

Highly Commended 2018 OutStanding LGBTIQA+ Short Story Competition

Meltdown by Caitlin Archer

From the outside, the party looks like any other charity ball. The rich and powerful roam the floor amid slimy politicians and nervous prodigies. The biggest names rub shoulders with one or two promising protégées, offering internships and positions in return for favours that are a little less than... savoury.

From the inside, on the other hand, the party is a withering snake pit of the largest underground criminal syndicates in New York. 'Kings' prowl freely, oozing auras of confidence, their 'Queens' hanging off their arm and every word. Intense battles of silence and charisma play out over expensive bottles of wine, cigar smoke curling like exotic dancers. 'Knights' follow their respective bosses like shadows, but the glint of weapons are a constant reminder to stay in line.

I pluck a canapé off a waiter's tray as he passes, and saunter over to Oliver, my date and a fellow 'Knight'. Our boss, Mr Du Pont, is no more than a metre away, discussing politics with the boss of the biggest drug ring on the East coast – Mr Agrach. I nod an acknowledgement to Clarissa, Mr Agrach's 'Knight', who glares coldly back. My hand strays to the stiletto knife sheathed to my thigh, comforted by the coolness of the metal bleeding through the fabric of my dress. Oliver sends me a warning frown, and I roll my eyes.

"Pim, let me introduce you to Mr Agrach." At the mention of my name, I step forward and give the older man a charming smile. "Mr Agrach, this is Pim, my best 'Knight' and protégée." Mr Agrach gives me a tight thin-lipped smile as he gives me a once over, his gaze leaving burns on my skin. If Mr Du Pont notices, he doesn't display any emotion. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Pim." I hold out my hand and bow my head as he kisses it. "The pleasure's all mine, sir."

Introductions over, I slip back into the shadows. The conversation turns back to business, so I allow myself to scan the crowd for suspicious faces. My ears prick, and I refocus on the conversation playing out in front of me. "... I have to say, Du Pont, I'm impressed by how... tolerant you are, letting him parade around looking like that. The others might think you've gone soft if they find out the lustrous "Miss Pim" is in fact, a boy."

My blood runs cold, and I feel panic stirring in my chest. Oliver reaches for me, but my glare stops him in his tracks. Mr Du Pont's eyes flash, as dysphoria washes over me, something I haven't experienced in a long time. The temperature of the entire ballroom drops ten degrees, and the loud buzz of conversation dies down to hushed whispers. As the current 'King' of the underworld, Mr Du Pont's word is gospel, but every move and word is watched by the shadows. How he reacts to this comment could make or break his authority, and while I don't care about what happens to me, Mr Du Pont is the father I never had, and I will never forgive myself if I'm the reason he falls.

I slide forward barely an inch, my hand slipping my knife free with a satisfying shing. A collective hushed gasp ripples throughout the room, and the air shifts as two dozen 'Knights' rearrange into defensive stances. Mr Du Pont raises his right hand, and despite the call for bloodshed singing through my blade, I stand down. "How my protégée identifies is none of your business, Mr Agrach. In my eyes, as long as it doesn't impede her capability to perform the tasks assigned to her, it's none of my business either. Gender means nothing when it

comes to leadership, and I know my faction is willing to follow this young woman to the grave, and beyond, if the need arises.”

Mr Du Pont’s words console the pain in my heart, settling the panic and sending a rush of blood to my cheeks. Mr Agrach scowls and backs down, and the ballroom lets go of the breath it was holding. Taking my hand, Mr Du Pont pulls me out from his shadow, and the sight of the world beyond nearly blinds me.

“I took you from the shithole you were living in and have watched you grow into the strong young woman you are today.” He says into my ear. “You will be the next big thing, Pim. I promise.”