**Chapter 93**

**Dance or Despair**

**10 December 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

It was a normal morning. As always, the students of House Gryffindor were eating their breakfast with none of the hurry they did from Monday to Friday. As it was the weekend, there was only homework and a Hogsmeade visit to look forwards to, and everyone who had seen the village of the Scuola Regina knew how empty and unremarkable the Scottish hamlet truly was.

Scylla didn't intend to go to the village today, honestly. Snape had given her class too many bloody essays to work on. With luck – that is, if finding the correct book in the library was not taking too long, the glamour-hidden future Yaxley Lady knew it was going to take five or six hours to have something which would maybe give her an 'A'.

Yes, she 'was' a Gryffindor and a Weasley. Exceeding Expectations and above required the 'greasy-haired bat' to be in a good mood, and somehow not notice he was correcting a Gryffindor's homework. In other words, it never happened.

The young girl was still absently munching on her breakfast when Alexandra Potter walked into the Great Hall.

Immediately, a storm of cheers came from the Ravenclaw table, and several younger students merged into a mob which had only one goal: obtaining an autograph from the Champion of their House.

"Why are our own first-years trying to get an autograph?" Fay Dunbar asked with a frown. 'Ginny' ostensibly turned her head, and indeed about one-seventh of the Lions was on its way to join the young Ravenclaws. Fred however pre-empted any answer she could have made.

"Oh I don't know," her prankster of a brother grinned, "after all, I'm sure that Champions are levitating sea snakes every morning! And they are also burying an entire arena in ice and summoning runic dragons when they want!"

"It was just a question..." the red-faced Gryffindor grumbled.

"And you just got your answer..."

It took over ten minutes of autographs for the most dangerous student of Hogwarts – and yeah, this was a title no one was going to deny her anymore – was finally able to break through the crowd and arrive at the Head Table. There the black-haired Champion was heavily congratulated by many of the teachers. Flitwick and Babbling were a given – given how Death had crushed the opposition in Charms and Runes, if they weren't proud of her now they never would be – but there also was some considerable support from Sprout and all the Badger-Sorted teachers, and...okay, what the hell? Even Snape seemed to have a polite word for her? Truly the end of the world was at hand!

The conversations only stopped when Professor Flitwick cast a few golden sparks with his wand which coalesced in a beautiful 'SILENCE' of exquisite calligraphy.

"Can I have your attention for a few minutes?" The green eyes for once were almost laughing in mischievousness. "I promise it won't take long. Afterwards, you will be able to return to your breakfast."

The bag which had been by her side suddenly opened, revealing a huge stack of gold-coloured letters...and immediately created a lot of whispers.

"The good news," Alexandra Potter said after magically increasing the sound of her voice, "is that the Scuola Regina and the Judges have finally settled on the number of foreign students invited for the Winter Ball which will take place on the Winter Solstice."

"AAAAHHHHH!"

"The bad news is that, unfortunately, there isn't enough space for everyone. The Venetian school is big, but not that big."

"OOOHHHHH!" The disappointment was...very sonorous.

"Do not be too disappointed. Yesterday the Board of Governors met, and they decided to organise a short evening at Hogwarts itself for the families of the first and second-years who are not authorised to attend, plus all those who won't be invited. I also understand that many of the mirrors that were created to view the Tasks will function for this event."

"The invitations, Potter!" Someone shouted at the Hufflepuff table.

"Ah yes, the invitations," the Champion of House Ravenclaw gave the Hogwarts students an ironic smile, "the Judges have settled for a simple concept: the Champion who has received the highest number of points in two Tasks receives the largest number of invitations for his or her school, and the number decreases as one descends into the rankings."

That explained why the fourth-year Ravenclaw had so many of them and why Cedric Diggory and the others had not rushed here today with her.

The four Houses were suddenly far more apprehensive, and for good reason. The 'performance' of the two Slytherin Champions guaranteed there would be little to no invitations going in that direction. And if Hufflepuff was guaranteed a few invitations, Gryffindor was far behind them...

"As a reminder, these invitations give you the right to attend the Winter Ball, but you have to bring a partner with you." It was clear the Champion was reciting the rules she had been given hours ago. "This partner doesn't need to have an invitation himself or herself, but no 'I lost my invitation' will be tolerated if at least one out of two partners do not have the golden pass."

"THE INVITATIONS! THE INVITATIONS!" The clamour mounted.

"Oh, and you need a formal Winter Ball suit or something appropriate for the winter theme of the evening," Alexandra Potter stopped the screaming near effortlessly, "the security will not let you enter if you're dressed as a vagrant."

"Is it a masked ball?" George asked loudly.

"No," his financial patron replied, shaking her head in mild disappointment, "why is everyone asking if it's a masked ball?"

"It's Venice!"

"Yeah, but the masked balls are for the Carnival, not for Winter Balls..." The lightning-caster shook her head once more before addressing the students yet again. "So yes, I'm supposed to give you the 'you're supposed to be on your best behaviour' speech. There will be a lot of Ministers of different magical nations, and a lot of important wizards and witches who will have come just for this event. If you're not on your best behaviour...well, let's say losing House Points for your House will be the least of your problems."

This slightly diminished the enthusiasm...but only for a couple of seconds, as Alexandra advanced towards the Hufflepuff table, the much-coveted invitations levitated behind her.

Hannah Abbot was the first one to receive her invitation, and she was not the only one of the fourth-year Badgers to receive one. No one was really that surprised. That Susan Bones and Alexandra Potter were together was perhaps the worst-kept secret of Hogwarts by now. So yeah, it wasn't a surprise that the best friends of Susan were invited to the Winter Ball.

There wasn't an infinite number of the precious letters distributed at that table, however, only a dozen or so. On the other hand, there wasn't a lot of disappointment: with Cedric Diggory in...seventh or eighth place? Yeah, with their own Champion seventh of the Tournament before the Third Task, the Badgers had the not-unreasonable hope there would be more invitations coming their way.

The Ravenclaw table got a lot of invitations right after them. In a way, that wasn't that surprising either. Many Ravenclaws were very recent supporters of the green-eyed witch, but invitations for an event of that magnitude were a very political gift and could cement a lot of alliances. Not everyone got an invitation, only forty did, but Luna Lovegood, Lisa Turpin, Padma Patil, and many other girls and boys did receive one.

The Slytherin table was next, and a lot of teeth gritted at the Gryffindor table when it became obvious they would be the last-served...and the number of letter-invitations, once upon a time considerable, was decreasing at a depressing rate.

Scylla wasn't surprised that the first Slytherin to be rewarded was Daphne Greengrass, who received it like a Princess accepted something from a Queen. Tracey Davis, by contrast, was the antithesis of this behaviour; she hugged Alexandra Potter. Those two were the most notable, though there were about a dozen other members of Salazar's House who received the Winter Ball's ticket entrance.

And after that, it was the turn of the Gryffindor table. Fred and George of course received their invitations...though Alexandra remarked loudly one of the two might not need it as they had only to ask Angelina Johnson for a date, making Fred blush...too bad Creevey had not his camera today!

Alicia Spinnet, Katie Bell, and Scylla herself received an invitation. The golden letter had 'Ginny Weasley' on it, so she would have to attend as her red-haired fake-self, but this didn't bother her. It was going to take her a lot more time unfortunately to explain to some parties how she could manage to pay for a dress which would empty the Weasley vaults for ten years...bah, she would say it was a gift from her prankster siblings. They were earning a lot of money with their legion of enchanted items.

Partially lost in her thoughts, it took her a few seconds to notice the distribution of invitations was over. And a few more heartbeats after that to acknowledge a lot of Gryffindors weren't at all pleased by Alexandra's choices...Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil leading the 'pride'.

"Why aren't we invited?" Lavender Brown asked threateningly, and for once, the blonde-haired, large-breasted Gryffindor fourth-year really looked like a formidable witch, as magic swirled around her and her wand threw alarming sparks.

Too bad for her, it was Alexandra Potter she had to face. The Ravenclaw Champion had survived twice the Dark Queen this year, she wasn't going to be impressed by a girl that she could likely demolish half-asleep, wandless, and with a hand tied behind her back.

"I had a limited number of invitations, you know, Brown. I had to make choices, and my friends went first." The bored expression was unflinching, and the righteous anger of several girls faded as they understood they weren't going to change this stance by threats or mustering in large numbers.

"This is the event of the year! It is out of the question I'm going to miss it!" Parvati Patil was not screeching, but she wasn't far from it.

"Then find a date with a boy or a girl who has an invitation," the black-haired fourth-year shrugged. "I'm sure there are plenty of boys who will want to ask you."

"Are you kidding me? Look at them!"

For once, Scylla was willing to admit Parvati had a point. The girls of Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin who had received their sesame were surrounded by dozens of 'chivalrous knights' of their respective Houses, all trying to get in their good graces so they were their partners for the Winter Solstice.

"You are going to give me an invitation!"

The retort was short and to the point.

"No."

Fortunately, before Parvati and Lavender got themselves in a situation they would regret for the rest of their lives, someone arrived at the Gryffindor table.

"Heiress Potter," Padma Patil saluted her respectfully, "I...implore you to give an invitation to those two. Otherwise their ghosts are most likely going to torment us for the rest of our lives, no matter how many centuries we might survive on this plane of existence."

The green eyes softened a bit. Padma Patil was not a friend, not one of the Exiled, she was more like...a respectful academic challenger compared to the Champion of House Ravenclaw?

"I have no invitations left to give, oh reasonable twin of the Patil line," the reply was definitely sarcastic, "and I can't create them out of thin air or ask someone for more."

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Well..." the thoughtful expression became a malicious smirk. "I just remembered that some prestigious members of House Gryffindor have received invitations, by virtue of being either a Champion or one of the substitutes. And they don't yet have dates..."

Oh...oh, that was evil.

Lavender and Parvati, as well as several older Gryffindor girls, suddenly looked like hungry lionesses. And those lionesses had just been thrown the most judicious piece of meat one could imagine.

"I could arrange an International Portkey in a few days," the Exiled Queen uttered in a bored manner, and it was certainly naked vengeance elevated to an art form...

**10 December 1994, an Alchemy lab near Turin, Italy**

Albus Dumbledore would be the first to say he wasn't a Potions *Master*. And he wasn't a Potions *Professor* either. That was not to say he was ignorant in the field. With the number of Alchemical reagents used in Potions, no Alchemist who wanted to earn his title and not be ridiculed by his peers was incompetent.

Albus was competent. His Potions NEWTs' grade had been the second highest in his year, and the Ravenclaw student who had preceded him had gone on to make a long distinguished career of Potions Master after Hogwarts. And between his habit of assisting at several meetings of the Potion Guild and many conversations and experiments with Nicolas Flamel, the Headmaster of Hogwarts could say his proficiency in brewing was more than acceptable.

But for the life of him, the silver-bearded wizard was unable to say how in the name of Merlin Neville Longbottom had transformed his cauldron into a giant purple crystal.

The Defeater of Grindelwald cleared his throat, and tried to think about something polite to say. It was a disaster? That was too harsh...but completely adequate. I think it's better to brew an Amnesia Potion next so we can forget this ever happened? No, the moment was poorly chosen to mock the young Gryffindor.

"I think we are going to stop the practical lesson for today, my dear boy."

There. No accusation.

"I'm sorry, Professor. It's not that I didn't pay attention, it's..." the Champion of Fate grimaced for a long moment, "I am destroying my cauldrons no matter what I do."

"Hum," Albus replayed the first phases of the catastrophic 'experiment' in his head, and realised what went wrong. In fact, it was incredibly obvious, and he almost slapped himself to not have remarked upon it earlier. "Why did you increase the magic flow you poured into the cauldron? Until you added the purified herbs, it was almost perfect."

"I increased the magic flow?"

The fact it was formulated as a question really, really alarmed the old wizard.

"Yes, my dear boy, you did."

"But...but we weren't told how to control that in Potions!"

"You weren't?" This was incredibly worrying. Severus had sworn he tried to impart the basics from a young age so that 'if they were dunderheads, they would not kill other prospective Potions Masters with them', in his blunt words. "There is...the Blue Tongue Potion I believe, where it is explained for the first-years. In second year, there's the Antidote to the Black Fever which verifies those fundamentals have been learned, and then improves upon this knowledge for more magical control and greater flexibility."

His Potion student for the day grimaced again, this time in a manner which was worse than the first time.

"I didn't finish brewing those Potions. The...Snape threw me out and in detention before we finished those classes."

"Professor Snape, Neville," he corrected automatically before sighing as the 'revelation' was voiced. In a way, that was a relief. Severus had not let his grudge towards Gryffindors destroy his curriculum.

He would not have to go to Hogwarts and tell his senior Potion Master that he needed to change and quickly.

On the other hand, the problem revealed was...very problematic, and no, it wasn't an attempt at humour.

"How many detentions of the sort have interrupted your Potions classes...this is not to judge you, my dear boy, just...an attempt at evaluating the damage your coursework in this class suffered."

Neville gave a number.

It was...shockingly high.

"I tried to...I tried to not make the same mistakes in third year." The future Lord Longbottom said defensively. "But Snape had a grudge against me by then, and the other members of my class aren't much better than me...I've made progress I think, compared to Ron and Leo."

Albus didn't want to know the number of Potion classes the young Black and his Weasley accomplice had missed, then. For that matter, he didn't exactly want to discover how awful their Potions' levels must be if their 'recently assiduous' friend was *that* bad.

"I see," the Headmaster said in a voice which managed to be calm by virtue of having the habit of fending off multitudes of political accusations from Death Eaters. "I compliment you in trying to erase the first mistakes you made. But I am going to be honest with you, my dear boy: self-sabotaging your education in the first two years is an enormous problem. Not paying attention in third-year would be eminently regrettable, but at least I could be sure you have mastered the material of first and second year."

Albus sighed internally and then moved on. What was done was done, and no device could bring him back in time to make sure this unfortunate series of consequences didn't happen. Though it was very frightening Fate had not already protected a potential Champion, or at least incited him to search for alternatives.

"But what is done is done. Now...I'm really sorry, my dear boy, but I don't really see a way for you to brew safely during the Third Task. There are too few days left."

Even if he had realised this at the beginning of the year, it would have been, in all likelihood, too late.

As it was, with the Third Task in early January, and with all the celebrations and obligations of the end of the year approaching, it was doomed before the first effort was made.

"Someone mentioned a Luck Potion during the rules of the First and Second Tasks, Professor" Neville mentioned shyly. Albus felt his lips twitch into a smile.

"Ah yes, Felix Felicis! Yes, it would solve many problems." His smile faded away. "Unfortunately, my dear boy, I can say safely that this Potion is banned for every Task of the Tournament. And for good reasons, I might add. The Champions who wouldn't have drunk this Potion would have absolutely no chance against the ones who did. Moreover, it is toxic if you use it too much in a short amount of time...and it is very, very easy to detect someone who is using it. There are a lot of drawbacks that I can't remember...and I forgot to mention it takes six months and an absurd number of priceless ingredients to brew."

No, Felix Felicis was not an option to salvage something from the disaster he felt coming in this direction.

Several other scenarios played in Albus' head, but he was forced to reject them one after another.

Much like Felix Felicis, Polyjuice would be detected by virtue of the Task lasting for too long, and the Arena handlers were too vigilant for something so simple to escape their vigilance. Illusions? Most of them would be dispelled with a Finite Incantatem. And assuming someone could take the place of the future Longbottom Lord without being caught, who would take the place in question? Albus was to sit with the other Headmasters and Headmistresses. Severus would refuse to help the Champion of Fate, unless the world's survival was at stake.

"Professor...could you put the knowledge of how to brew several Potions in my head?"

"In your head, my dear boy? Certainly not." Albus replied quickly. "It would only give you my memories. You would have the theory, but no practical experience. At the first unexpected issue, you wouldn't know how to react. Furthermore, you and I don't channel our magic the same way and with the same techniques. What works for me is certainly not guaranteed to work for you. And worse...it has the potential to wreak terrible damage upon your memories and your mind. While the Third Task is important, I refuse to let you suffer those kinds of consequences. There are wizards who would say death is painless compared to the problems a Legilimency transfer can cause."

The Defeater of Grindelwald didn't mention that in this case, Augusta Longbottom was certainly going to try to kill him too.

But the fourth-year Gryffindor had brought forwards an interesting idea. Memories of brewing could be shown...

"I can't place the knowledge in your head, my dear boy. But I can show you in a Pensieve how to avoid certain mistakes without ruining good cauldrons in the process."

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

Now that she was familiar with the library of the Scuola Regina, Alexandra had come to a sad conclusion.

No matter how long she lived – and as a Hydra Animagus, the possible lifespan was enormous – there was no way she would be able to read every book in this library, never mind every book in existence.

The Potter Heiress wasn't going to say it out loud; Hermione had not yet arrived at this dramatic conclusion, and the bookworm of the Exiled was sure to react violently at the first attempt to suggest something so 'terrible'.

It was a pity, really. Those Venetian shelves had a lot of writing reporting on the practises, spells, and discoveries of thousands of past and existent magical communities. There was a near-infinite amount of knowledge and imagination contained within those pages...and for the greater part, it would stay in the library, for no student could possibly read a tenth of it in his or her lifetime.

The book she was reading was a perfect example of this. It was about Alchemical reagents...but not the kind one might think when about to participate in a very dangerous Task of the European Magical Tournament. No, it was a Potion which was tailored to create massive amounts of *sugar* from Alchemical reagents.

"Curious reading," a voice echoed, and Alexandra's eyes rose from her reading to meet familiar dark green eyes every Champion had learned to fear.

"I'm expanding my magical knowledge, Chaos." The female Champion of Death forced herself to remain calm; if the Dark Queen of Durmstrang had come to threaten her or some antagonistic purpose, she wouldn't do it in the Venetian library.

"Maybe," the older girl conceded, "but I fail to see what use sugar can provide you when you will have to break through the obstacles of the Third Task."

"Well," Alexandra had a wild thought and went with it, "assuming they have a sugar-addicted animal guarding a Citadel's gate, I will be able to bribe it with desultory facility?"

It sounded stupid, once uttered...but the Dark Queen grew thoughtful.

"It isn't the worst idea of the century...assuming they are sugar-addicted defenders, of course."

"Of course," the Potter Heiress repeated ironically. "What are you doing here, Chaos? You're not trying to mix 'Chaos ingredients' in your evil lair?"

"Come on, that is ridiculous," the Russian witch snorted in her slightly-accented French, "everyone knows there are no 'Chaos ingredients' in Potions. Much like everyone should know there are no 'Chaos Runes'."

The British girl raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"You used Norse Runes no one had seen in decades."

"That's because my family has considerable archives of various Russian and non-Russian mages doing things with Runes in the last millennium or so," the Champion of Loki replied with a smirk. "There is a lot of knowledge and witnesses' testimony on what my Champion predecessors did...as well as their speculations on how to replicate their feats."

Said like that, it sounded completely logical...and completely unfair for the Champions who had to fight against her in the Coliseum.

"Gungnir?" The sacred spear of Odin had been originally a Light treasure...which meant evidently someone from Chaos shouldn't even been able to touch it, never mind wield it in combat.

The smirk grew into a very satisfied and frightening grin.

"That...let's just say that the fates of some Norse legendary beings are intertwined in Norse mythology for a reason. And claiming Gungnir like I did is one of the reasons I was able to become the Champion of Loki."

The name, even voiced with zero magical power behind it, provoked a sort of cold current in the library. Alexandra thought she head the whisper of mad laughter far away...and the young witch couldn't convince herself it was her imagination playing games.

"Fine," the Ravenclaw Champion turned another page of her book, though most of her attention remained on the Dark Queen. "You have enormous advantages. We are all happy for you...oh wait, no, most of the Champions are not."

A snort was the first answer she received.

"Don't be ridiculous, Death. You are as powerful as I was at fourteen. The only differences between you and I are that I am older than you and I got a far better magical education. If you were seventeen-"

"If," the green-eyed Champion of Hogwarts said sarcastically, "there are a lot of sayings about 'time' and 'if'. One which comes to mind is that even the Emperors and Kings of this world know better than to ask for time."

"True," the Russian Champion nodded, "but enough about that. What did you tell Lust about her alliance proposal?"

That was not something she had expected, honestly. The Dark Queen had seemed very...disinterested after leaving them in the Art Wing a few days ago.

"Not that it's very much your business...I rejected her terms. Her friends and superiors have killed and will continue to kill tens of thousands. I think...no, I know I don't want to be on the side of someone who kills like humans are all insects to be disposed as they see fit."

"The Light does it too," Lyudmila Romanov pointed it out.

And unfortunately, she was absolutely right.

"I said the Exchequer and its Dark Lords and Dark Ladies were monstrous and unworthy of an alliance with me, Chaos. I didn't say I was going to side with Ra and Dumbledore's lackeys."

She wouldn't side with the forces which day after day looked more and more like the hordes of Sauron about to invade the nations of the Free People.

If someone asked her in later years where she was when Gondor called for help, the Potter Heiress wouldn't be forced to admit she was the Saruman of the Exchequer.

Long ago, Alexandra had asked herself what would happen if one day the blood on her hands stopped bothering her.

In hindsight, this was the wrong question to ponder upon. Her younger and far more naive self had no idea it was the reflexion in the mirror a Ravenclaw witch should be wary of.

Alexandra wanted to survive, that much hadn't changed.

But what happened when the Dark Lady you were supposed to oppose wore your traits?

Who would play the role of the Rohirrim cavalry at the Fields of Pelennor if everyone had fallen into the darkness?

"So no, I won't ally with her. All the advantages gained for the Third Task aren't worth the problems from siding with the Succubus Champion."

"Good," Lyudmila Romanov answered, and threw her a roll of parchment, that the Hydra Animagus caught effortlessly despite her surprise. "The list of reagents the Judges will make available to use at the beginning of the Third Task."

Alexandra gaped for long seconds. Yeah, she had definitely not expected *that*.

"From the goodness of your heart?" Her voice must have betrayed how sarcastic she was about it...

"You're not as cynical as I was at your age," this was a statement, not a question. The Dark Queen snorted for the second time of this conversation. "I want competent opposition for the next Tasks. You being unable to compete seriously would make this Task very boring in short order. And nothing forbids me from giving away information...the more who try to escape the trap of the Exchequer, the better."

"You have an idea what their goals are for this event?" the Potter Heiress inquired.

"Not a clue," the Dark Queen said joyously, "but I think-"

The voices of students approaching very close to her alcove stopped the Russian Champion in the middle of her answer. Alexandra was about to say she could continue...except her Hydra senses recognised the two voices which were speaking, and by the marriage of Aragorn and Arwen, this was hilarious.

"Lady Hermione Granger," the accented British of Viktor Krum was rough, but perfectly recognisable, "will you give me the honour of being your Champion to the Winter Ball?"

"Yes...yes, Viktor, I do..."

Well...it seemed the 'information channelling' in the library had evolved into something else.

Alexandra smiled. The Basilisk Slayer was happy for Hermione, she truly was, and she wasn't going to stop her teasing after the Winter Ball...

The next sentences they heard confirmed it was not 'merely' an invitation to the Ball...they really intended to go further than that.

When the Star-Seeker of the Bulgarian National Team and her friend walked away, Lyudmila Romanov exploded in laughter.

"Oh, this is pure gold," the blonde Russian witch giggled. "Who would have thought Viktor Krum was interested in something besides brooms? Ah! Ragnarok truly is near, if he begins to date girls...I hope your friend is ready for the horde of angry fan-girls, Death."

Ah yes, the fan-girls...never had the world been besieged by such a terrible threat in ages past.

"Well, this was amazingly interesting, but this reminds me I need to find a partner for the dance!" the Dark Queen smiled carnivorously, and Alexandra was very, very happy everyone she liked had a date for the Winter Ball. "See you later, Death!"

**11 December 1994, somewhere on the island of Sumatra**

Everything was destroyed or drowned under a sea of mud and debris.

Had he not been able to see it with his own eyes, Ra wouldn't have believed it.

As it was, the ancient Avatar of the Light had truly wondered if it was a large wave which could do this world-shaking damage. Surely the forces of Darkness had cast some form of sorcery or wall-breaker to prevent the conventional and unconventional defences from functioning correctly.

But to his consternation, after a day of scrying and searches, Ra had been unable to find another explanation.

It was a tsunami which had destroyed his citadel.

Once this was acknowledged, finding the 'how' had been rather simple. Alas, it provided him very little comfort now.

The Seal had fulfilled its grand purpose, and though a long-range incantation had destroyed the abominable construction dirtying the seabed with its very existence...it was far, far too late.

"We are counting more than two hundred mages for our forces, Lord Archmage," the Asian leader of the Army of Light reported, "we still have over fifty missing. As for the Muggles on this very island, there are over eight thousand dead and-"

"I don't care about the Muggles." They bred so fast those days anyway that by the end of this century, they would have recovered in numbers from this disaster. The same couldn't be said about the skilled wizards and witches killed by the terrifying assault of Osiris.

"I know, but..." The young wizard swallowed heavily. "Many souls have been corrupted by War, and some of them are quite young-"

"My orders were clear. Those tainted by the Great Darkness must not be allowed to spread their corruption further. Is my will unclear or must I find another theatre commander?"

"No, Lord Archmage! Your will is clear. Your orders will be obeyed to the letter."

The wizard rushed away, and minutes later, familiar orange-yellow spells began to be cast. Imprecations were screamed for a few seconds...and then silence returned.

"Their blood is on your hands, Osiris. I will never falter in my duties."

His brother and his group of Dark Lords and Dark Ladies would not win. The loss of his citadel was a serious blow, but one which advanced little in the millennia-old war. This wasn't an assault against the Light Powers; this was an extremely dangerous physical assault against a stronghold. The Light was not weakened by this blow. The Statute of Secrecy was not weakened, for no Muggle believed someone human could wield the power to unleash the wrath of the seas.

The first Seal was far more dangerous, but there were solutions for this kind of complication and-

"Lord Archmage! Lord Archmage! We found it!"

Ra beamed and ran towards the young wizard who had uttered the fantastic words.

For a few seconds, the Avatar of Light feared it was a false alert, but as a German Tunnelling Charm threw quantities of mud to their left, the hole created expanded to reveal a chest which must have been gold days ago before the tsunami. A Cleaning Charm later, some of its brilliance was visible again...as was the emblem of the White Phoenix decorating the container of the weapon.

"Yes...excellent work, all of you."

The Archmage smiled.

The Exchequer had failed, and soon, his enemies would rue the day they had decided to defy the Light.

**12 December 1994, Magical Paris, France**

Alexandra stared in the mirror of the French shop for a long time.

Was it her in this mesmerising evening robe?

Between the ice colour, the pure white, and the diamonds, it was...it was...

"Isn't it a bit too much?" The Potter Heiress asked her magical guardian. "I mean, I know there's a winter theme for the Ball, but the green robe we saw earlier-"

"Alexandra," Stella Zabini interrupted her, "it is not a question of being 'too much'. I am letting you borrow the diamonds for an evening...and you need to impress the audience you will have at the Scuola Regina."

The Basilisk Slayer didn't ask 'why'; the answer was as always politics...politics and how important it was for a Tournament Champion to have Judges and the public have a high opinion of you.

"That assumes I will manage to impress anyone." The young witch murmured before clearing her throat. "There's a colony of Succubi at the Scuola Regina, I doubt they are going to restrain the use of their powers for the evening."

"You might be surprised," the Black Widow of Magical Britain gave her an enigmatic smile before giving half of an explanation, "Many of the Ball's invitees will have considerable Occlumency defences."

And after saying that, her magical guardian lay down the magnificent diadem of diamonds upon her hand.

"All right...it's a good point. On the other hand...fashion-wise, isn't the ice colour going to clash with my hair and my eyes?"

"You don't think I am going to let you enter the ballroom just by donning your ball robe, are you?" Stella replied, uttering what was no doubt for her a rhetorical question. Alexandra fidgeted, crossing her arms, making her incredibly aware she had long opera gloves of ice-snow theme here. "I've already hired several witches to take care of you during the afternoon of the twenty-first. If you had any obligations, you'd better cancel them."

"Yes, oh Lady Zabini." The young Champion didn't salute, but the sarcasm in her voice should be sufficient to explain how 'ecstatic' she was about it. "And Susan? Good sense and traditions-"

"I've already contacted Amelia." Stella Zabini waved the issue away in a few words. "Do not worry, you will be among the Princesses of this Winter Ball, and no faux-pas will come to hurt your grand entrance."

There was nothing but conceding her defeat, then.

It was only when the shoes were brought in front of her that Alexandra frowned again, and it wasn't just because the height of the heels was ridiculous.

"Leaving aside the fact the heels are way too high," of course, her magical guardian murmured a password in French, and the height went from 'impossible to walk upon' to something far more reasonable, "leaving aside that, there are a lot of enchantments on those shoes."

"The Tournament organisation has communicated a lot of details about what you are supposed to do during the evening," Stella replied very evasively.

Oh. The Ravenclaw Champion couldn't say she liked that at all. And it pretty much confirmed her theory of them being able to claim one more clue for the Tournament's Third Task was correct.

"And I suppose the instructions came with a limited Secrecy Oath?"

The lack of an answer was synonymous with approval in this case.

Alexandra sighed internally. The 'Winter Robe' was incredibly comfortable and warm, and while she would never try to win a Task wearing it, the mobility was far better than what she had thought possible. It might be possible to do a few large jumps and dance without too many problems.

"Your mother approved your clothes, by the way."

This time, Alexandra outright snorted.

"I'm ready to bet this isn't the only thing she told you to do. Where is the camera?"

And yes, there was one. Yes, they spent the next thirty minutes taking photos.

At this point, Alexandra was ready to do the Third Task on the spot if only to let this 'fashionable duty' stop.

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

"Frode Falk?" The green eyes, no matter how inexpressive, always seemed to burn with the fires of Death. "No, I didn't know he was a Light bigot. I'm not surprised, though."

Henri de Condé didn't know what was worse: that a Champion of the Dark always assumed the worst when one of their Light counterparts was involved, or that a young witch several years younger than him took the news of someone trying to kill her like it was an average day for her.

Light and Sand, he really hoped the latter was not true. If someone truly tried to kill her every morning, it was a minor miracle Death's Chosen was not a sociopath.

"I don't really know if he is as...convinced as Lorenzo de Medici was of the inevitable victory of the Light, but given the near-monologue he gave us, I'm not ready to bet against it."

"Formidable," Alexandra Potter sniffed before passing a hand through her black hair. "If his specialty is Potions or Alchemy, he could be a really redoubtable opponent for the Third Task."

"Do you have any indication he is?" the French wizard asked with a hint of curiosity. "The few students of Durmstrang I asked weren't able to give me his grades; they said he wasn't in their classes."

"My cousin Astrid said the same thing." The British girl revealed, playing with a quill absently. "Well, she also said he was thrown out of the Duellist Class during third year."

"Thrown out?" Henri said slowly. That was definitely something no one had mentioned.

"Unlike at Hogwarts, Durmstrang teachers have zero intention of tolerating students who are unable to get good grades in the subject they teach. So yeah, Frode Falk was thrown out of Duelling because he wasn't good enough, and it was in his *third year*."

"You're certainly more familiar than I am with the Durmstrang curriculum," the Champion of Horus said carefully. "Given the way you insisted on the last words, I assume it is significant."

"It is," the Champion of Death explained very seriously. "Everything I know about Durmstrang is that their classes massively increase in difficulty the longer you stay at the school. Their first year has more classes than Hogwarts, but the spells to master are fewer in number than at Hogwarts. Second year in Scandinavia is about on the same level as the standards we have in Britain. Third year is when the challenges truly begin. To sum-up, Frode Falk failed when the difficulty really began to rise. And in addition to no longer been wanted in Duelling, he wasn't taking Dark Arts in the first place."

Henri smiled.

"I thought it would be rather evident why he didn't."

Being a Light Champion – or a Light claimant, since it was unlikely he had been a full Champion of a Light Power at thirteen – made sure you couldn't cast any Dark-aligned spell without vomiting blood and suffering a lot of unpleasant effects.

"Yeah, but it is a core class at Durmstrang. You can't fail too many of them without being in serious trouble...but I don't think you're very interested in learning all the intricacies of Durmstrang's 'for the elites' system."

The Champion of Hogwarts might be surprised.

"Anyway, my cousin confirmed Frode Falk is not part of any Potion or Alchemist study group, or Guild. I don't know how competent he will be during the Third Task."

Green eyes stared at him in amusement.

"On the other hand, I was betting a Champion of Horus would be very good at deciphering Hieroglyphs, and I was wrong about that."

Of course a Champion of the Dark was among the witches who found this funny.

"I never learned Hieroglyphs so far," Henri admitted freely. "With a certain organisation having way too much influence among the Egyptian specialists, it wasn't judged wise to accept tutoring there during my childhood. And Hieroglyphs as a Runic language is extremely complicated for a beginner."

Fortunately, he was far better at Potions...except Alchemical reagents were very costly and there had been only a few hours of teaching at Beauxbatons.

"I understand." The girl who was currently second of the Tournament rankings agitated her quill before readjusting her bag. "Well, this was not a very productive conversation, but thanks for meeting me. See you next time, oh Beauxbatons Champion."

Yeah, this wasn't a very productive conversation...but it had raised an important point, Henri mused, as he saw the Champion of Death walk away.

When it came down to it, most of the Dark Champions, far from being masterminds or extremely qualified spies, were just students and gained their information from rumours and gossip.

And they didn't know much about their fellow Champions, be they sworn to the Dark or the Light.

The majority had not met each other before this Tournament.

They had no reason save their status as Champions to kill each other.

And yet the Light was doing its best to sow hatred and mistrust everywhere they went.

What an unfair world they lived in.

**13 December 1994, Alexandra's Villa, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

"I'm going with Blaise Zabini to the Winter Ball."

"Yes, yes I'm happy for you Morag..." absorbed as she was trying to list the possible combinations of Alchemical substances, Alexandra took several seconds to truly acknowledge the information. "Wait a minute...Blaise...Blaise Zabini is your date?"

"Yes...is there another Blaise at the Scuola Regina?" The red-haired Irish Heiress grinned widely at her surprise.

"Well...not that I know of. Of course, I'm not learning the first names of every student present in this school." She hadn't done it at Hogwarts. There was no way she was going to do it now. "Why did you choose him, by the way? You had your eyes on some pretty Italian boys, last I recalled..."

"Several of them were Incubi, and they were in it for sharing my bed after the Winter Ball." The blue-eyed Ravenclaw gave a threatening look, hinting saying something was counter-indicated.

"Morag, at the risk of saying the evident, Incubi and Succubi live for sex...or at least anything they consider intimate activities." And Blaise was the son of a Lamia, so yeah, it wasn't exactly like the Slytherin boy was very much 'normal'...whatever the definition of it was these days.

"Yeah, you would know about that...the Succubi Princess has not been shy in her motivations."

"True." After all, what was there to say when the Champion of Lust had taken an adult body of her girlfriend? "But she will wait a long time. I have a relationship with Susan I enjoy, and I am not going to risk breaking it for something...something..."

"It's called a threesome, Alex."

The Potter Heiress blushed.

"I was going to say 'something that isn't going to work'. I could very much close my eyes on a Succubus being a member of the Exchequer. But what she is willing to do as long as the Light loses is making me very, very worried. And..."

"And?"

"And in a way," the green-eyed Champion admitted in a whisper, "I worry I could have turned out exactly like her."

Morag's grin disappeared, and to her relief, didn't say she was stupid or making up something that didn't exist.

"Yeah," her friend confirmed after about ten seconds. "You have a point. And it's not just Sforza, is it? The Dark Queen frightens you too...differently, but you have the same potential for mayhem and being in the eye of the hurricane."

"Yes." Alexandra grimaced. "And Romanov telling me she was about as powerful as I currently am when she was fourteen didn't exactly help in that regard."

Alexandra considered the situation for a few seconds...before banishing it from her mind. What was done was done. She had made her decision for the Third Task, and now she would have to deal with it.

"Totally unrelated to the subjects we discussed previously, I told Roger to stop searching for the solution of the 'Potion enigma' he is still trying to decipher. He refused."

"What did you expect? His pride as a Ravenclaw is at stake."

"I know, but with the dreaded Dark Queen giving me the list of Alchemical reagents authorised, the 'clue' has just lost a lot of importance...unless he could decipher the fourth enigma no one has access to."

"You plan to improvise, then?"

"Well, there's still the Winter Ball." Alexandra gave a thin smile to the other Ravenclaw. "The event is mandatory, and there have been very extensive preparations to make it memorable. I wouldn't be surprised if we do somehow have to recover a clue."

"And if it's about dancing, you will count on your girlfriend to save you?"

"I don't need salvation, thank you very much," Alexandra said haughtily...before amending her previous sentence. "But she's a far better dancer than me, yes."

The contrary would have been very surprising. As an Heiress of a prestigious House, Susan had received lessons in dancing and plenty of other important subjects after celebrating her eighth birthday. At that that time, Alexandra had not known there was a magical world.

"And I do not intend to improvise, no." Alexandra reopened a large grimoire which detailed a very interesting list of Potions which had nothing in common except their Alchemical ingredients. "I have a far better plan in mind."

"Oh? And what is this plan which has escaped our illustrious Headmaster and most of your peers, oh mighty Champion of Ravenclaw?"

"I thought it was evident," Alexandra bared her teeth, and allowed her Hydra to transform her teeth. "This time, we are going to do something I should I have done outrageously and blatantly during the first two Tasks, but I didn't because I thought I had a huge advantage over my 'peers'."

"This better be good, Alex."

"This time, my insolent minion, we are going to *cheat*."

Morag blinked...and then burst into mad laughter which lasted more than five minutes. Alexandra raised her eyes in consternation. Why was everyone not appreciating her theatrical efforts lately?

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

Everything was going wrong lately.

The Third Task was about Potions. That would have been bad enough, but it was about high-level Potions, the kind of stuff even NEWT-level students at Hogwarts didn't learn about much. Professor Dumbledore had told him it would be better if he had listened to Snape respectfully from the beginning of his time at Hogwarts, but Neville wasn't honestly sure it would have changed anything.

When you observed several near-adult Champions in the Scuola Regina's library stare in incomprehension at certain books, it was easy to understand the Judges hadn't prepared the Third Task with third or fourth-year Potion novices in mind.

All his practical attempts to make the simplest Potion attempts had ended in utter failure. There had been a moment of hope when Diggory had delivered him the list of authorised Alchemical reagents – the Hufflepuff hadn't said where he had obtained it, and Neville hadn't asked – but it had quickly faltered. Yes, he could learn the Potions which could possibly be brewed given the ingredients available. Theory was fine. It was the practical which was going to be problematic.

Everything was going wrong. The Winter Ball was approaching, and save a few Succubi, no one had shown even a slight interest in being his dancing partner...and yet he needed one. The future Lord Longbottom would have summoned his courage and accepted the not-subtle hints of the Dark Creatures a few days ago...if he wasn't sure his grandmother would kill him when he showed up with one at his arm. Forget Professor Dumbledore, the Champions of Light, and every likely Light supporter, Neville wouldn't try to defy his grandmother. There were a lot of methods to die which would be incredibly less painful than that nightmarish end.

So yeah, no date for the Winter Ball. It would be a monumental humiliation to be the only Champion not to have a partner, and thus the only one to not be able to enter the ballroom...but it would only be that. The Third Task, however...

Yeah, in the Third Task, he could really die if he wasn't good enough. And he wasn't good enough. If it had been the Second Task, at least he could have invented something, carving some Runes wasn't difficult, no matter how much Montague wanted to pretend the contrary.

But there was no force in this world which could make him learn everything there was to know in a few days.

The more days he spent listening to the explanations of Professor Dumbledore, the more Neville understood how much he was screwed. This Task was for a Potion expert. The other Champions of Hogwarts had agreed when they had to meet at the Headmaster's urging the last time.

"Longbottom? Longbottom!"

Neville shook off the dark thoughts, and focused again on his surroundings only to realise he was facing Alexandra Potter.

"You should be a bit wary of where you're going," the Champion of Death informed him with a smile. "This school has a lot of water around it. A few more minutes in this direction, and you're going to jump into a canal."

"I will keep it in mind," the Gryffindor pureblood nodded. "Thank you for the information, but-"

The green-eyed Champion took a step aside, revealing the presence of Lavender Brown behind her. Wait a minute. What was she doing here? And how in the name of Morgana and Merlin were the two girls together? Lavender wasn't a friend of Potter's. In fact, she heavily disliked her.

"What is she doing here?" he managed to ask as the blonde Gryffindor looked at him like he was about to be devoured.

The Slayer of two Basilisks and one Light Champion snorted loudly.

"Hearing your difficulties about finding a partner," yes, there was largely a vicious smile on the Ravenclaw's face now, "I decided to share the information with poor Lavender here. By a dreadful turn of events, she hasn't been invited to the Winter Ball."

Neville stared at the green eyes looking like the Killing Curse, and was on the edge of shouting it was her who had delivered three-quarters of Hogwarts' invitations. It was her fault that-

"I think the words you are trying to articulate are: 'thank you, oh magnificent Heiress Potter'. You're welcome, Heir Longbottom."

"Hey, wait a minute-"

"You're supposed to kneel," the black-haired Ravenclaw interrupted him again.

"Kneel?"

"At least, bend the knee," the infernal smile grew wider, "you're a pureblood of a long prestigious line, and Lavender is Heiress Brown. There are traditions to respect if you're asking her to be your partner for the Winter Ball."

"But-"

An enormous amount of magic suddenly turned his legs into jelly, and before he could react, one of Lavender's hands was holding his left hand in an iron grasp.

Neville was a Gryffindor.

He was the Boy-Who-Lived.

He was the Champion of Fate.

He had survived the Battle of the Chamber of Secrets and many extraordinary events.

As the blue eyes of Lavender became his whole world, Neville knew none of it mattered. If he didn't say the fateful words, the Brown Heiress would slaughter him, and then Potter would help her hiding his body.

"Heiress Brown...will you do me the honour of opening the Winter Ball in my company?"

"I would be delighted to," Lavender purred, a sound which now that he thought about it, was sounding like the satisfied noise of a tigress. "Thank you for your assistance, Champion Potter. It won't be forgotten. Stand up, my date. We must go to Paris."

"Paris?" It was getting out of hand, it was-

"Of course! The Venetian market is crumbling under the demand now! Where else to go but the capital of fashionable robes!"

Forget his earlier comments, the nightmare was beginning right now!

"Someone save me!" the Boy-Who-Lived moaned as Lavender 'escorted' him to the location where International Portkeys were arriving and departing.

But everyone, be they a student of the Scuola Regina or Hogwarts, Light or Dark, laughed as he passed before them.

Filthy Traitors.

What was the point of being the Champion of Fate again?

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

The vial had been magically reinforced three times before it was declared ready to receive the Alchemical-based Potion. Despite that, Alexandra could still see the baleful aura of the crimson substance trying to free itself from its container.

"It doesn't look very impressive," Hermione declared.

Alexandra rolled her eyes.

"Believe me, Hermione, that's because you don't see what I see. If you did, I believe you would be far more impressed."

"Oh, I'm impressed," the bushy-haired Ravenclaw hastily added. "You had an elite Potion Master to make sure nothing bad happens during your Potion tutoring, but you still brewed the Prague's Pyre-Gift alone. I'm sure I wouldn't be able to do it. Officially, it's a sixth-year Potion by the Scuola Regina's scholarly coursework, right?"

"It is." There was no classification by British standards, because the Alchemical-based Potion was illegal to brew, Potion Master or no Potion Master. "And yes, I'm very proud to have brewed it on my own."

As Hermione had said, Slughorn had been there to make sure the brewing could be stopped if she made a major mistake; a Hydra Animagus was resistant, but the Prague's Pyre-Gift was a powerful Fire incantation imbued in a volatile liquid, and could easily eat away through enchantments at the best of times. His assistance hadn't been necessary, in the end, and brewing this Potion was a major achievement she could add to her academic performance.

"What was the most difficult thing, in your opinion?" the other Ravenclaw girl placed the vial in the reinforced box which would hold it until it was ready to be used.

"Difficult to say...I would say the sheer amount of concentration it demands. We spent one hour making the preparations for about sixteen frenetic minutes of brewing."

"Frenetic?" her friend questioned her with an amused smile.

Alexandra returned her a sardonic expression.

"You believe your Venetian Potion Master is pushing you hard in class? This Potion makes everything else look tame. I had to learn by heart everything before placing the water in the cauldron, and each ingredient was measured to the tenth of a gram. Alchemical reagents are substances that tolerate absolutely no mistake."

"One could almost hear Cho."

"Well," Alexandra scratched her head, "in this case, my not-tutor of Alchemy definitely has a point."

And Horace Slughorn had organised beforehand a miniature event where a 'distracted student' – with him playing the role – failed utterly to take seriously how difficult the brewing task was utterly. The 'mistake' had melted the cauldron and incinerated the surroundings faster than you could say 'Oops!', and according to her Exchequer, it was a very *minor* mistake. Namely, instead of placing twenty grams of an ingredient, thirty grams had been poured into the incomplete Potion.

This was done in the middle of nowhere, and with enchantments to protect everything which wasn't the cauldron from the blast.

Needless to say, during a real brewing, you had to realise something was wrong and run away incredibly fast.

"It helps we have modern machines here, of course." The Ravenclaw Champion pointed a finger at said instruments. Apparently, they worked on some new concept of magical arcane, and the wizard or the witch who invented them made them incredibly similar to what could be found in a non-magical home. No old-fashioned scales in the halls of the Scuola Regina, no Sir. "But yeah, it is going to be very difficult."

"Maybe too difficult," Hermione replied as she locked everything away for the next day and they began to leave the Potion lab, "I mean, it's the point of this whole Tournament to tell the Champions they must do horribly complicated and dangerous things, but really, this field of Potions is looking like it's going to make the Runes' challenge *simple*."

Alexandra nodded vigorously.

"That's a lot of good points, Hermione. Unfortunately, as Slughorn reminded me, *they* informed the potential Champions before the preliminaries that Potion was one of the subjects they were going to base at least one Task on. If we aren't able to handle the challenge, it is because we aren't prepared enough."

And as much as the Potter Heiress didn't want to admit it in public, the Potion Master was right. Save Neville and she, all the other Champions were at least sixteen, and thus not far from final graduation. If they weren't able to brew correctly Potions of that level, then they weren't going to pass their Potion exams a few months later.

Alexandra turned around to cast a powerful Locking Charm on the door. When she returned her hand, Ron Weasley had emerged from the small groups of students walking towards the dinner hall.

"Err...Hermione, you are a girl."

As far as introductions went, it was so pathetic that Alexandra burst into giggles, unable to control her hilarity.

"You...stop!" The Hydra Animagus was unable to do anything but giggle louder. "Err..."

"Call me by my name, Weasley. You and I are not friends," the ex-Gryffindor girl said with a good dose of annoyance every Exiled had long learned to recognise and be wary of.

"Err...Granger...do you want to go to the Winter Ball with me?"

This was too much. Her giggles became a loud hiss of unrestrained, hysterical laughter.

"No."

"Thank...what?"

"I said, 'no', Ronald Weasley. No, as 'no, I won't go to the Winter Ball with you'. I already have a partner for the evening of the Winter Solstice...and even if you were the last boy on this planet, I wouldn't choose *you*."

"Come on, I am a Champion substitute, give me a chance. It's obvious no Champion will ever invite you to the Ball-"

"And why would no Champion invite me to the Ball, oh proud Gryffindor substitute?"

Alexandra made several silent signs to the red-haired moron, insisting he had to desist and flee, as Hermione's hand was on its way to her holster.

Her efforts were completely ignored.

"Your teeth are too big, and the local creatures aren't too big on bookworms, plus your...OUCH!"

The expression of pain was the result of Hermione kicking the 'New Marauder' between the legs, somewhere no sane male being enjoyed being hit.

A second later, Hermione began to cast several Curses Viktor Krum had certainly taught her.

The real miracle was that after a good dozen changed several limbs into animal parts and covered the idiot in a sort of purple pus, Ron Weasley was still able to talk. Fortunately for him, Hermione stormed out, meaning Alexandra didn't have to stop her friend from killing the rude boy.

"But...you...you found a date for Neville..."

Alexandra giggled again.

"Weasley, throwing Lavender Brown at Neville Longbottom was not a reward." Controlling her emotions was damn hard, but she managed. Somehow. "But if it's a date you want, I'm happy to oblige. There are many bright young Ladies who are eager to find a partner for the dance."

"Really? You would find a date for Leo and me?"

Let's see...there were Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode who had been prompt to jump on the bandwagon 'we will go to the Winter Ball no matter what obstacles stand in our way!'...

Oh yes. The Gryffindor substitutes were going to love that.

Just joking. They were going to hate it. But the Slytherin purebloods were going to 'tame' them, and make sure they behave.

It was going to be the perfect revenge for the insults the 'New Marauders' regularly hurled whenever they thought they were clever.

"I swear it, on my magic."

**Author's note**: The next chapter will be the Winter Ball. And it will have its fair share of surprises, believe me.

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