**Chapter 64**

**Christmas and Snakes**

**22 December 1993, Marina Island, Angra Dos Reis**, **near Brazil**

Alexandra was sure there were plenty of young girls like her who across the world were beginning the day with a glass of juice from an exotic tree, and a perfect view including an azure sky, tantalising limpid waters, and a beach of white sand.

It was a bit unlikely however the same girls were beginning their day chatting with a Lamia.

Alexandra took a few seconds to lament where her life was going. As if the whole thing was a continental-sized joke, her mother was a vampire. Her father, if the rumours and his dubious Marauder nickname were any indication, had the ability to change himself into a stag. As Champion of the Morrigan, her inner animal was a Lernaean Hydra and her pets were a snow owl and her owlets, plus a gigantic carnivorous bat.

And now her magical guardian was a Lamia.

That was the result of living two and a half years among wizards and witches. By the way, she had acknowledged living a normal life was now utterly impossible. Strange, no?

“I confess, I am curious...Stella. Since the Princely House of Sforza hasn’t made it any secret that they have Succubus blood in their veins and House Zabini has done the same with the Lamia species, are there a lot of other great Venetian Houses which experimented with crossbreeding magical unions? It’s just plain old curiosity, you understand...”

The tall dark-skinned witch just smiled in return.

“Yes, my House and the Sforzas aren’t exceptions in Venice. You might say the love in our country for long travels and unexplored regions allowed our captains and our wizards to...make interesting discoveries and charm some interesting beings, shall we say?”

“Now you’re trying to be vague on purpose,” Alexandra accused her guardian.

Stella Zabini laughed loudly.

“You’re right. I am.” The laugh stopped. The large smile continued to illuminate her visage. “I am afraid I can’t tell you more without breaking some accords we have with the Great Council of the Thirty. When the Houses began pouring gold, magic, and research into the improvement of our lineages, it was decided with near-unanimity that what was done in Venice, would stay in Venice. Members of a House are told which House has tied its blood and magic to which species, but we have not the right to reveal any save our own to outsiders.”

“But everyone knows about House Sforza!” Alexandra protested before amending her sentence. “Well...I mean almost everyone. They were a few Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs who didn’t know at the Winter Ball. But I’m sure they didn’t know there was a House of Sforza in the first place.”

“Judicious point,” the Lamia replied. “And yes, most of Europe knows about House Sforza and their alliance with one of the last covens of Succubi in the world. But the Sforzas were the first and acted...rather brazenly, shocking most of Europe. The following attempts were done in the shadows, and while the secrets did not stay that way, many of the spies who found out about them did not realise that the new generations of hybrids were not exceptions, but the rule.”

“I can’t say you are wrong.” The insults she had received at several points in Hogwarts’ corridors had not been flattering at all. And that was because her mother was – or is it ‘is’? – a Muggle-born. The Potter Heiress had no idea what would happen if a Succubus tried to enrol at Hogwarts. Actually, no, that was a lie. She knew what had a high likelihood of happening: the ‘disgusting hybrid’ being getting sent straight to Azkaban once there was ‘proof’ she had tried to bewitch an ‘upstanding wizard’. Translation between the lines: a pure-blood would likely try to rape the Succubus and then pretend to be enraptured by her abilities when his ‘victim’ castrated him. “Why take the risk, though? And I’m assuming that aside from the possibility of failure or the ICW intervening, it was not cheap in Galleons and resources.”

If Rincewind had told the truth, it certainly involved several disciplines of the Dark Arts. At a guess, Dark Alchemy, Blood Magic, Soul Magic, Dark Rituals, and Black Philtres were used in these experiments.

But obviously the Thirty Great Houses were officially the government of Magical Venice. Even if the ICW had its suspicions, it was not like Geneva could intervene on a whim. Nothing short of an invasion would force the guilty Houses to reveal their dirty little secrets.

“The problem of all pure-bloods, Alexandra. Inbreeding. By the end of the nineteenth century, the House of Zabini was dying. Half of our members were so weak magically that they would have been called ‘Squibs’ by the British Ministry, and the number of stillbirths and sterile wizards and witches was unbearable. Give it a decade or two, and our family would have been extinct magically. So we decided to act. Accords were signed with multiple clans of Lamias our House had traded with for generations.”

There was no triumph in Stella Zabini’s voice. It was an admission that no matter its current state, House Zabini and the rest of their counterparts had once been in the very situation the British Houses of Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, and others were where marriage between cousins and blood purity were concerned.

“Unlike Britain, you have found a solution. I’m not sure anyone in England has acknowledged there is even a problem.”

Because unfortunately, while many Ravenclaws loved to mock certain Slytherins and pure-bloods in Hogwarts’ Great Hall, no British Wizengamot House had crossbred with trolls or harpies. The pure-blood teenagers were ugly and one hundred percent human.

“It was not bloodless.” The warning was impossible to dismiss. “The Thirty have the same names, but many families survived by marriage and some forced legitimisations.”

Lady Zabini recited a few more vague anecdotes, and Alexandra didn’t ask for more. It was obvious that as the nineteenth century was ending, the canals of Venice had turned red and the violence had risen to levels perfectly acceptable to earn the label of a civil war.

It was only a few minutes later as she watched the waters surrounding the island that she felt a question had to be posed.

“I have to ask you something important. Is there a House which decided to do crossbreed experiments with Nephilim?”

Before the Battle of Hogsmeade, she wouldn’t have thought it was important. The Army of Light wasn’t her problem. Now however, they had tried to kill her and the raven-haired girl wasn’t stupid enough to believe there would be no second attempt.

“The Accords prevent me from giving you this information,” Stella answered with a wink.

There was one. Damn it.

This made the incoming Tournament even more unattractive. The chances were slim there was going to be a Light Champion at Durmstrang. But Beauxbatons had Fleur Delacour and possibly more; they had not been close enough at the Winter Ball to see if there were other Champions among the students of the Academy. And now there was the implicit threat the Scuola Regina would have a Light Champion thrown into the arena.

“And...err...out of curiosity, why did you kill your husbands using Lamia poison?”

The amusement returned instantly on her guardian’s lips and behaviour.

“I am a Lamia in every way which counts, Alexandra.” Each word was dripping with irony.

“Yes, and?” Alexandra wasn’t seeing the point. “I mean yes, you have fangs and scales. But I have a half-goblin – or is it a quarter-goblin – Head of House at Hogwarts. There is a half-giant living in a shoddy house near the Forbidden Forest. It doesn’t sound to me like a big problem. Your...abilities sound more like a weird Animagus transformation.”

The reaction of the Black Widow was to explode in laughter.

“Ah, if only all the children could be so tolerant.” For half a minute the Lamia giggled before returning to seriousness.

“I am afraid my husbands didn’t react that calmly or rationally. Despite most of them coming from very different backgrounds, as I am sure you’ve investigated, the moment I told them my secret – or in two cases, they managed to discover it themselves – the general reaction was ‘you’re a monster, I am going to call the Aurors!’. It didn’t help that two of them were Light zealots with ties to some violent organisations.”

Alexandra could read between the lines. Stella Zabini was a target for the Army of the Light too. No wonder she thought it was a good time to reveal her Lamia lineage. For one, every bridge which might have existed with the bigots had been burned in the Battle of Hogsmeade. For two, Alexandra had advanced enough with a hydra in her belly to understand the problems tied with inhumanity. She was one of the last persons who would denounce her guardian to the Ministry.

“For all its flaws, the ICW is an effective guardian of the Statute of Secrecy. And the Statute insists on one thing.”

“We must remain hidden. The non-magical world must remain unaware of our existence.” A simple law, and one she could say with absolute certainty she had already violated several times. And the green-eyed Ravenclaw didn’t regret it for a single second.

“Yes. The secret must be preserved at all costs. And of course any species which is not human does not have the intelligence and the skills to successfully achieve this. Never mind that the Statute was, and still is, a purely human invention.”

This was giving her bad vibes.

“You’re saying it was a tool to promote human supremacy?”

Her interlocutor shrugged.

“I don’t think it was the original goal. But its architects certainly didn’t object when the time came to subdue the magical creatures, exterminate those who opposed them, rewrite history, and ban whatever magics they didn’t want their disciples to study.”

Alexandra had not liked the principle of the Statute in the first place, but now she liked it less and less. No wonder Binns had been kept to babble on lies and fabrications. The history of the non-magical world was not sunshine and daisies, but it looked like the wizards had more to be ashamed of than their wandless neighbours.

“Don’t worry too much about it, Alexandra. What is done is done, and at least the alliance between House Zabini and the Lamias has made sure our two species have been able to recover from their problems.”

“I’m all for alliances,” the Potter Heiress answered, “and I understand how you benefitted from it. But I don’t see what was in it for the Lamias.”

“The exact terms are only known to certain members of House Zabini of Venice, which I do not belong to. But it is not exactly difficult to guess, Alexandra. Thanks to this accord, the Lamias received lands, territories the Statute had stolen from them. They also obtained a means to reproduce far more easily than before.”

This was far more information than Alexandra had hoped to learn, and thus she didn’t insist. The young witch nodded and changed the subject.

“How are your Lamia abilities supposed to help an Animagus transformation?”

“Unlike the wizards and witches who devote themselves to self-transfiguration into animals, I can use magic when I am showing the world my Lamia appearance,” her guardian explained. “In addition to this, you and I will be able to communicate in Parseltongue, though I do not expect you to be lucid and resistant to your inner animal’s instincts the first time.”

Her visage or her eyes must have betrayed her feelings on this very subject because the next tirade was more reassuring.

“This is not a slight against your mind or your personality. In centuries, no wizard or witch who attempted to become an Animagus alone and unsupported has been successful. Some who believed themselves geniuses stayed trapped for days in the body of an animal and went feral when they were transfigured back into their human shell. The effect is similar for a member of House Zabini when he or she reaches puberty. The first transformation is extremely violent, and I confess I do not remember anything from it. I woke up two days later.”

The sentence ended there. The transformation began an instant later. It was rather....fascinating, in spite of seeing it for the third time since her arrival on the island. The feet covered in dark green scales, and the legs followed an instant later. The robe fell to the ground, but already the legs had merged and there was now a powerful tail replacing them. Barbed spikes emerged on Stella’s back, her shoulders and her elbows. In a few seconds, any resemblance to a human body was over. The two arms were still there, but the dark green scales covered them, and their angle was just impractical. Four long and sharp claws at their extremities served as hands. Below the torso, the body was virtually impossible to distinguish from that of a snake.

Above...the torso and the belly were coloured in softer shade of green, but there was no trace of belly button and the two protuberances further up could only have been described as breasts if one had a large imagination. The head was not perfectly snake-like, but all hair had been absorbed, as were the nose, the ears, and the eyebrows. There were some human traits left, but they were subdued, and the shape and the characteristics of the head definitely tended in favour of a reptilian parenthood, not a human one.

Assuredly, if you were a pure-blood or someone believing only humanity had the right to walk on this earth, the Lamia was anathema to your beliefs.

“On the other hand you are far prettier than a Basilisk,” the Slayer said out loud.

The Lamia hissed in return.

“Ssssss....compliments....sssssss...ssssss....nowhere....sssss....”

“Compliments? Nowhere?” It was like when she had begun to learn Gaelic or French for the first time; there were words she could understand, but most of the speech was foreign to her ears.

There were more hisses, but her comprehension of the Parseltongue sounds remained where it was: abysmal.

After about half a minute, Stella Zabini changed back to her human appearance. Here again, it was impressive: the scales shifted to skin like it was a natural process and in ten seconds the Lamia was replaced by the dark-skinned woman. Alexandra turned her head in another direction as her guardian donned her robe again.

“Your Parseltongue listening ability is weak, but it is better than I hoped. You have started to draw upon your inner animal mentally and use the hydra’s skills, even passively, to your benefit. You have made great progresses on your own.”

“Thanks?”

Suddenly there was a wand in Lady Zabini’s right hand, and Alexandra drew hers by reflex.

“I think it is time to see how much of the transformation you can control.”

“Hey, that’s not fair! You told me you were going to wait after Christmas for...”

A sort of blue shockwave erupted from the Black Widow’s wand and there was no time to evade.

In the first couple of seconds, Alexandra thought it had missed. Then the very bones in her body cracked and pain engulfed her body. The Potter Heiress screamed but her voice shrieked and mutated into hisses. There was too much pain. She couldn’t feel her arms anymore. She couldn’t feel her legs. Her vision was erratic. Four, ten, fourteen....it was like her eyes were multiplying to the infinite.

Alexandra tried to fight. But there was too much pain and she couldn’t focus on everything.

Something threw her into the green-blue waters and then darkness claimed her.

**24 December 1993, MacDougal Manor, Ireland**

Morag shook her head in half-amused exasperation as she read Hermione’s new letter. Did the bushy-haired girl even understand the notion of holidays?

This was a very rhetorical question, obviously. No, Hermione Granger wasn’t keen to leave homework –any homework – uncompleted, in summer or in winter. Sometimes, the red-haired teenager wondered if their friend was not the reincarnated union of thousands of students’ souls who had at one point or another failed their exams.

It would certainly explain why the Muggle-born witch was stressing and making preparations for tests and exams which were five months away. And everyone agreed Hermione didn’t really need this intensive devotion on her coursework. Her ability to memorise texts was absolutely prodigious, better than Alexandra’s, Nigel’s, and hers added together. Where magical theory was concerned, the Ravenclaw bookworm – and why in the name of the Irish Kings had the Sorting Hat decided to send her to Gryffindor in the first place? – dominated the rankings. It was the practical where her skills were less brilliant. Hermione could adapt as long as her friends had made her work on a similar situation or she had already read of one in a book, but creating new methods and tactics on the fly were not her specialty.

To each wizard and witch their talents, Morag supposed.

Anyway, reading the very large letter was at least good for a laugh or two. Hermione complained much about the unreasonable standards of their Potions Professors where homework was concerned, and ranted a bit about how disadvantaged non-magical households were since they could not test their hypotheses in a cauldron. Morag wrote a note on her desk to remind the homework-overachiever that Potion experimentation and research fell under the gaze of nearly fifty laws and was only accessible to the wizards and witches having the proper accreditations and diploma. The Wizengamot, on this subject, was prudent, and with good reason. In a novice’s hands, a cauldron could transform itself into a manor-destroying device. History was full of arrogant Potion ‘experts’ telling their neighbours ‘I know what I am doing, trust me’, only to disappear with the Potions laboratory, house, and most of their possessions in a massive explosion, leaving only a large crater behind.

The other roll of parchment was more interesting from her point of view. Hermione had listed twenty rune-based fire incantations which could be useful. The Heiress of House MacDougal was going to make good use of them...after making sure they were not illegal. They shouldn’t be, but a few precautions were better than none with the imbecility London was drowning in.

And Alexandra may be interested in them too. Since the Hogsmeade battle, her lightning-aligned friend had begun her own research to compensate the secret loss of so many of her trump cards. Granted, fire and lightning were elements which had a large degree of symbiosis, but this should give her another arrow for her already wide repertoire of spells.

“Your bowl of owl treats and some warm water,” the Irish pure-blood told the owl she had chosen to travel to the Granger residence. The poor bird was still shivering on his perch despite the nice owl-blanket with the MacDougal colours, courtesy of the icy rain falling outside her window. “You deserve them, poor messenger.”

The black owl hooted in joy and began to feast on the treats with an ardour which was amusing to watch.

Morag was about to return to Hermione’s letter when the bell of the manor tolled, announcing the return of her parents. It looked like the Galdr and the other existing combination of fire runes were going to wait a few more days, then. Her cousins were going to arrive in a few hours, and after that there were more celebrations and events to participate in.

Judging the poor owl was unlikely to desire a return in the wind and the rain, the Ravenclaw witch took the messenger bird and its food to the Manor’s owlery.

“Morag!” the voice of her mother resonated in the familial manor. “Where are you?”

“I’m going to the owlery, mom! I will be down in a minute!”

Intending to make good on her promise, she picked up the pace, deposed her messenger with the other owls – which were all sleepy and hooting like they were enjoying the misfortune of their brethren forced to endure the fury of winter, and ran back in the direction of the entrance, descending the stairs two by two.

The last days had not allowed her to see a lot of her parents after her return from Hogwarts. They had a lot of appointments this December, and they were not in Ireland since they were using a lot of powerful Portkeys...

All her questions vanished as she saw her mother. The robe she had was not tight, but there was no mistaking the larger belly.

“Surprise!”

For some fifteen seconds, it was a surprise that did indeed stop her mouth from working. Her parents had already tried to give her siblings. It was no pleasant story. Her own birth had been very difficult, and the boy who should have been her brother had been stillborn.

“I am going to have a little sister!”

“Morag, we don’t know yet if it is a boy or a girl,” her father corrected her with a large smile.

“A sister!” Boys were poor conversationalists, had no sense of hygiene, and couldn’t keep a secret to save their lives. Thus she ignored her father. “I am going to be a big sister!”

This was one of the nicest Christmas presents in her life, to be sure.

**24 December 1993,** **Marina Island, Angra Dos Reis**, **near Brazil**

Fortunately for her pride, Alexandra was alone when she returned to consciousness.

Why fortunately? Well, first she was naked and presenting a very sad appearance. She was covered in a substance which looked like a mix of dirt and even more disgusting things.

Second, she had in her mouth a dead fish. That she immediately spit out, but the damage was done. A few seconds later, the thirteen years-old girl vomited the contents of her stomach. And by the looks of it, this was not the only thing she had tried to eat while in her Animagus form.

Wonderful.

She had to admit, when she had decided to become an Animagus, she had not thought she would take up the disgusting habits of Gollum.

Third there were deep burn marks on her legs and arms, like someone had used some sort of burning object to brand her. Thank the Morrigan for small favours, the marks disappeared after a minute or two.

Fourth...there was no fourth. The first three points were largely sufficient for a very bad day.

Her body felt fine at least. There was no more pain, though her recent souvenirs were full of it. And she wasn’t in an unfamiliar territory. About two hundred metres westwards, the Zabini villa was shining under the rising morning sun.

And since she was pretty sure it had been later in the day when the ‘Animagus lesson’ had started, this meant she had been unconscious for the better part of a day.

Sighing, the Champion of Death decided there was nothing she could do about it. Instead she ran in the direction of the sea and jumped into the water head first. Instantly, the Potter Heiress felt better. Having salted water on your skin was far better than mud and whatever had been there previously.

This was the moment the Lernaean Hydra chose to wake up in her chest. Her inner animal was not happy, and tried to regain control of her body a heartbeat later.

This was all it had in common with the fight the XXXXXX-class creature and her had after drinking the Animagus Revealing Potion. This time, the Hydra was far, far weaker. The previous day roaming in the real world had really exhausted her opponent. And this time, they were really fighting in her mind and for her body. And as the saying goes...this was her body and they were playing by *her* rules.

“Come on, Enemy of Heracles. Let’s see how powerful you truly are.”

The Lernaean Hydra certainly tried. Mentally, she was targeted by a ray of blinding thunder and a cloud of poisons. It was something extremely powerful, no doubt about it. It was also dramatically limited when you were fighting in the realm of minds and spirits. In a second she conjured a firestorm to burn the poison and then a hurricane pushed the storm of lighting away.

The black scales which had appeared on her left arm disappeared as fast as they had appeared.

And the fight continued.

Her next strike was to conjure a hundred stalactites of ice at the hydra. This time she was not going to make the mistake of sending lightning bolts and boost the animal’s already formidable lightning affinity. The hydra hissed in defiance, but it had no choice to endure the assault, as its poison-spitting head could not parry an elemental-based attack.

Of course, a hydra regenerated inhumanly fast. The injuries created by the ice were healing mere seconds after they started to bleed. So she used a second assault, this time a firestorm and trying to trap the gigantic tail of the Greek mythological creature.

This was not a sprint, she was forced to admit. It was the opposite of playing to her strengths normally. Against a hostile wizard, Alexandra was forced to end the fight quickly, because while she had a huge magical core, she had not the ability to channel it to a fraction of its maximum power. It also didn’t help that her opponents – when they were adults – had a far greater military experience and likely spent decades reading forbidden libraries in a quest to master ancient incantations and precious magical lore.

It didn’t apply here with the hydra. The only thing that should have forced her to end this mental clash fast was the fact she was underwater. Without watch, the Ravenclaw girl should have had to resurface minutes ago, but she had enough awareness of her surroundings to know she was breathing underwater.

And with this restriction removed she could dictate the pace of the offensive. The hydra was extremely powerful yes. The mythological story had not chosen this monster as an opponent for Heracles because it was a friendly puppy eager for caresses. Lightning, acid-like venom, and Basilisk-sized fangs were enough of a danger to kill ninety-nine percent of humankind in less than one minute. But it suffered from one major flaw: it was not as intelligent as a human. Oh, it was clever. The Lernaean Hydra was a predator and had the strengths of a monster standing head and shoulders above a Cerberus or a Manticore. It was dangerously vicious, and could not be tricked like a dog or a cat. But it was still lacking the skill to devise specific counters to her attacks, and Alexandra was denying it the ability to use its surroundings. It was not like the first fight-meeting. She was the Morrigan’s Champion, and she was dictating the rules of the battlefield.

Her inner animal – though she more than ever doubted she had the traits a hydra found attractive – did not roll over and submit, however. By lightning and tail strikes, by poison and fangs, the hydra resisted and fought hard.

It was when the outcome became unavoidably in her favour that her opponent hissed in desperation and began to step back.

“Oh no, you aren’t going to flee...”

There was a flash of lightning green. Alexandra closed her eyes. When she reopened them, the inner animal was gone. Well, no, not entirely gone. One head had remained behind, and as she conjured a sword covered in flames to deal with it along with a few grenades, the lone head coalesced into a sort of ghost form which immediately struck her.

There was no pain. It was...bliss. Her body was answering perfectly to her brain...and she had to reassert her control because her legs became a tail.

It was far easier to propel her body to the ocean’s surface. It was a child’s game too to shift from gills to lungs. Her eyes were now those of a hydra when she wanted it, and she could use her self-transfiguration to cover her arms in scales and maybe go a bit further.

For the moment, she didn’t want to. It was maybe the second flaw of having a Lernaean Hydra as an Animagus form: it was a body extremely removed from humanity’s template. The hydra had nine heads and eighteen eyes, and her few souvenirs from yesterday told her how disorientating that was. A human had one head and two eyes, thank the Powers for that. This was evident.

What she had not thought a lot about unfortunately was that the XXXXXX-class creature had no arms or legs. Obviously it had no need for them. The large tail allowed it to accelerate at impressive speeds, and the nine heads could ‘manipulate’ the food and everything in the nearby environment.

“I will have to think a lot about this if I want to use my Animagus form in a fight,” Alexandra whispered to herself.

The green-eyed teenager took the time to check if everything worked as it was supposed to and that she had not been ‘gifted’ with something weird on her body. To her relief, there was not. She was in control and one hundred percent human. She began to swim back in the direction of the beach.

Her arrival was not unremarked. Her guardian was awaiting her, and levitated to her a swimsuit as she was able to walk on the seabed with her head above water. This time, she decided to not comment on the fact the tiny piece of cloth was far too revealing. It was better than going back to the island’s house naked.

“I see you managed to defeat your inner animal,” Stella commented, looking visibly pleased.

“You thought I was going to fail?”

“The method I used has been proven to work, but it was never tried against a Lernaean Hydra. You remained transformed close to one and a half days before your nine-headed alter ego lost control.”

Wow, she had not lost one day. She had lost two.

Alexandra was about to say that everything ended well when her stomach decided to manifest its discontent with much growling and agitated noises.

“Maybe we can talk over a large breakfast?”

The Lamia gave her an ironic smile, and it was at this very moment that Alexandra really noticed that if her swimsuit was somewhere between ‘light’ and ‘not suitable for a conservative pure-blood witch’, the one Lady Zabini had chosen to wear was positively indecent. Did it even qualify as a swimsuit, really? And yes by the way, the assimilation of hydra’s essence into her core was not preventing her from blushing.

“I think you need more the breakfast than the Talk....”

**25 December 1993, Bones Manor, England**

Susan had wanted to sleep late. It had been more of a slim hope than a rock-solid conviction, and it was dramatically acknowledged as such when Hannah arrived in her bedroom at seven o’clock and threw her a pillow at her head.

“I am going to kill you!” the Bones Heiress roared at her fellow Hufflepuff who was also her sister in all but blood. She took her wand from her nightstand and cast three powerful hexes. Hannah avoided them all.

“Promises, promises...” Hannah mocked. “Get out of bed, sleepyhead! We have presents to open and I want to see you unpack the big box your Queen-girlfriend has sent you!”

Susan refused to bite and tried to return to her dreams. Her head had not the time to enjoy the soft touch of her pillow before Hannah used a Charm to trap her in her sheets. Understanding there was no possible future which was going to see her sleep one more hour, Susan cast two Rictusempra before standing and beginning to dig in her wardrobe for common clothes.

“Hurry up!”

The Charm missed her by inches, but this time she replied with an Expelliarmus which hit its target.

“You know Auntie monitors our spells, right?” Bones Manor was protected by powerful wards and therefore the Ministry magic grid was deaf and blind to anything happening inside, but her aunt and guardian had cast and built plenty of detectors to make sure what Hannah and Susan did while she was away was reported immediately to her. And despite some long quests, the two Hufflepuffs were still discovering new ones in locations they had believed for months safe.

Lady Amelia Bones was scary like that.

“Oh come on, it’s Christmas!”

“Yes, that’s what I’m afraid of.” Susan said. “She won’t complain today, and she will punish us tomorrow.”

Hannah remained thoughtful for three seconds before realising her school roommate was likely right and grimaced.

“You’re right. Think I can blame your girlfriend for my violent tendencies?”

Susan raised her eyes to the ceiling in consternation.

“You’ve always had these ‘violent tendencies’ against everything forbidding you to use your wand, Hannah,” the red-haired Hufflepuff was forced to remind her, playing with the wand she had just confiscated. “And I will thank you not to involve my girlfriend in your problems.”

“Fine...” It was half a crime Hannah looked so innocent when she pouted. “I will not speak to your aunt about your marriage projects.”

Susan finished lacing her shoes and cast a Colouring Charm which turned her friend’s hair a bright yellow.

“You are an insolent wench, Hannah Abbot, Heiress of House Abbot!” Susan reprimanded her half-seriously. “You should be ashamed of yourself, spreading those unfounded rumours.”

As much as she liked Alexandra, the green-eyed Ravenclaw was just her girlfriend at the moment. They may go further in the future; Susan wasn’t going to deny it. But for the moment her relationship with the Potter Heiress was one of girlfriend in addition to working together on the Egyptian Runes.

“Brown will be sorry to hear that. She made a betting pool one month ago in the Lions’ dorms. The girl – or the boy – to have the good day will win the prize money.”

Susan rolled her eyes as they left her bedroom and gave the wand back.

“I would be far more concerned if they weren’t doing the same thing for each and every couple at Hogwarts.”

“It’s not just the official couples!” the protestation was well-rehearsed at this point.

“Yes, it isn’t. I doubt Snape and McGonagall are ever about to proclaim their undying love for each other....”

“That was a bet made by the Weasley Twins! It doesn’t count!”

The Bones Heiress chuckled...before entering the Eastern Wing where the Christmas tree had been decorated this year. Then she instantly stopped laughing and wondered if she was not in fact continuing to dream.

“Hannah, what are all these stuffed badgers doing here?”

Susan was used to having many presents waiting under or next to the tree. It was one of the privileges which went with the fact that she was one of the last two Bones women alive. Consequently, there were plenty of wizards and witches which depended on House Bones for their financial and political survival.

On the other hand, she was rather sure no one had ever sent something like fifty stuffed badgers in one Christmas.

“Your girlfriend decided to recognise the power of the badgers...” Hannah was not singing in triumph...yet. “Open the box, I want to see what else she decided to give you!”

Hannah turned towards her aunt at the table ten feet away, but her mother-guardian refused to come to her help.

“Merlin’s staff, you are going to pay for that, Hannah...”

Carefully, she removed the four stuffed badgers on top of the box and moved them with the rest. Susan had to give it to her, every plush was different and adorable. She cast a weak Diffindo on the box, and as she discovered what was inside, she knew Hannah was never going to let forget this.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! This is priceless! She just forgot the giant badger going with it!”

Yes, inside the box was another huge plush. Except this time, it was not a small badger. It was a massive panda, a human-sized one.

“If this is not an invitation for more caresses, I don’t know what this is...”

Ignoring her best friend’s comments, Susan noticed that there was a place where the material was a bit inconsistent. As she reached toward it, a shining green Wunjo rune was lit.

It was not the only Rune which had been carved. There were also three Raido glyphs, though they had all been carefully emplaced and only now that they were shining was it easy to observe them.

Before there was the time to comment on her girlfriend’s skill in the field of Ancient Runes, a tiny box appeared between the paws of the big badger.

This time, even her aunt a few feet away whistled in appreciation.

“She hid the box in the belly of the panda and combined a small Galdr of the travel rune keyed to your magical signature.” Well, at least she knew what Alexandra had worked on the last evenings and nights before leaving Hogwarts. And she noted the appreciative tone employed her aunt. The former Head of the DMLE was difficult to impress, and this combination was certainly not as easy as to do as the principle implied.

The box when it was opened was far larger in the inside than the outside. Hardly worthy of mention, if it did not contain a specific material she had hardly ever thought someone would offer her as a gift.

“Is this what I think, Auntie?”

“It is a small protection jacket enchanted with the scales of a Welsh Green, yes.”

Yes, this was what she had thought the object was. On the plus side, her girlfriend had respected the custom: nothing that could be considered a courting present or an attempt to buy her favours. On the minus side, now she was feeling anxious. What if Alexandra didn’t like her Christmas present? It was already far cheaper than anything she had received, including dragon-harvested parts...

“Well, at least you will have a nice badger to play with if your current relationship doesn’t work!”

“Hannah!”

**25 December 1993**, **Marina Island, Angra Dos Reis**, **near Brazil**

In hindsight, it had been a horrible idea to play that Quidditch match against Gryffindor two months ago. Yes, the assassination attempt had been more than compensated by robbing Dumbledore of four million Galleons and recovering her family’s Invisibility Cloak.

But now even her friends were sniggering behind her back about how terrible she was at playing Chaser. It didn’t matter that the only Quidditch trials and training sessions she had ever played before September were as a Seeker. It didn’t matter that the game had been played in weather conditions so horrible the referee could be sued for attempted murder by not delaying the game’s start.

And now even Morag had joined Team ‘let’s embarrass Alexandra’. The Christmas present she had sent was nice, no doubt about it. It was a full set of professional Quidditch gear in the colours of the Holyhead Harpies, playing robe and all. But was it necessary to write her commentaries on the back of the robes?

*1*

*Alexandra Potter*

*Second-class Seeker*

*Third-class Chaser*

“If it’s any consolation, I think the last two lines are enchanted differently than the rest,” Blaise affirmed while opening one of his own gifts. It looked like it was a collection of Potion books. “They will be easier to remove with a few spells.”

“It’s a small consolation.” Alexandra said after a second or two of reflexion. “Though I would have preferred she didn’t write the words at all.”

Thankfully, her other friends had not felt the need to tease her on her lack of abilities in certain Quidditch-related fields. Hermione’s present was a large book of advanced Transfiguration. Nigel had purchased a flute, which apparently produced melodies greatly appreciated by birds. Luna Lovegood had subscribed her to the *Quibbler* for the next five years and delivered her a ‘top-secret article’ on the ‘Rotfang Conspiracy’. Lyre had found a few fantasy books in French, subtle method to remind her to practise her first language. Daphne had seized the opportunity of being in a foreign territory to send her a very illegal book related to certain weird practises surrounding the Tri-Wizard Tournaments and other inter-school events the European continent and the British Isles had hosted in the past.

Her guardian had felt that the number of swimsuits and other clothes commonly found under these latitudes in Alexandra’s possession was far too small. So now Alexandra owned enough of them to open a modest shop for two or three days.

The package with a lily for its sole signature had a painting of Hogwarts which could also serve as a super-Portkey. The notice on the back had told her to only use it ‘in extreme emergencies’.

This was a non-exhaustive list. In three years, she had gone from zero presents to...a lot. It was extremely satisfying to know there were people who cared about you.

She opened Susan’s present last. To disguise the nature of the Christmas present, a lot of package had been used. Fair was fair, she had used the same technique for the panda-holding box.

The gift itself was more surprising.

“It’s a dagger?” It was a bit surprising, coming from her cuddly red-haired Badger. A lot of their conversations had been about limiting violence, not magnifying it or escalating the cycle of death...

If Susan really wanted her to have something more than Fragarach to stab people, maybe she was corrupting the Bones Heiress more than she thought.

“It’s a dagger yes, but it’s not a weapon. Or at least it was not forged to be one,” the Lady Zabini intervened as she was levitating a few dozen robes that her admirers had sent her, perhaps in the suicidal hope she would take one of the benefactors as her eighth (soon-to-be-dead) husband. “It is an Egyptian athame. It has a cutting edge, but its main purpose is to be a runes-carving instrument.”

Alexandra clicked her tongue in amusement. Well, it was a nice gift...and strangely appropriate given that they studied hieroglyphs. The hilt and the blade were in the same silver colour as Fragarach, and the design was eye-catching.

“Are there any advantages compared to the tools we are using in Ancient Runes?”

“It depends on if the creator of this athame followed the methods of the artisans of Kemet. If they did, it becomes far easier to use it against stone, but it will break far more easily against anything breathing or plants.” The eyes of Black Widow were not fixed either on Blaise or her; they were on the horizon, like she was remembering a school lesson. It was far from impossible, admittedly. “As such these daggers are only useful for carving runes. The cults from Egypt and the neighbouring countries take their vows very seriously.”

 As Morgana had chosen this country to build her palace and present herself as a Queen-sorceress, it was not reassuring at all.

“I am going to need a new trunk to carry all these presents.” Alexandra said to her guardian. “And Blaise will need two or three.”

It was not an exaggeration. Alexandra’s packages had made a modest-sized pile – in large part because Blaise’s mother had given her the equivalent of an aquatic wardrobe – but Blaise had a mountain of them. If poor Dudley had ever seen it five years ago, he would have died of jealousy.

To be fair, a lot of presents...they were not really gifts or anything remotely qualifying as a Christmas present. Perhaps if Blaise was crazy, delivering a few cauldrons could have been a sign of friendship, but it wasn’t the case. And there had also been several parchments opening automatically and hissing furiously.

“Well, I’m going swimming.” She told the two Zabinis. “Have fun opening the rest of your presents, Blaise.”

“You are hilarious, you know that?” the dark-skinned boy replied without looking at her and opening a package with flashy colours. “From your dearest friends...there’s no name. I suppose it’s a good thing we have a lot of wards and House Elves to check beforehand...”

BOOM!

Blaise was instantly bathed in a pool of green paint and began to swear a series of powerful insults in Italian.

“I think the Elves made a mistake this time, Blaise. If I’m not mistaken it is a brand-new product of Weasley Wheezing Wheezes: the explosive paint-gift...”

And despite the furious glare Blaise gave her, Alexandra laughed quite a long time.

**1 January 1994, Hogwarts’ Foundations, Scotland**

The Founders had learned well the mistakes from their predecessors. If the stories of Arch-Mage Vortigern and numerous other megalomaniac sorcerers had taught the creators of the Scottish school one thing, it was that their enchantments had to be flawless.

If the protections, wards, and enchantments failed, their life-expectancy would be measured in minutes.

Dragons were one of the most notorious wizard-killers in existence. The one they had imprisoned was making the rest of the dragon species look like clumsy and innocent children.

So the Founders had created a flawless prison.

Beneath the great ward stone destined to feed magic to their school, they had forged a dimensional prison which did not answer the laws of this reality.

It was, to be particularly blunt, an absolute necessity. Dragons were always growing, and a self-expanding pocket dimension had not been a skill the Enchantress of the group had ever learned. Nor had the Alchemist inside their little group found a way to adapt the output of the dragon’s magic across several centuries.

The dragon would have to be imprisoned in a cell where time had no meaning. The rest of the physical and magical laws didn’t apply either. That way nobody would need to feed the huge prisoner and waste a fortune in meat and eggs for a non-human creature which dreamed every night of dismembering them in horrible manners.

The enchantments, runes, and wards around the ward stone and its nearby chambers had been increased and increased over the decades of the Founders’ lives. One might argue it had been a success. In over fifteen hundred years, no one save the Founders, their children, and the Headmasters of Hogwarts had ever been able to watch in person the spectacle of the great Ward Stone catalysing and redistributing energy to the castle above it, protecting it from harm and hardship.

One might argue it was a massive success, unequalled by any organisation or enlarged coven of magic practitioners, and indeed in a way it was.

Of course, if an expert Enchanter with some competency in Curse-Breaking and Alchemy had been able to examine the Ward Stone and its purpose, his reaction would have likely been far different.

But none of the people who had seen the Ward Stone in recent centuries had such a relevant background. By a tradition which had taken a life of its own over a thousand years after the last heir of the Founders left Hogwarts, the only person who was authorised to descend inside Hogwarts’ depths was the Headmaster.

Ambitious DADA Professors, arrogant Dark Wizards, and thieving students: all had failed breaching the defences of the Ward Stone in recent centuries, often losing their lives in the process.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts – or the Headmistress – descended only to swear formally on his magic the ancestral Oath of his – or her - function, and the sheer concentration of magic made sure no one stayed long to indulge in a lengthy study of the surroundings. Albus Dumbledore, who for all his faults was truly the most powerful Headmaster in the last three centuries and one of the most observant men of Magical Britain, was only able to stay close to the Ward Stone for five minutes, and the Oath took one and a half to swear formally.

There were instructions and verification spells to make sure everything functioned correctly, of course.

The issue was that Hogwarts had been built fifteen hundred years ago, and a lot of knowledge had been lost from this period.

Each Headmaster the moment he took office and swore the Oath was required to write down the magical process his successor would need to do once death or retirement forced him out of the supreme seat. Even this had not been totally sufficient. Several violent duels, blood feuds, and sieges had destroyed the instructions a Headmaster or Headmistress had left behind him or her several times.

And as a result, the last Headmasters had no way to know that, for example, the six circles of Egyptian Hieroglyphs surrounding the Ward Stone and carved by the man everyone called Salazar Slytherin these days had not been six one thousand years ago, but twelve.

It was not Albus Dumbledore’s fault. It was not the fault of Armando Dippet or Phineas Nigellus Black. The fault, at heart, lied with the Founders.

For all their magical talents, wisdom, and sheer brilliance, they had refused to acknowledge the possibility a dragon could be smarter than them.

 That they could draw from its magic and make sure none of its will and influence remained dormant in it.

They had, unfortunately, completely underestimated its patience. In over fifteen hundred years, the Founders’ greatest prisoner had successfully deactivated, broken, and erased from its very existence close to twenty percent of the enchantments and wards keeping it chained in this weaker and cruder simulacrum of Pandemonium.

Already the dragon had far more sensitivity to the events of the world outside than any Founder would have imagined in his worst nightmares.

As such, it was only a few hours past midnight that the reptilian irises opened in interest and what would have been a loud chuckle escaped a colossal maw.

“Oh Arthur, what a pity you won’t be able to see Britannia burn.”

Nidhögg, First and Last of the Elder Dragons, unfurled his black wings and sneered.

“But do not worry, the descendants of Hogwarts’ Founders and your knights will be perfect replacements.”

The inferno he sent against the door of his prison had no visible effect, but the simple fact it had managed to reach the enchantments of the witch now remembered as Rowena Ravenclaw was proof the defences were weakening.

“Soon vengeance will be mine.”

**Author’s notice**: And on this very friendly note, the first part of the winter holidays end. Second part next month, and then we will return to Hogwarts.

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