**Chapter 95**

**Third Task**

**6 January 1995, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

The Champion of Ravenclaw was in a good mood today.

Scylla didn't know Alexandra Potter that well compared to several members of the Exiled, but she was at least sure she could correctly assess *that*.

"I thought a Tournament Task wasn't something one looked forwards to?" the future Yaxley Lady asked lightly.

"This Task is special," the green-eyed witch said in a distracted tone, one she rarely used...and which certainly implied Susan Bones had devoured her lips a few minutes ago.

"Special because your girlfriend helped you?"

The indolence in the eyes and the overall expression instantly vanished, and suddenly it was like staring at a monstrous predator wondering if you were the appetiser... or if it would keep you for dinner.

"I didn't say anything when you chose Dean Thomas to go to the Winter Ball."

The young girl scowled.

"If I had any choice, I would have tried to go with Lyre...as friends." But the harpy who pretended to be her mother would have immediately called Dumbledore and whoever she could pressure, and likely tried to cancel everything as a warning 'she was going Dark'. It wouldn't be long before the masks could fall, but for now, 'Ginny' had to pretend she was a good little sheep.

"Hmm...only as friends?"

Scylla blushed as the insinuation wasn't exactly subtle.

"Yes," she said sternly. "As friends."

"Morag will be so disappointed," the Basilisk-Slayer mused. "Ah, well. Anyway, I will reassure you. No, this Task isn't special because of the people who helped me. It is because in many ways, the Task is already over."

"Err...sorry?"

"You're forgiven."

The blonde-haired pureblood who hid her true appearance behind glamour and illusion huffed in a manner which would have made any Gryffindor proud.

"I understand this Task isn't about wand-wielding, but surely the preparations research won't be able to compensate for the actions in the arena? It is Potions, there are already-"

"Ginny," the Potter Heiress interrupted her as the stands of the Coliseum began to fill up and let the first couple hundred spectators discover the landscape where the Tournament was going to play today. "If this was about the entire field of Potions, you may be right, but it isn't about that. The brewing can only be done with Alchemical reagents, which is a highly difficult sub-category of the Potion magical field. It's so difficult in fact I honestly doubt anyone had the time in a month to adequately brew more than thirty different Potions."

"Thirty?" Scylla repeated. "That doesn't sound... like a lot."

To be sure, it wasn't the most brilliant retort she had ever made.

"It isn't," Alexandra Potter acknowledged. "But it is far better than six, and that's the number of substances Slughorn praised me for brewing correctly."

Scylla at first thought it was a joke...but there was no sign of great hilarity or a small smirk on the face of the girl she had pledged her allegiance to.

"Only six?" she managed to stammer.

"Your answer should be 'you managed that much?', my dear Lady," this time there was some humour. "Whenever Alchemical reagents are involved, it is NEWT-level, no 'if', no 'but'. And at the risk of sounding humble, I am not a Potion prodigy. That's my mother."

"Says the girl who is studying Potions one or two years ahead of the curriculum."

"Having a tutor just for you is an enormous advantage," the Champion of Ravenclaw reminded her.

"True. But you're still gifted when it comes to Potions."

A click of the tongue was heard, but there was no other remark on the topic.

"Ultimately, this lack of versatility guaranteed my defeat." Alexandra Potter said after a few seconds. "Unless the other Champions could brew fewer Alchemical things than I did, I was completely screwed. There are four brewing phases, and the Champions are of course forbidden from brewing the same thing twice. How lucky would I have to be to find that four different Champions work on the four different levels of this 'Citadel'?"

Now that it was mentioned, the future Scylla Lady couldn't help but look at the monument which occupied the near-entirety of the Coliseum's arena.

It was bloody enormous. In fact, it was so bloody enormous it shouldn't be able to fit into the Coliseum; no doubt the Enchanters and the other handlers had used an insane amount of Space-Expansion Charms plus some Mastery-level artifices so that it was the 'appropriate size'.

There were four different sections, built on four different levels. The outermost perimeter was not over-elevated, but the closer you were from the 'centre' of the arena, the higher it got. By the end, the fourth section very much looked like a medieval dungeon, though the details were impossible to make out.

That was because the second, third, and fourth sections of the 'Citadel' the Champions were soon going to 'assault' were plunged into some sort of darkness-imbued illusion, preventing everyone, including the spectators, from seeing what was waiting for the participants.

The only exception was three out of the four 'brewing zones', where each time the cauldrons were disposed. Those you could see effortlessly. And you couldn't miss the fact that if there were sixteen cauldrons for the first obstacle, there were fifteen in the second zone, and fourteen for the third before the mysterious final phase.

"Each obstacle is an elimination round by itself." Scylla was not the gambler Fred and George were, but it was simple to bet that the last Champion to cross an obstacle by himself or herself would be removed from the competition.

"Honestly, I am pleasantly surprised," the green-eyed Ravenclaw said laconically, "I expected them to try to eliminate two or three Champions per 'challenge phase'. As it is, the 'Outer Wall' is likely to eliminate more than the Judges will."

"The 'Outer Wall'?"

"I had to call it something, I think it fits."

"There are three walls."

"Yeah, but they're an interlocked system of fortifications."

On that point, Scylla couldn't disagree.

The 'Outer Wall' was an oval-shaped fortification. The first 'wall' was twenty metres-tall, and the second and the third right behind had a minor increase of height. It was a monstrous thing of grey and dark stone, intensely foreboding with its gargoyles and dark medieval ornamentation. Really, the more you looked at it, the less you could doubt it was a Dark Lord's lair.

"I am really happy to not be a Champion..."

This was an admission she could freely speak either as Ginny or as Scylla.

The 'Outer Wall' was bad enough. Dark, grim, and threatening, the stones seemed to spread the threat of imminent death, and the sixteen gates which were emplaced at regular intervals were all closed and covered in spikes and fake skulls.

At least, Scylla hoped it was fake skulls.

This was, unfortunately, just the beginning of the trouble. Any idiot would feel that the gates and the walls were massively enchanted. At this distance, it was hard to study the nature of the traps, but it was a certainty the Judges had ordered the 'Outer Wall' to be warded so it could withstand the might of the spells which had been thrown around in the First and Second Tasks.

The young pureblood witch had a guess that when the final of the Runic Duels had played out like it did, the Judges and their Exchequer patrons had decided to deploy some counter-measures so that neither Lyudmila Romanov nor Alexandra Potter could win by overwhelming magical might.

Their best counter-measures looked...very, very formidable. Scylla wasn't sure that even if an alternative to Potions was provided, it wouldn't exhaust the Champions trying to break through the Gates.

And this was just the beginning of the Champions' problems.

Like at Hogwarts, there were enchanted armours on the walls. Unlike at Hogwarts, those armours were currently magically enchanted to imitate the behaviour of real armoured humans.

There were hundreds of them...on the first wall. Two-thirds of them were armed with enormous crossbows and some sort of siege engines which were apparently called 'scorpions'. The arrows and everything 'arrow-like' those lifeless servants had at their disposal in their quivers and elsewhere were shining with malevolent lights. This promised at the very least an amount of excruciating pain if you were touched by them.

If only this was the only opposition. But it wasn't. There were many pipes and other mechanisms above the gates and the different 'entrances' to pour...whatever substances the Potion Masters in the service of the Judges had prepared for a month. In medieval times, it would have been oil, fire, and even less pleasant things. For this Task, who knew what would be the replacements?

And this 'Outer Wall' was just the first 'challenge phase' out of four. And you only had the authorisation to use a limited number of ingredients for your thirty minutes of brewing.

"I hope your 'cheating plan' will succeed," she said to the Champion of Death, "because unless you use Animagus Transformation, I don't think you will get through this obstacle."

"An apt observation," Alexandra Potter nodded before shrugging. "It's not like I didn't anticipate it. For this Task, it's all-or-nothing, and I'm not just speaking about me. Either a Champion has correctly interpreted the rules and will get full marks, or he or she didn't, and the final score will be zero."

There was nothing left to say, not when the Judges entered their personal lodge and summoned the sixteen students who were going to be the actors for the Third Task.

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Once again, you could say a lot about the people who had learned their lessons from the previous Tasks, and those who didn't.

Today it was best summed-up with the question: who had thought wearing armour was a good idea?

Alexandra was going to reveal a big secret: donning a heavy amount of metal and protection on your skin was a bad idea.

It hadn't stopped Graham Montague, Neville Longbottom, Giovanni Ruspoli, Boris Viipuri, Frode Falk, Lucas Gauthier, and Armand Coularé de Lafontaine from doing it.

"You realise such an armour is absolutely not going to stop the scorpion bolts the enchanted armours have ready for us, right?" Alexandra was only human, and she had warned them yesterday not to do it. But apparently, her successes in the First and Second Task did not carry enough weight compared to the advice of meddlesome older wizards.

"Shut up, Potter!" Montague snarled.

Alexandra wasn't going to admit it out loud, but she really, really hoped the stupid Junior Death Eater was going to join Warrington and the other deceased Champions. It was too bad her plan for the 'Assault of the Citadel' made it virtually impossible for her to arrange a fatal accident or two for the Slytherin.

Bah, there were fourteen other Champions. Surely one of them was going to rid her of this Pureblood cretin?

The Champions didn't form up in a line this time. No, exceptionally, the location near the line of cauldrons was a representation of a great circle around the 'Alchemy triangle', and countless esoteric diagrams associated with the subject had been carved magically upon the newly-imported grey stones of the Coliseum.

As a result, the sixteen Champions surrounded the Australian Judge from all directions.

"Welcome to the Third Task!" Judge Felix Norris flashed them a smile which reminded her somewhat of Gilderoy Lockhart. "Welcome to the *Assault of the Citadel*!"

It was clear from the very beginning that the magically-altered voice's announcement was more destined to the public now flooding the tens of thousands of seats than the Task' participants.

"For this Task you are to be graded on your resourcefulness and your skill in the noble art of Potions!" the Judge continued, as if facing twenty metres-tall walls with just a vial or two was a perfectly normal thing. "Wands are authorised for the brewing phase. You can keep them with you at all times, but using them in an active manner during the challenge phase will result in forty points of penalty."

Ouch. Forty points out of one hundred? The Judges were certainly not playing around...

"Your goal, Champions, is to reach the Throne Room of the Citadel!" the Australian wizard continued, trying to dazzle them like Bagman would have had the ex-Beater been in charge. "You have to pass four exciting challenges of brewing first, of course, but should you achieve it, you have only to touch one of two thrones, and you will have completed the Third Task!"

"Two thrones?" Ambre de Courtois said in a distrustful voice. "Why not a single one?"

This was, in fact, a very good question. What sort of magical shenanigans had the Exchequer prepared for them?

"I'm afraid I can't say," the Judge replied with an apologetic smile. "Just be assured it will have no importance for the Third Task."

Translation for the non-imbeciles: it was going to have major importance for the Fourth Task.

"Each throne has magic surrounding it which will indicate how many Champions before you have touched it when you enter the throne room," the explanation continued, "which throne you will touch is entirely up to you."

Yeah, something suspicious was definitely afoot.

"The first Champion to touch a Throne will receive a Tournament Clue and ten points of bonus. The second Champion to touch it will receive five bonus points, but no Tournament Clue. The third Champion will earn three points. And the fourth and the fifth will receive respectively two and one point."

"A moment," Frode Falk pompously intervened, "two thrones and only the first five of each rewarded...that's six Champions who will receive nothing!"

"Oh look," Lyudmila Romanov yawned, "the Light monkey is capable of basic mathematics. Miracles are truly possible in this day and age..."

More than ten Champions, Alexandra included, chuckled.

The Light Champion didn't like that at all, but Judge Norris replied before an angry tirade could be formulated.

"This is true, but neglects a few details. You will realise we have placed cauldrons protected by enchantments for each brewing phase. You will also have remarked, I'm sure, that the numbers of cauldrons tend to decrease as the Task progresses. This is, I'm afraid, because the last Champion to finish a challenge phase will be eliminated."

"So only thirteen of us will have the possibility of trying their chance against whatever blocks the way in the throne room?" Lucrezia Sforza asked, dressed in red-coloured tight clothes which screamed 'seductress and mistress of poisons' to everyone in the Coliseum.

"Correct." The tanned Judge answered before amending, "Of course, it is entirely possible the elimination process will not be limited to three or four. Unlike the previous Tasks, many Potion Masters have volunteered to serve as handlers, and if they judge you are going to do something putting the survival of several other Champions at risk during the brewing phase, they will not wait before the end of the brewing phase to stop you...forcefully."

There was no amusement or any sign of jokes during the next sentences.

"There will be no fighting during the brewing phases," the Australian wizard commanded. "Alchemical reagents are far too dangerous to be played around with while they are brewed. If you want to fight against each other, do so during the challenge phase."

Glad to hear the organisers were handling the security correction adequately, at least.

"You have a maximum of thirty minutes for each brewing phase," it was really, really a very short amount of time, "and a maximum of fifteen minutes for each challenge phase. Naturally, finishing a brewing phase earlier gives you more time to go through a challenge's obstacles. However, the surplus time is only kept for the dual combination of first brewing and first challenge. If you reach a third brewing phase, for example, it won't matter if you have completed the second challenge and the brewing in twenty minutes or forty, you will only have a total of forty-five minutes to alchemically imbue something which will allow you to go through the third challenge."

"Wasn't it possible to brew those high-level Potions before the Third Task began?" Montague grunted.

"Champion Montague...we want you to check your Potion-making abilities in person, not see whether other Potion masters can brew the Potions using Alchemical reagents correctly," Felix Norris chided the Slytherin Champion. "This is why we...removed all the Potions some of you tried to sneak through our security measures. Isn't that right, Champion Malatesti?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, your Honour!" The Champion of Ares crossed his arms, but his angry expression proved beyond a doubt that yeah, he had tried to cheat...and he had been caught.

"That wasn't the opinion of my colleagues, but I will let it pass. After all, there are no penalties against cheating attempts. Are there any additional questions?"

Sixteen 'no's were uttered with varying intensity.

"In that case, you are going to see a number between one and sixteen flash at your feet. It will be the number of the gate you will have to go through at the end of the first brewing phase. And though no one asked the question, yes, past the first wall, the number of gates available progressively decreases until the throne room. To use some, you will have to cooperate with your fellow Champions...or fight them, I suppose."

"That promises to be sooooo fun..." the bespectacled Giovanni Ruspoli complained dramatically. Too dramatically, in fact, most of the other Champions laughed at his lament.

Alexandra watched at her feet...and a big golden '1' had just materialised.

The black-haired witch grinned. As far as omens went, this was a very good one.

"You can take position next to your cauldrons," it was more a suggestion than an order. "Your reagents' requests will be fulfilled within five seconds. And for the pleasure of the crowd, we of the Judges recommend you announce to the crowd how long you intend to brew, and which specific Potion you have selected for your first effort."

They really had thought about a lot of things, right?

It was a good thing the Winter Ball's Clue and its miniature model had been hers for days. The alternative...well, given the sheer danger posed by the enchanted armours, Alexandra recognised she would likely have been completely screwed.

Being the 'owner' of a big black cauldron with the '1' marking – the colour was as dark as the very threatening 'gate' it was facing, the Judge in charge of this first phase walked towards the starting position less than thirty seconds after the 'presentation' was over.

"So," the thunderous applause and encouragements of the crowd diminished as the magically-amplified voice echoed in the Coliseum-stadium, "Champion Potter! How many minutes do you intend to spend working upon an extraordinary Potion during this first brewing phase?"

Alexandra smiled carnivorously.

Just for the pleasure of this answer...it was worth it. No matter how many points she was going to earn, this Task was not going to be part of the plan the Exchequer had in mind.

"Zero."

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"Zero."

It was a single word, and yet it successfully killed all noise in the Coliseum.

Neville at first thought he hadn't heard correctly. Yeah, there were enchanted mirrors and everything, but even the best Charms could be incorrectly cast, right?

And what the Boy-Who-Lived had heard wasn't making any sense at all.

The gates were so defended it was possible that even with a hundred magical foci and dozens of artefacts, they wouldn't be able to do anything against the hundreds of animated armours and their deadly siege engines. And they hadn't the right to use that; instead they were limited to *Potions*.

"Champion Potter," it said quite something that a Judge was losing his composure.

"An instant, your Honour." The Champion of Death cleared her throat, and the next second, without using her wand, her voice tripled in intensity. "Fred, I am in front of Gate One. Crystal Dream. Three Times. George, replicate. Morag, you will go for the boulders in a minute."

Fred? George? Oh damn it, what had the Champion of Ravenclaw unleashed?

"Champion Potter, I think you have incorrectly interpreted the rules. The public is not allowed to help you!"

"Then it's a very good thing, your Honour, that my friends aren't part of the public today, no?"

There was an enormous rumbling sound, and suddenly something happened at the closed portcullis of Gate One.

There was a colossal amount of white smoke, and when it cleared...when it cleared half of the enchanted metal seemed to have turned into...crystal?

Oh damn, this was the Potion known as Crystal Dream! It transformed everything it touched into crystal!

And seeing as the dark stones of the walls lost all colour before becoming strangely transparent, the Scuola Regina's handlers protections were totally insufficient to counter it.

"But...but..." Judge Felix Norris had looked like a wizard able to tolerate a lot of impossible things. "Magical intervention...is forbidden..."

"Oh, don't worry, your Honour," Alexandra Potter was walking slowly towards the Gate, as if her victory was all but assured...and Neville couldn't help at this moment but think she was triumphant before the Task had really begun. "I anticipated this issue. That's why my partners used a trebuchet to launch the Crystal Dream vial against the Outer Wall."

"A...trebuchet..."

The simple word broke the tens of thousands of spectators out of the astonished trance they had plunged into. They began to roar, either in support or in anger.

"It was difficult to find the schematics and we hadn't many hours to experiment after the Winter Ball. But I think it was worth it."

A second rumbling sound arrived to the ears of the Champion of Fate, and the poor Gate disappeared into white smoke again.

This time, part of the parapet and the tower to the immediate right of the Gate were struck, and the same crystal transformation was repeated.

"You built a trebuchet to throw Potions from outside the Coliseum's boundaries."

The affirmation from the Australian Judge was simple, and his disbelieving tone described perfectly how insanely ridiculous the plan of Alexandra Potter was.

No wonder the Weasley Twins had looked so happy during the Winter Ball.

They would have likely sold their souls to be involved in a plan like that, and the Basilisk-Slayer had likely paid them for it!

It was maddeningly brilliant.

It also was violating every bloody rule of the Third Task!

"That is not exactly correct, your Honour," Alexandra Potter said quietly. "A single trebuchet does not fire quickly enough for my plans. So I built three of them."

Fewer than two heartbeats later, the infernal machinery unleashed an enormous rock, which collided with the stone-turned-crystal of Gate One.

There was an enormous explosion and the sound of ten thousand mirrors breaking in a single sound.

And when all the Champions were free to look at the cataclysmic damage, there was a massive breach into the first layer of the Citadel's defences.

Normally, Neville should have thought this was a fluke. There were two more walls behind that. And hundreds of enchanted armours were arming vast quantities of very threatening weapons.

The future Lord Longbottom knew this wasn't a fluke. Death's Champion had just cheated in every manner possible. What were the Judges waiting for? She deserved to be disqualified-

"Your interpretations of the rules, Champion Potter, while unconventional, are in accordance with the spirit of the Tournament. You can proceed."

What?

Thousand blasts of Light! Merlin's beard and Morgana's damned soul!

This...this was damn unfair!

"Thank you, your Honour. Fellow Champions...remember this moment well. I am organising a little celebration in a certain throne room. Don't be too late!"

The trebuchets rumbled again, and Neville watched powerlessly as Alexandra Potter slowly walked towards the second wall as the Crystal Dream resumed its destruction of the walls' defences.

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Of all the wizards and witches sitting in the lodge reserved for the Heads of School and top officials, Igor Karkaroff was the first to shrug off the monumental astonishment which had seized them all.

"This is absolutely outrageous!" the High Master of Durmstrang protested so fiercely one almost could see the smoke coming out of his ears. "This is a travesty! She must be disqualified at once!"

The glare the wizard who had once served Tom Riddle directed at the Judges was truly heinous.

It also failed to achieve anything of significance.

"This is very irregular," Headmistress Maxime sighed, a noise which was quite loud given her sizeable stature. "But the Judges' decisions can't be cancelled as we wish. We all agreed we would respect their ruling a year before the Tournament officially began."

"I was as surprised as you are," for once, Albus Dumbledore was quite willing to believe the Succubus Headmistress was speaking the truth, "I don't really think it is *that* irregular. Otherwise the majority of the Judges would have immediately punished Champion Potter with a heavy point deduction. No, it is a rather...clever way to interpret the rules. Either the Champion or someone close to her re-read the entire Tournament rules to find loopholes, and the same likely was true for the instructions given via the 'Tournament Clues'."

"This is outrageous cheating!" Igor Karkaroff raged impotently.

"Is it?" the Dark Creature had donned a white robe today, and the way she wore it was an offence to every code of aristocratic conduct ever accepted in Western Europe. "We told the Champions they couldn't receive help from the spectators. But our definition of 'spectators' only includes visitors who are present inside the *Colosseo*. The young witches and wizards providing help are clearly staying outside our splendid arena."

This was quite obvious, as one of the enchanted mirrors had shifted its perspective to show the roaring public what was happening outside...meaning thousands of eyes, including Albus', had a perfect view on the dozen of Ravenclaws and Gryffindors who were loading and unleashing the trebuchets.

The effect was absolutely devastating. It had not been ten minutes since the Task officially began, and their 'Crystal Dream' throws plus some crude boulders had utterly destroyed two out of three walls, and were going to soon attack the third.

The spawn of James Potter had only to walk slowly through the devastation, wave to the crowd, and wait for her 'help' to complete the Task! Igor was right for once...it was absolutely outrageous!

And if it wasn't violating the rules, it was trampling and spitting on the intentions, the very spirit of the documents every Champion had signed before competing!

"The Judges and several of our handlers anticipated the possibility of long-ranged outside interference, of course," the Succubus was still visibly shocked, but her mask of arrogance was back in place now. "We thought the measures forbidding it from being magical in nature would make all efforts doomed from inception. I am rather...fascinated by the idea of building trebuchets. It is very unconventional, goes well with the medieval theme of the Third Task, and delivers a relatively accurate amount of magical firepower against the Citadel's defences. Thus Champion Potter is not only able to save her energy for the obstacles ahead, she wins a decisive lead the other Champions are going to struggle to catch up with."

This...this was true.

Most Champions had affirmed they would brew for thirty minutes once Judge Felix Norris recovered enough to interview them. None of them, even the Chaos sociopath, had asked for less than fifteen minutes. The conclusion was that the Champion of House Ravenclaw had gained a fifteen minute-long advantage, assuming the 'solutions' the other Champions found to pulverise their own Gates were as fast as those provided by the trebuchet bombardment, and Dumbledore doubted they would be.

"That said," the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina purred, "I am cheerfully waiting to see how the Judges will interpret Champion Potter's moves when the time comes to deliver the final score. I'm confident to say it wasn't something they had prepared to grade yesterday..."

No, no they weren't.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts grimaced inwardly.

Maybe one of his Champions was going to win the Third Task...but would it have been too much to hope this damned child wouldn't do it by cheating outrageously?

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The moment the Judges had announced they weren't going to disqualify the Champion of Death, Henri just knew there was no hope of winning the Task anymore.

It wasn't just because the Champion of Death had in just a few seconds avoided one out of four 'brewing phases', and thus gained an incredible strategic advantage in time.

It was because the green-eyed Champion was *prepared*.

Henri had prepared some contingencies – it would have been idiotic not to given what happened during the First and Second Tasks. But nothing he had imagined predicted *that*.

And by 'that', he meant 'a Champion has access to an uncountable amount of Alchemically-based Potions to throw at the Citadel'.

Honestly, one glance at the wall sections where 'Gate One' and countless enchanted defences had once stood proved beyond doubt that *someone* had brewed a considerable amount of the Potion called *Crystal Dream*.

Potter had proved beyond doubt the moment this Tournament began she was extremely ruthless when the Tasks were discussed.

The question thus was not *if* the Leviathan-throwing witch intended to cheat again when confronted with whatever obstacles laid ahead.

The wise question was rather: how many different Potions did she have ready to send by trebuchet, and in what quantity?

The Champion of Horus had a dreadful feeling the probable answer to each question was 'dozens' and 'too bloody many'.

"And there's nothing I can do..."

It was rather...humiliating to be beaten by a witch who likely had half of the magical education he had taken for granted when eleven years-old.

Henri sighed and conjured another vial to hold the silver-gold Potion he had just brewed. Normally, if he had been able to get through the same Gate as Eleonora first, he could have stopped brewing here and now, but since they had to use different Gates, their coordinated plan was not going to work for this 'challenge phase'.

It was frankly unnerving; drinking this Potion with their efforts combined...it would have given them a Light-based diamond armour covering their skins.

They could still do it, but they both had to brew both components of the Alchemically-active Potion...and in less than thirty minutes.

"NO! YOU CAN'T DISQUALIFY ME!"

Henri was very glad he was just preparing the ingredients and not mixing something volatile, because the consequences would have been...disastrous.

The French Champion smiled nonetheless when the Potion Masters who were watching them with hawkish attention dragged one of the Hogwarts Champions away. This had to be some kind of world record...this was the one which had received a zero last month, right? Well, it looked like this...this 'Montague' was going to receive a zero...again.

"Good riddance," Romeo Malatesti grunted on his right. "I would have killed him myself, but perhaps he will abandon the Tournament on his own now that he has failed twice."

Henri wasn't convinced it would be the case. Save death or disabling injuries, there weren't many reasons a Champion would be authorised to drop out legally, and if it wasn't legal, the fine the Tournament organisers would hammer you with would be...ruinous.

"Oh, by all that is unholy in the Underworld," the Champion of Ares swore. "What in the name of the Tartarus Pit is she brewing now?"

The Champion of Horus turned his head and shivered. There was no need to wonder who the bloodthirsty Champion of the Dark was speaking about.

Not when the cauldron of the Champion of Loki was expelling white smoke of all things, and the more seconds passed, the more there was some kind of serious Black Magic aura coalescing.

That the Dark Queen of Durmstrang was laughing like a crazy madwoman was another disturbing factor. For some reason, Henri didn't believe that she was brewing milk, for all the pure white colour of the corrupt substance.

"The Winter Ball seems to have given the Champions of Death and Chaos extremely bad ideas..."

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Alexandra did her best not to sound too disappointed when she heard the Judges announce that Graham Montague was eliminated from the Third Task.

Twelve minutes.

Twelve little minutes.

By the White Tree of Gondor, was there truly no limit to this Junior Death Eater's incompetence?

One would have thought that with Snape to give him lessons, the Slytherin Champion would *at least* be able to survive until the first challenge phase.

By the black scales of Nidhögg, even Longbottom was still in the competition! And one couldn't say that the fourth-year Gryffindor Champion was a Potion Master...except when the skill demanded was to detonate a cauldron, that is.

Damn the idiot. That Montague was sinking Hogwarts in the school rankings, the Potter Heiress had no problem with that, but having to deal with his moronic presence one more month was going to be taxing, especially during the inter-House Champion meetings.

But that would have to wait. The Third Task was far from won, after all.

"Welcome, Champion Potter, to this new section of the Third Task," the Judge who greeted her was dark-skinned and dressed in exuberant robes of gold, to which a multitude of gemstones had been added. The effect was...shiny for a day where the weak winter sun didn't provide much illumination. "I, Judge Salimata Mema, will be the overseer of the second brewing phase and the second challenge phase."

If anything, the wizard she had recently confirmed to be a Ward-Master of the Mali Empire didn't sound impressed by her little trebuchet surprise. But then he had approximately ten minutes to prepare himself – even with trebuchets, Alexandra had not wanted to take any undue risk.

"And the obstacle includes mirrors."

No need to be a genius to realise that.

The first 'phase' had been dark walls, dark gargoyles, and a medieval wall which looked really, really threatening.

The atmosphere of this arena section was by comparison quite...well, not light, but rather blue.

Alexandra had not thought she would ever use the term 'forest of mirrors', but looking at what was waiting for her, it seemed readily apt.

There was a rather large empty location surrounding the fifteen cauldrons for the brewing phase, but apart from that, the field between the 'Outer Wall' and the next obstacle was overcrowded with mirrors.

"Indeed. The second phase will see you confront the Labyrinth of Mirrors."

Okay...she owed Daphne Greengrass a few Sickles. The day after the Winter Ball, Alexandra had gathered all her friends and allies, and asked for their opinion of what the tortuous section was supposed to represent.

The general opinion had quickly gathered it was a Labyrinth of some sort, but it had been the Slytherin blonde who had pushed the idea this might be something inspired by infamous Renaissance-era traps. Both magical and non-magical Venice had islands which had gained great renown for creating mirrors, the Heiress of House Greengrass had argued.

It appeared her idea was far more grounded than the jokes of certain other parties.

"Do you want to use the brewing phase this time, Champion Potter?"

"No, I' m afraid I will have to decline, your Honour," the Champion of the Morrigan answered politely.

To be honest, even if she hadn't known what this challenge was about, it was entirely possible Alexandra would have succeeded, trebuchet help or no trebuchet help.

This challenge-obstacle was certainly all about illusion, misdirection, and a whole lot of enchantments befuddling your senses.

All of it would be completely useless against a Hydra Animagus.

"There is an additional rule, however. You are not authorised to destroy the mirrors. For each mirror destroyed, you will receive a one point-penalty."

"I will not forget it, your Honour." Alexandra took two steps forwards, and amplified her voice again. "Fred! Send me the Graveyard Potion in an indestructible vial!"

The green-eyed Champion could try to cross this Labyrinth without drinking, throwing, or using a single Potion. But this Task was all about Potions, and though the Exchequer knew she was a Hydra Animagus, there were other factions which had no clue about some of her strengths and weaknesses, and she had every intention to not inform them for as long as possible.

Three seconds later, the 'help' arrived three metres on her right. And yes, it was a very good thing the glass was enchanted to be incredibly resistant, because a trebuchet wasn't an instrument of precision, and it caused a lot of damage everywhere.

Curiously, the Malian wizard, instead of remaining near the cauldrons, walked so as to make sure the Potter Heiress was mere steps away from him at the entrance of the Labyrinth.

"For the spectators' sake, Champion Potter, could you explain what a Graveyard Potion does?"

Alexandra blinked, before deciding it didn't matter if she remained mysterious at this point. It was unlikely any Champion would have the knowledge to brew it behind her...nor could they use it like she was about to do.

"If this Potion is poured onto an appropriately enchanted object, the Graveyard Potion will transform said artefact into an identical copy made of bone. The new nature of this bone structure will depend upon the ingredients used to brew it."

For this Potion, the main ingredient had been draconic bone. Alexandra had paid her magical guardian a few hundred Galleons to acquire a small bone of a Welsh Green deceased over a decade ago – everything was valuable where the magnificent reptiles were concerned.

Joining the deed to her word, Alexandra opened the vial and poured the contents onto the biggest mirror near the entrance, taking great care to not let a single drop touch her skin and that the Alchemically-based Potion was coating the surface of the mirror evenly. There were only two replacement vials if she missed, and she really, really hoped to keep those in reserve, given how expensive the Graveyard Potion was.

Fortunately, everything worked perfectly.

In about forty seconds, the enchanted glass wasn't reflecting anything anymore, it had now the properties and the colour of the amber-coloured dragon bone she had collected a week ago.

"It is...err...clearly something particularly interesting, Champion Potter, but I don't know if it is going to be of great use to help you cross this Labyrinth."

"On the contrary, your Honour," Alexandra let her magic flare up, and the power of Death which was inside her as per the Morrigan's will answered. "By the power of the Bountiful and the Dark Path, remember what the Ancients wrought! I call for the power of the secret pathways, recall the road to Pandemonium! Wunjo above, Raido under, Eihwaz before, let me ignore the artifices of glass and mortality! So mote it be!"

There was a new flash of green magic, her magic, and as the power coalesced, the bone surface of the transformed mirror vanished to be replaced by a miniature twirling surface burning in green flames.

"For those who ask themselves the question," the Ravenclaw Champion said serenely, "the incantation made sure another mirror at the end of the Labyrinth is now going to serve as an exit."

"I withdraw my objection," Salimata Mema gave her a slight nod. "This is indeed a clever and remarkable usage for a single Potion. Thank you for this explanation, Champion Potter."

Alexandra silently nodded back, and then jumped into the mirror before running as fast as she could. Opening Pandemonium this way was technically possible, as she had just proved using her powers as the Morrigan Champion, but the connection wasn't going to stay open all day...

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Lyudmila cackled when she felt the portal opening.

Of all the things she had expected from Alexandra Potter today, the creation of a true Gate for the Antechamber of Death's Realm wasn't it.

Then again, the Russian witch had not thought the Champion of the Morrigan would be so crazy as to research the construction of medieval trebuchets just to win the Third Task.

It was a massive investment in gold, material and human resources, and of course you lost hundreds of hours.

The Champion of Death had done it anyway.

This was fantastic!

If Lyudmila had thought her little motivational speech, mixed with a few untruths and some subtle lies, would produce such results, she would have tried it before the First Task. Who knew the British girl had such untapped depths of madness waiting to be released?

Yes, it was just brilliant. And the best part, she had forced the Judges to reluctantly admit *it was not violating their rules*!

Oh yes, the Champion of Chaos didn't believe she had laughed so much since...well, she didn't remember the last time. Perhaps three or four years ago when she had played that trick on some Ministry official near Perm?

"Are you going to stop laughing? Some of us are trying to brew, Dark Queen!"

Lyudmila snorted and wandlessly poured the Potion she had just finished into the three bottles she had spent a good minute enchanting beforehand.

"Nuisance," the unofficial Queen of Durmstrang knew the name of the Light parasite was Frode Falk, but she certainly wasn't going to give him the dignity of calling him by his name. "I am in a good mood today, so I will propose to you a bargain: if I don't see your ugly face for the next few hours, I make the promise you will see the sun rise again over the Coliseum. Now if you'll excuse me, some of us are incredibly talented, and my brewing phase has been successful."

Lyudmila didn't run towards the fortified gate bearing a large number six. It wouldn't do any good where victory in the Task was concerned. Alexandra Potter had cheated outrageously and successfully while most of the other fifteen Champions' attempts had been mild failures...at best.

If the trebuchet was a one-use trick to reverse a problematic situation, there might have been a hope, but the girl the Morrigan had taken as her Chosen was not incompetent. Judging by the images on the enchanted mirror, Alexandra Potter had bypassed the second obstacle without a scratch.

"Which means I am likely going to lose first place in the rankings, if only temporarily."

Lyudmila sighed. She didn't really care about this temporary loss, but the High Master of Durmstrang and her father's courtiers were likely going to be very annoying every day of January after this Task.

"Champion Romanov?"

Ah yes, there was the Judge Felix Norris, no doubt wondering which Potion she had brewed.

He was right to be confused, by the way. This Potion was unlikely to figure in a Ministry's grimoire or a Potion Guild's lore repository.

It was totally their fault to assume that because they thought they knew every combination of Alchemical reagent, they could dictate which Potion a Champion of Magic could use.

But she was Lyudmila Romanov, Champion of Loki.

She wasn't going to be tamed by those weak simpletons.

But first, a blatant lie.

"This," the green-eyed Russian Champion drily began, "is obviously **milk**."

The crowd erupted in laughter, predictably.

Lyudmila wandlessly levitated the bottle and threw it against the gate five seconds later.

There was no explosion. The gate appeared to be perfectly intact...but only for a couple of her heartbeats. Then it began to liquefy itself. The metal began to be distorted. The armours on top of the walls were corrupted, as the enchantments failed, and some appendages which were not conventional seemed to grow as new appendages. Those included spikes, fangs, claws, and other things...but not always at the correct emplacements.

"It appears to work fine," the Chaos Champion contemplated her work for a second, and judged it acceptable. It was going to be an ironic additional challenge for everyone who came after her...

"WHAT IS THAT?"

"Champion Romanov, this is not something-"

"Ridiculous," the blonde Dark Queen said, increasing the power of her voice so that everyone heard her, "I just attempted to replicate the White Veil of the Elder Dragons, and my efforts are only a copy of the real deal. And for those who wonder what I am speaking about, yeah, Elder Dragons were very real once upon a time. But humans tried their best to exterminate them. The dragons grew smarter, and learned to use their magic so that their progeny, from the moment of their birth onwards, would be able to change their surroundings by their mere presence. Where a dragon thrived, his or her primordial magic remade reality. Humans were transformed into beasts. Magical flowers and animals were born. And the best part?"

The witches and wizards had fallen silent as she continued her tale, and surprisingly the old fossil of the Dark made no move to prevent her from speaking? Well, that deserved its reward...

"This all began because a Light Archmage thought it was justified to kill some dragons in order to fuel the greatest ritual imaginable and rewrite reality according to his whims."

Lyudmila heard Loki laugh, though it was distant, compared to the tumult of protests and horrified screams she heard.

"So witness the madness of the White Veil. **Behold the true power of Chaos**."

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The magical shockwave, all things considered, was not that impressive.

The wards protecting the Champions still busy brewing something in their cauldrons dissipated the magical effect without major issues.

The chaotic power was still sufficient to distract two Champions. Perhaps with another kind of high-level Potion, they would have been able to stabilise the cauldron and have a few minutes to assess what could be done to achieve a near-perfect Potion, but here it was not to be. Substances involving Alchemical reagents were infamous for many reasons, and their volatile nature was one.

The cauldron of Beauxbatons Champion Lucas Gauthier was the first to explode with the strength of a non-magical bomb. Fortunately for the French boy, he had realised his mistake and was already running away when the cauldron began to expel acidic fluids. Lucas Gauthier survived uninjured. The cauldron, however, melted and was soon submerged into a mushroom-shaped blue 'sculpture'.

Boris Viipuri was far less lucky...and had not the skill to recognise there was a time to correct your mistakes, and a time to flee. His orange-coloured Potion, a decent attempt to create the Jotun Blood-Spears if he wasn't mistaken, received twice the dose of magic it should have, and certainly more Giant's blood than ten Potions of this type required.

The Potion Masters and the arena handlers were fast, but not fast enough to intervene in time.

Boris Viipuri was holding his arm above the cauldron when the orange Potion suddenly happened to coalesce into a maw. There was a flash, and before one could say it, the human-eating substance had consumed the Durmstrang Champion's arm.

Predictably, the boy screamed and tried to crawl away. If the security detail hadn't been there, it would have been futile, but as it was, the efforts to get away saved his life, and the Potion was quickly bombarded by numerous Alchemical-killer incantations. Boris Viipuri was quickly evacuated away...of his arm there was no trace, and there likely would never be.

Osiris, King of the Exchequer, turned his eyes away to watch what the Champion of Loki was doing. Apparently, the answer was: spread as much as the White Veil as possible, to make sure the first obstacle of the Third Task was a nightmarish garden of scales, spikes, and maws.

"**I find myself conflicted, Knight Herald**."

"We stand ready to kill the Champion of Chaos, if it is your desire, your Majesty."

"**One hour ago, I would have likely let you**," the ancient Avatar of Darkness replied.

"She is too unpredictable...your Majesty," Knight Summoner spat the words one by one not two metres away from him.

"**The same could be said about the current performance of the Champion of Death**," Osiris reminded the Knights present in his lodge. "**Or did someone predict ahead of schedule the Chosen of the Morrigan was going to cheat so blatantly with three trebuchets? If so, everyone failed to tell me**."

"This is not the same!"

It was quite unlike Knight Summoner to protest so vehemently.

"**How so**?" Osiris asked, truly interested by the answer.

"The British girl tries to subvert the rules because this Tournament was deliberately imagined for students far older than her. The reports from her tutor made clear that while gifted, she could not hope to match someone as knowledgeable as the Sforza Champion. Her stratagem was likely her only chance to win this Task. The arrogant Russian servant of Loki does not need to play those tricks to achieve a one-sided victory."

This was a good point, yes. On the other hand...

"**Expecting a Champion of Loki to not play these tricks, unfortunately, is like expecting a non-magical human to grow gills because you threw him or her into the sea**." Osiris remarked. "**Theoretically, it can happen if a wizard is nearby, but no one sane will bet his or her life on it**."

"If you are unsurprised by the White Veil," Knight Herald spoke thoughtfully, "I can only conclude it is the...the little historical lesson she gave that convinced you there is some hope for this Champion, your Majesty."

"**Very good reasoning, my Knight**," Osiris smiled, "**and yes, it is indeed something unexpected...in our favour. Hear how many spectators whisper between themselves. Hear their doubts, as the power of Chaos spread a terrible and dangerous truth in their ears. It was not to happen in our plans, and yet...it would be a lie to say it is not going to be of immense help**."

The King of the Exchequer looked at the blonde girl making her way through the madness she herself had created, as a living carpet of scales behind her formed and tried to devour some enchanted armours, which altered by the White Veil had taken a reptilian aspect.

"**Yes. For what she did today, Lyudmila Romanov had earned herself a reprieve. I won't deal with her today**."

"And if the other challenge phases prove she is too unstable and unpredictable?" The voice of Knight Summoner, the King reflected could be courteously called 'unconvinced in the extreme'.

"**Then I will deal with her during the Fourth Task. The Champion of Death will win this Task, so there is no reason to consider drastic measures this month. Uncontrollable or not, Loki's Chosen will not be in charge of her Court**."

"That still assumes the Champion of Death is going to win," his red-robed Knight insisted.

Knight Diplomat, who had stayed silent so far, chuckled.

"Please, my friend! You have seen what she did to the Armoured Wall and the Labyrinth of Mirrors? Do you really think the Champion of Death has no plan to counter the Potion Armoury?"

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A few days ago, Alexandra had wondered why there was no moat included in the first layer of the Citadel's defences.

After all, if you went for a medieval theme, a couple of moats were perfect for historical accuracy.

The third section had looked vaguely like it could fill this role, except that first on the model the terrain was represented as a series of six trenches, and secondly a moat without a wall next to it didn't make a lot of sense.

Therefore after a few hours of brainstorming, Alexandra had decided those trenches represented an unknown threat, but it certainly wouldn't be a moat. When it came down to it, the Potter Heiress had thought, maybe the Queen of the Exchequer had decided the crocodile lake was sufficient for the entire Tournament?

Alas, now that she had reached this section of the arena, Alexandra knew this had been a mistake to think so.

The obstacle field in front of her was indeed a series of moats.

Normally, this shouldn't be too much a problem. She was a Hydra Animagus, and if she couldn't swim in two metres of water, best forfeit here and now.

The problem was that this was a task about Potions. Take a guess what they had filled the moats with?

The Ravenclaw witch was going to give everyone a hint: it wasn't water.

"Welcome, Champion," the old Japanese Judge greeted her. "I am Judge Hanayo Komachi, and in the name of all Potion Makers involved in this Tournament, I have been chosen to explain and monitor your progress as you try to go through the trial of the Potion Armoury."

Why this name had been given was immediately revealed, as some cauldrons materialised over the third moat, before being emptied violently into the liquid placidly waiting. The result was...terrifying.

BOOM!

In an instant, it was like tons of fireworks and magical curses were conjured into existence. Alexandra had heard about Fiendfyre, and this Potion explosion had to be not far behind in potential deadliness.

One by one, the 'moats' were activated. The first was a line of orange fire which consumed itself unnaturally. The second was as if a Gryffindor cauldron-exploder had decided to invent an acid of red and gold...expect Alexandra was pretty sure even a Gryffindor would have had difficulties creating the shapes coalescing unnaturally. It looked...very malevolent.

The six 'moats' had all different effects, but one point in common: you certainly didn't want to bathe in one, 'invincible' Animagus or not. Nothing but Alchemical reagents could have created something like that, and the moment was really badly chosen to experiment with their incredibly dangerous effects on a human body, especially hers.

"I suppose that brooms are not authorised, your Honour?" Alexandra asked half-sarcastically as a line of levitating cauldrons began to move on her left, signifying that yes, as long as they were Champions, the Tournament's organisers would make sure the obstacles were filled with deadly Potions.

"They are not." The Japanese wizard gave her smile which, for all its exquisite politeness, betrayed a large amount of smugness. "There is no shame using a few minutes to brew a delicate Potion, Champion Potter."

"There isn't," the green-eyed girl chosen by the Morrigan to be the Sword of Death agreed.

The problem, unfortunately, was that she knew only how to brew six NEWT-level Potions which were based on Alchemical reagents, and the Graveyard Potion was one. The Prague Pyre-Gift was another. The former couldn't be used here, since she had already used it during the second challenge, and for the latter, she wanted to make the obstacle less dangerous, not multiply the flames and the explosions by ten.

Alexandra played the last four Potions' names and effects in her head, and concluded that unfortunately, they were going to be as useful as plenty of Gryffindors in a contest of grace and chivalry traditions.

Yes, her brewing would be useless.

No, it was demoralising to admit, but it wasn't an obstacle she could cross...unless, once again, she wanted to test how the public would react to seeing her transform fully into a Lernaean Hydra.

"George!" She called. "The Indomitable Carapace unbreakable vials! Two doses, please!"

This was not going to be pleasant in any way. This Potion was to be drunk, and it basically made sure the aura of a wizard or a witch transformed into a radiant, integral magical shield capable of repelling an incredible variety of magical phenomena. Obviously, there were things it was incapable of countering – Avada Kedavra was one of the exceptions.

The problem was the cost of magic expended. To gain this amount of protection, the Potion 'burned' the magic of the drinker. When she drank one vial to experiment after George brewed it the first time, Alexandra had seen one-fourth of her core be depleted in less than three minutes.

Needless to say, the Basilisk Slayer really, really hoped the second vial wouldn't be necessary.

Oh, and since it couldn't get better, the Indomitable Carapace Potion – some wizards had really a deplorable imagination when it came to names – had another problem. It tasted bloody awful.

"The things I do to win this Tournament..." the Ravenclaw Champion scowled before grabbing the two vials which had arrived five metres behind her. "Give me back a Leviathan to play with any day."

As predicted, one week of abstinence had not made the black-coloured Potion taste better. If anything, it tasted worse than she remembered.

But there was no other solution but to drink it...and then rush straight into the furnace of the 'Potion Armoury', praying that the magical protection was going to work as she intended.

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Neville had really thought the Thief's Imagination Potion was a good idea.

It was simple to brew; he had been able to do it three times before the Third Task's day.

It didn't need complicated wand moves or extraordinarily difficult wand manipulation.

No, you only needed to use two simple Alchemical reagents, and about twenty-five minutes later, add one more ingredient along with the Potion you wanted to 'copy'.

Yeah, it was the Potion of a cheater. The Boy-Who-Lived wasn't going to say otherwise.

But it gave him a chance to get through a 'challenge phase'...unlike Montague and two other Champions.

Neville had thought it would be relatively easy. He was sure most Champions weren't going to wipe out the contents of their cauldrons before assaulting the walls defended by enchanted armours. In a classroom, sure, you always did it because Snape would murder you if you didn't, but here where time was absolutely limited? The participants would leave the 'clean up phase' to the arena handlers.

Neville had just to take a vial of Potion from the most successful brewing, and add it to his own cauldron so he could blast apart or somehow evade the immensely dangerous arrows which were sure to target him in a few minutes.

Easy right?

The plan had utterly collapsed the moment the Task began.

Alexandra Potter had not brewed anything; instead she had just used the most demented prank of the Weasley Twins – a trebuchet! – and disintegrated Gate One, plus the other walls behind it.

It had taken only a second for Neville to acknowledge that, with the benefit of hindsight, his plan was not exactly a brilliant one.

He couldn't use the cauldron of Potter...or rather, yes, he could use it, but since it was absolutely clean and empty, using that would be absolutely stupid.

The second Champion to finish the 'brewing phase' was the psychopath witch of Durmstrang. Neville had been tempted to replicate whatever milky substance she used...until he saw the abominable substance in action. The monster of Chaos may have lied or not about its origin, but the effect was utterly awful and unleashed Black Magic on a massive scale.

There was no way Neville wanted to get close to that cauldron, and as if things weren't bad enough, the effects distracted two other Champions, ruining their Potions, and resulting in their elimination.

The future Lord Longbottom had not said aloud 'how could it get worse?'...but somehow the power of Fate seemed extremely capricious today. Lucrezia Sforza had been the third to finish, and her dull grey-coloured Potion, once in contact with the lifeless guardians of the Tournament Citadel, had somehow altered their enchantments enough to obey her orders...after the Dark Champion of Lust unleashed either her Succubus power or her Black Witch's aura.

Neville couldn't replicate that, and so he was forced to wait.

In the end, he had to wait for Henri de Condé to finish, silently beg him for permission, and then drink hastily the copy of the 'Light Serenity' Potion the older French Champion had selected for himself.

Then Neville ran. Not because he was at risk of being disqualified – between Montague, Viipuri, and Gauthier, there would be no problem until the fourth brewing phase – but because all those delays had ensured the thirty minutes-mark was sixty seconds away, and even if it hadn't been, there was only the French witch from Beauxbatons still working on her cauldron.

The 'Light Serenity', despite its fairly pleasant name, was brutal: Neville went through all the walls and the protections like they didn't exist, digging holes into the dark stone like they were made of cheese.

All thoughts of triumph left his head when the effects of the Potion dissipated.

"Ouch..." the Gryffindor Champion suddenly felt weaker than a kitten as the golden-diamond magical power which had surrounded him vanished, and his vision blurred.

Suddenly, every step seemed to require a supreme effort of will and strength.

"What...what kind of...secondary...effect...is...that?"

"There's a price to be paid for the kind of overwhelming power this Potion gives," Henri de Condé walked with less strain, but by the way he gritted his teeth, the French wizard was definitely feeling the nasty consequences too. "If you weren't a Champion like me...I wouldn't have let you **drink** it. You would have passed out the moment the power of the Light Serenity ceased to fuel your strength."

The way he said a 'Champion like me'...Neville guessed it had to do with the fact they were secret Animagi. Nothing else he had could explain resistance to this...err...really terrifying Potion.

"I think I am going to vomit," the Boy-Who-Lived groaned.

"If I were you, I would avoid it...there are tens of thousands of spectators...and there is another brewing phase which awaits us."

"Merlin's socks..."

"And while I think it was clever of you to go for the Thief's Imagination Potion for the first round, I am politely warning you I won't let you cheat your way with my brewing a second time. You remain a Champion of a different school, Neville Longbottom."

Neville felt worse than a second ago, and it wasn't only the Potion aftereffects. Could something go right today?

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Forty-five minutes, and though she hadn't half of the Potion knowledge Horace Slughorn had, Lily was quite wary of this 'White Veil Potion' the Champion of Chaos had brewed and unleashed in the Coliseum's arena.

"Would I be wrong to assume that if it was done anywhere but this Tournament, an international military effort would be gathered to arrest the Tsar's daughter?"

"Do you really need to ask?" her former Potion Professor asked back rhetorically, pausing between two bites directed at an enormous pizza. "In fact, shouldn't you focus on the exploits of your daughter?"

"I can do two things at the same time," the female vampire stuck her tongue in a childish retort, "and she has crossed the fifth Potion obstacle out of six. Alexandra is really dominating this task from the very start. She is as gifted as I am."

"I don't know if I would go so far," the former Head of House Slytherin shook his head and gave her a thoughtful look. "Magically gifted? Yes. You hadn't the boon of a Power, so power comparisons are a bit unfair, but I think in term of skills, you would be on the same level."

"Why the disagreement then?"

"Your daughter is not spending as much time as you did in a Potion laboratory, my dear," the Potion Master smiled. "In fact, I think that approximately half of her 'free study time' must go to Runes, Elemental Battle-Magic, and Charms. The young Lady Potter is not neglecting Potions by any means, and I wish I would have had a few more students as skilled and respectful as her while I was teaching at Hogwarts...but I don't think she will try to pursue a career of Potion Mistress upon graduation."

"I would tend to agree," the red-haired Vampiri Romani declared after thinking several seconds about this issue. "But you have to admit that what she lacks in dedication for the art of brewing, my daughter more than compensates for in innovation to gain the greatest possible advantage of her limited Potion lore and training."

"That goes without saying," Slughorn chuckled, just as Alexandra got out of the sixth Potion moat, under the thunderous applause of the crowd. Only one more challenge phase left, and her daughter would win her second Task of the Tournament.

"A trebuchet," the Potion Master chuckled for himself.

"Three trebuchets," Lily reminded him, and Slughorn let go a very unprofessional giggle.

"Yes, yes, three trebuchets! Ah, to have a camera to take a photo of some of our enemies' faces when she revealed it...as well as some of our Knights'! This was something very outrageous, and completely unanticipated! I don't think anyone pulled a prank of that magnitude at Hogwarts while I was teaching! Or if there was one, my memory is really becoming quite bad!"

The ivory-skinned vampire bared her teeth. His memory wasn't that bad, and they both knew it very well.

As Alexandra was panting and trying to catch her breath – the Indomitable Carapace was powerful, but if you weren't a Champion, drinking two vials could send you directly to a hospital – Lily Evans returned to the conversation subject her mentor had forced her to abandon minutes ago.

"So. Now that it is over, what do you think of the first phase of the Third Task?"

"That it is quite miraculous there were no deaths," Horace Slughorn answered very seriously before placing another piece of pizza in his mouth and masticating it with a delighted expression. The commentaries after that didn't come for ten more seconds. "There have been a few impressive injuries, the Scandinavian wizard losing his arm being the worst, but apart from him, I'm sure that the five other Champions who were eliminated will be perfectly healthy tomorrow."

That...that was in fact remarkably accurate.

"It's a pity the young...Ambre de Courtois, was it? Yes, this young French witch was eliminated during the challenge. I quite liked her idea to use the Bird Conjuration Potion."

Yes, it had been the first Alchemically-based Potion she had brewed during her scholarship. Yes, Lily might be a little biased.

Slughorn chuckled.

"My dear, while I admit the aforementioned Potion is something requiring great Potion-making skills, it is hardly efficient to confront a fortification defended by dozens of enchanted armours."

"It could have succeeded."

"No, it wouldn't." The Potion Master gave her his best sardonic expression. She growled. "And threatening to bite me will not change the truth. The bird conjurations were good distractions, but they exhausted themselves too fast. That the Beauxbatons female Champion had to forfeit after the second wall is all the confirmation you should need it was impractical. At least she did better than the two others."

The latter point the former Gryffindor could rally behind.

"Yes. Giovanni Ruspoli tried...some sort of small fire-based Potion? It failed to leave a mark upon the first wall. For twenty minutes of brewing, I must say I expected quite better from him...him reaching the half-finals of the Runic Duel must have been a combination of a Rune specialty and the luck of the bracket drawing, I think. As for Armand Coularé de Lafontaine, his Enchantment-Breaker Potion could have been something to watch, but though he managed to complete it without any explosion, it would have earned him a failing grade at his NEWTs."

"Harsh, but true," Slughorn nodded. "And if I may add something, I would say their solutions utterly lacked the cleverness of the Champions who took the leadership of the Task...or even those behind them. Take Mister Krum, for example. His Flying technique is a combination of a Wind-Summoning Potion and a Levitation Potion precisely timed to last no more than nine minutes! It is quite ingenious!"

"Indeed it is..." And her attention returned in direction of the centre of the arena, where her daughter entered the fourth section of the 'Assault of the Citadel' Task.

"Already the throne room, and the Champion of Chaos has yet to finish her second brewing..." the old wizard caressed his moustache. "If your daughter is again using her wits well, we might as well be about to witness a truly epic victory the likes rarely happen in millennia..."

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If someone suggested she do this 'moat obstacle course' again, Alexandra was going to kill him.

The Indomitable Carapace Potion had protected her from the worst of the dangerous Potions, but it had been anything but a pleasant experience, and if she had to repeat it even once in her life, it would be too soon.

The mood of the Hogwarts Champion didn't get better as she walked forwards. Yes, the gates leading to the fourth section opened without any magical incantation on her part, but it was clear the next brewing and challenge phases were definitely inside a dungeon-like building.

It didn't completely invalidate help by trebuchet, but to receive it, Alexandra would have to order Fred and George to fire a lot of boulders with their new super-heavy 'pranking weapons'...and they had not a colossal amount of rocks as ammunition the last time she checked.

Once the Champion of the Morrigan had gone through the enchanted gate, it immediately closed behind her in a very sinister sound.

"Well, they've got the theatrical part right," Alexandra murmured as old-fashioned wooden doors opened immediately ahead.

The Potter Heiress had almost expected a new gate or some other entrance, but when the illusion of darkness dissipated and the arena handlers lit the candles, the throne room was revealed in all its glory.

And it was truly glorious, Alexandra wasn't sarcastic about that.

The main alley had a great carpet of gold, blue, and red, and the sigils woven into the fabric were really gorgeous...and enchanted.

The style remained medieval, but there was some extraordinary nobility to it, as the pillars and the walls were sculpted with an amazing skill. There were no written inscriptions, but there didn't need to be to acknowledge the three previous obstacles had been immortalised on these walls: the Outer Wall and its enchanted armours, the Labyrinth of Mirrors and some wraith-like creatures summoned by traps – her plan had likely saved her a confrontation with those – and the trenches filled with deadly Potions.

Less than two metres away from the entrance, there was a circle of seven cauldrons on her right, and six cauldrons on her left.

The wooden doors closed slowly, with only the smallest humming sound to be heard.

This was the throne room of the Third Task. The two thrones Judge Norris had informed them the importance of were clearly visible, though given that the distance separating them was one hundred metres-long and there was some of magical distortion in the way, it was difficult to describe them perfectly from where she was.

Speaking of Judges...there were clearly none here.

And more pressing...there was no 'obstacle' or 'challenge', at least not one which was visible.

The alley leading to the two thrones was completely empty.

"Is there someone here?"

Her voice resonated...and no one answered.

Yet Alexandra knew a lot of people, including the Judges, had heard her. On every side, disguised atop some very expensive tapestries representing the Second Task of the Tournament, there were many enchanted paintings. No doubt those items relayed everything there was to be seen.

"Okay." Alexandra sighed. "I know this is a trap, we all know it is a trap...let's see what the trap is."

Her steps were very cautious as they led her towards the throne, and her eyes were already transformed into those of inner animal.

Somehow, Alexandra knew there was something dangerous nearby. All her instincts, both Lernaean and those coming from her battle-experiences, told her so.

But the gaze of a Hydra, so prompt to see through illusions and tricks, was unable to see anything here. Knowing the importance of looking at the ceiling and the air in general, the green-eyed Ravenclaw had done so, but there was absolutely nothing perched on the high pillars or using a bat-like position to wait and fall upon her.

And of course, using her wand to cast a variety of Charms would be tantamount to losing all the hypothetical points the three first sections had earned her.

Half of the length of the throne room was crossed when Alexandra heard a rumbling sound she had become intimately familiar with since Lady Stella Zabini was her magical guardian.

"Oh no..."

Coming so close to the guardian of the throne room, the Hydra Animagus could suddenly taste the magic and everything else.

It was different than what she was used to, but then she supposed the ones she had met weren't available...

"I know you're here...*dragon*!"

And suddenly, it was as if the veil of reality was torn apart.

In the time it took to say it, the familiar shape of a four-legged, two-winged reptile came into existence.

It wasn't as big as Nidhögg, praise the Morrigan and the small favours this world was giving her...though the black dragon was so big he wouldn't have fit into this throne room anyway.

But it was bigger than the biggest Welsh Green Dragons she had seen, and the size of this new draconic specimen was likely superior to one adult Hebridean Black too.

Like Fingolfin, it was beautiful...the scales were resplendent, a true display of jade-like artistry.

"*You are early*," the dragon hissed in accented but recognisable Italian.

Looking at the crystal reptilian eyes, Alexandra had no doubt this was not the act of a ventriloquist.

Right. It was just her luck to be the first discover that the final Judge of the Task was a talking dragon...

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"*You are early*."

At first Albus Dumbledore thought he had misheard.

There was no way...surely it was his imagination playing tricks on him.

The dragon couldn't have addressed the Black Witch in Italian. Surely even the Dark Wizards weren't ready to reveal that to a public of tens of thousands of souls!

Alas, the way the public erupted into laughter was an indication that no, he wasn't hallucinating.

At least judging by the excited whispers, two-thirds of the crowd were already laughing with 'ventriloquism' on their lips.

For once, the Headmaster of Hogwarts was ready to bless their ignorance.

The next seconds killed very much any hope there was that a Judge was playing some fantastic act in the shadows.

"I took a short-cut," the daughter of James Potter retorted. "Now please, oh great dragon, move yourself so as to stop blocking the alley. I need to reach the thrones."

"*You asked politely*," the massive dragon hissed. "*I will return the favour, tiny human touched by Death. No, you will not reach the thrones so easily*."

"You know who I am, and yet you choose to stand against me?" the young Black Witch's amusement was evident. "I have killed Basilisks and dealt with a young Leviathan, dragon."

Seeing from a spectator's point of view, it was obvious that dragon and witch, for all their immobility, were truly challenging each other.

And it was also clear that if the younger Champion of Hogwarts was trying to impress the reptile, the attempt was failing very badly.

"*Are those puny exploits supposed to leave me in awe, Champion?"* the draconic beast asked in a very rhetorical manner before yawning in a very exaggerated manner. "*I've killed Basilisks when I was a young hatchling! These days I could eat one before breakfast! My dead sires could beat Basilisks with tails and talons chained*!"

"You lie, and very badly." Magic the very colour of a Killing Curse began to swirl in the Ravenclaw Champion's hands. "The gaze of a mature Basilisk is instantaneous death."

"*And its venom is not so far behind*," the enormous dark green dragon agreed. "*But I am no mere dragon. I am the Guardian of Jade. And my instructions are clear and simple: you will not pass without brewing something and offering it to me as a gift*!"

This...the dragon was a Chinese Jade Imperial? But they were all supposed to be extinct!

At least, Ra himself had assured him they were...

"You realise I could call my friends and kill you by bringing down the walls of this throne room with a trebuchet."

"*And you realise that by the time the walls will collapse, there wouldn't be anything left of you, Champion. I have mastery of the five sacred elements, and I have already hunted many heads of what you are. Do not waste my time. Begin brewing...or forfeit your chances of winning this Task*."

By Merlin and everything sacred of the Light, this was indeed an old Jade Dragon, also known as the Chinese Celestial Dragon...those beasts, before they were confirmed to be extinct, could weigh more than thirty tonnes and boasted elemental powers the likes of which mages routinely failed to equal.

For several seconds, the Black Witch stayed silent, her eyes on the very serpentine tail and the enormous claws of the flame-breathing monster.

Albus couldn't be sure, but he guessed the girl was trying to assert the danger represented by an intelligent, rested Jade Dragon, while she had not the right to use her wand.

The danger must have been far more than the Black Witch was ready to tolerate, for she turned around ten seconds later and rushed in the direction of the cauldrons sitting at the entrance of the throne room.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" Igor Karkaroff burst into laughter. "It takes only a ventriloquist and a dragon to force your Champion to brew? That's completely ridiculous! My Champion won't have any difficulty now winning this! Not when she has already dealt with all the other Champions in the Labyrinth of Mirrors!"

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Cedric was beginning to hate this Task.

And yes, the Champion of Hufflepuff knew that hatred was an un-Hufflepuffish emotion.

But this time, there were good reasons to be mad.

Seriously, they, and by 'they', Cedric counted every Hogwarts Champion in it, were completely and utterly unprepared for the Third Task. Potter? Yeah, that applied to her too. Cedric was sure that if the Ravenclaw girl had been *that* confident in her own Potion skills, she would not have gone for an 'all or nothing blatant cheating plan' which had somehow been accepted by the Judges.

Snape and Whitehead had not taught them enough about Potions to be ready for a Task this dangerous.

The Hufflepuff Champion was thinking about how he was going to break this major issue when he collided with something...no, someone.

"Argh...look where you...Longbottom?"

"Diggory?"

Yes, it was the younger Champion of House Gryffindor which had rather violently interrupted his race through the Labyrinth.

"How did you...I thought you were far from the completion of your Potion when I began the challenge!" It was better to focus on what was important, and bitterly arguing who was at fault for the collision would achieve nothing.

"I was," the Boy-Who-Lived admitted with a grimace. "When I entered, there were only forty seconds left before the second brewing phase was officially over."

"Wonderful," the son of Amos Diggory muttered. "I had...what, ten minutes of advance?"

"About that," the fourth-year wizard nodded. "And while I don't want to be the bearer of bad news...we're very close to the entrance of the Labyrinth."

"By Helga's Cup and all her lost heirlooms," the Badger swore, "I was completely lost, wasn't I?"

"Err...maybe?"

The tone Longbottom employed, in Cedric's humble opinion, could have been far, far more reassuring than it currently was.

"If I knew this was going so bad, I would have begged Potter to loan me one of her trebuchets, even if I had to become one of her slaves for one year and one day."

Cedric didn't know where he was supposed to go, and the Gryffindor boy had some kind of funny lights shining in his hands, so he supposed following him around was the best thing that could happen. The 'Myriad of Paths Unlocked' Potion he had drunk had outlived its usefulness, and the Captain of the Hufflepuff Quidditch Team didn't believe he was going to find the exit in time to do any good.

"I don't think your girlfriend would like that."

"Oh, Cho would understand..." Cedric rolled his eye, "and then she would likely ask our famous Basilisk Slayer for the boon of transferring the slave contract to her."

"Well, that's your problem, not...okay...what is happening here?"

The Labyrinth of Mirrors had offered unpleasant surprises since he stepped a foot inside it. There had been several monsters crawling out of the mirrors, some ice wraiths doing their best to mutilate them, and without a wand, escape was more or less the only sane method of survival.

There had been countless traps, including some enchantments which made you speak in riddles and with a girly voice if you stared at it for too long.

And of course there were plenty of illusions to make sure you lost any indication of where exactly a Champion was going.

But even after all those misadventures, seeing three Champions waiting for them in the same miniature plaza of mirrors was a rather large surprise.

Cedric recognised Viktor Krum, Eleonora da Riva, and Romeo Malatesti in a couple of seconds. And they were...wait, why was the reflection of the mirrors showing the Dark Queen of Durmstrang?

"Ah, the last weaklings to fall into my trap have arrived..." Cedric did not like that voice at all. It was something a Dark Lady would use before ordering someone's death.

And yeah, as the Champion of Hufflepuff could only acknowledge the entrance they had used to arrive in this place where mirrors were everywhere had disappeared somehow in the last seconds...or the passage had only been intended to be one-way.

"Release us at once," the Bulgarian Seeker commanded.

"Ah, Krum, Krum..." the psychopath who was leading the rankings of the Tournament bared her teeth. Cedric wasn't stupid enough to believe it was an encouraging smile. "Believe me, I did not intended for a 'us'. It is only a small little trap I made to test you along the way. It's not my fault the less talented specimens of this Tournament cheated and tried to replicate your efforts...or got lost when their best was simply lamentable and catastrophic."

The Durmstrang Champion clearly didn't believe her for a second. He was...not exactly right to do so. Judging by the guilty looks of Malatesti and Longbottom – those two were hardly able to maintain emotionless faces – there had clearly been *some* cheating during the second brewing phase.

"Fortunately for all of you," Lyudmila Romanov continued with a smile which could have turned blood into ice, "I am really not vengeful."

The enormity of the lie was such Cedric grimaced. It was going to be very bad, then.

The leader of the Hufflepuff Tournament delegation was not disappointed by the next words.

"I modified the Labyrinth into a Niflheim variant past a certain threshold, which has now been activated."

Instantly Cedric shivered, for it was as if the temperature of the Labyrinth of Mirrors had dropped by ten degrees.

"You will easily be able to exit...but the temperatures are going to get a bit...chaotic, I'm afraid."

"You..." The litany of insults which came out of Romeo Malatesti's mouth was incredibly vulgar.

"Or you can use the mirror-portal in front of you," there was a maelstrom of black and blue energy, and a mirror transformed into something vaguely gate-like, and after a second it showed Lyudmila Romanov...but this time, Cedric knew this was the real Dark Queen, not a reflection.

"You bitch, I am going to crucify you! I am going to strangle you with your own intestines! I am going to drown you in our schools' canals-"

Cedric was too astonished to stop Malatesti from charging straight into the portal...not that it would have changed anything, most likely.

There was an enormous dark cloud of evil magic.

And when it dissipated, there was a *duck* trying to attack the only daughter of the Tsar of Russia on the other side.

Naturally, the duck's charge...err...failed epically.

Cedric was ashamed to say it, but he giggled like a girl, despite the cold, despite the gravity of the situation.

"Now...we are going to play a game, Champions."

The cold increased, and the flow of magic in the mirrors was so bright it became hurtful.

Something...something was happening.

**6 January 1995, somewhere near the settlement of Grise Fiord, Nunavut, Canada**

Unlike some of their other creations, the Third Seal to be activated had never unduly worried the Exchequer.

It was close to the North Pole, and for all the ability of non-magical humans to settle in inhospitable lands, Ellesmere Island had only three permanent hamlets.

The closest, called Grise Fiord, barely boasted a population of one hundred and forty-eight souls.

The chances of someone finding the white-coloured structure in the middle of a white landscape was close to zero, but of course Osiris and his senior commanders never relied on chance, not when Fate was making it easy for their enemies to ruin their plans.

About three hundred major wards and enchantments had been cast, the runic protections were a work of art which had cost enough to bribe ten Magical Ministers for a lifetime, and there were other guardians, both of the living and the un-living kind.

Thus on this morning of January, as a blizzard raged, there were absolutely no humans to witness the activation of the Seal of Frost.

This Seal was not supposed to be triggered so soon. By an irony only the Knights of the Exchequer were aware of, Alexandra Potter had come quite close to activating it during the Second Task. But her Runic improvisation which had summoned a lot of ice had not been sufficiently imbued with the power of Death, nor had it resulted in the death of someone important, or significantly altered something extremely magical.

The Labyrinth of Mirrors of the Third Task, however, undoubtedly qualified as a heavily-enchanted area, the power of Loki ushering temperatures worthy of the mythical Niflheim exploded the threshold effortlessly, and the transformation of Romeo Malatesti into a duck, while not permanent, satisfied the Power of Chaos.

A ray the very colour of an underwater iceberg burst into existence, and all around the now-revealed white pyramid, enormous spikes of ice rose from the floor, surrounded by little statues of ice ducks.

The latter did not stay in existence for long, not that it mattered as the Seal used brute force to open a link to a small dimension the Exchequer had taken three centuries to engineer.

An enormous blizzard began to rage, and as it was fuelled by magic, it would not stop a day or even a week later.

The power of eternal winter was now unleashed upon Ellesmere Island, which would quickly result in the local population finding more tolerable regions for the sake of survival.

And this time, there was absolutely no one in a radius of a thousand kilometres to warn the Army of Light's Knights of what had just happened.

**6 January 1995, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

Alexandra had to feign nothing wrong had happened when she felt another Seal activate.

For the moment, the Potter Heiress had to admit that the theory of Lyudmila Romanov that only one Seal was to be activated per Task was correct...and she dearly hoped Loki's Champion had not deliberately activated one at the worst moment possible just to annoy the Exchequer.

The young Ravenclaw witch sighed internally and continued to slowly stir her cauldron, checking three times she had not forgotten anything, before pouring a vial of cinnamon in.

And yes, Alexandra was perfectly aware this wasn't on the list of Alchemical reagents the Judges had allowed everyone to read this morning.

On the other hand, it wasn't on the list of substances prohibited either.

And when it was combined with the Potion she was brewing...

"*It is...a pleasant smell*," the enormous dragon barring her way to the throne acknowledged. "*Since I forgot to ask,"* it was more like the Jade Dragon had been yawning and half-sleeping, in her humble opinion*, "what is this supposed to do? Polish my scales*?"

"Do not worry, oh Prodigious Dragon," Alexandra snarked as the Potion finished simmering and was at last not at risk to blow up spectacularly, "I am just going to bribe you."

"*Bribing me*?" the too-talkative guardian sniffed disdainfully. "*Champion, I was advising the Heavenly Monarchs of the Great Tang Empire when your ancestors were still trying to figure out if it was better to cook their meat or not before eating it. I have gathered so much wealth in my hoard that whatever pathetic fortune and lore you have in your possessions, you will not equal them, whether you live three meagre centuries or not*!"

"So you are refusing my generous gift of cinnamon-spiced, Alchemically-cooked, sugar?

"*Sugar*," if the bronze eyes of the Jade Dragon could have tripled in size they would have done so, and the drool coming out of its maw was another sign her decision to brew this Potion in particular was completely vindicated.

Yes, learning Fingolfin had a crazy addiction to this concoction had been troublesome – especially since it was she who had to brush the teeth of her Britannian Gold – but it was extremely satisfying to know he was not the exception to the rule.

"*I shouldn't*..." the draconic being rumbled with an expression which was very human-like...and very guilty, "*my Mistress forbade me to taste it since the last incident*..."

"Our little arrangement can stay between us," Alexandra was pretty sure it wouldn't, since there were enchanted mirrors and tens of thousands of spectators watching her 'negotiation'...but it wasn't her problem. "And for all the punishments she can give you, you will remain the proud owner of a cauldron of unique sugar, to satiate your...formidable appetite."

"*By the flooding of the Yangtze, yes*!" The jade-scaled reptile must have not received this kind of gift very often in the last decades, if his weakness to sugary things was so huge...or he had been ordered to accept, for the theatrical purpose of the Task. "*Bring me the cauldron, young Champion, I want to...examine it and sample its purity*!"

Levitating it wandlessly, it took only a few seconds for her cauldron to find itself between the claws of the throne room's guardian...and just like that, Alexandra was walking towards the throne room.

The Champion of Death didn't run; while the draconic opposition had been more trouble than she expected to face, there could be other traps. The other reason why she wasn't in a hurry was that no Champions had currently completed the third section. At least, there was no thundering sound to indicate the gates of the throne room were about to let the Dark Queen pass or someone else.

But with each step, the traps failed to activate, and there was no other guardian to challenge her.

There were large slurping sounds, indicating the Jade Dragon found her 'gift' eminently satisfying.

And there were the two thrones.

Now that there was no magical disturbance between her and them, it was quite evident which theme had been chosen.

On the right, the throne was golden. A splendid sun had been raised over the royal seat, and flowers which would never fade flooded on the sides. Everything else was about the golden rays of the sun, the sun rising high over the horizon, and wizards and animals prostrating themselves before the solar aster. Everything was golden on and near this royal seat.

Either this was the Throne of the Sun, or it was the Throne of the Day. It couldn't be anything else.

Yet there was something...which gave her bad vibes. Was it the lone golden mask under the sun above the throne? It was Venetian, and quite clearly represented the sun...but it seemed hollow, emotionless.

The second throne, by contrast was adding the silver of the moon, and the onyx of the night. The different phases of the Earth's only satellite were all represented, between different waves of darkness, and a benevolent figure smiling sadly in the shadows.

This was the Throne of the Moon and Darkness, and for all the fact she knew this was certainly a trap, Alexandra was unable to stop her hand from touching the splendid artistic creation...but there was no Seal Activation.

The earth didn't rumble, and neither Powers nor Seals did react.

But a crown of silver most assuredly appeared where a King or a Queen should sit.

A heartbeat later, and the cacophony of the spectators applauding her arrived at her ears, and by the Fields of Pelennor, it was *deafening*.

"EXTRAORDINARY! CHAMPION ALEXANDRA POTTER HAS COMPLETED THE THIRD TASK IN ONE HOUR AND FIFTEEN MINUTES! SHE TAKES THE LEAD OF THE EUROPEAN MAGICAL TOURNAMENT!"

Well, if the Judges were ready to announce it...

Alexandra breathed loudly and finally allowed herself to relax.

Her strategy had worked, and those thrones were a mystery which could wait for another day.

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The good news was that he hadn't been transformed into a duck.

That he could say that without lying said really, really bad things how the Third Task had not gone according to the plan.

And yes, there was some bad news too.

First of all, they might have avoided the fate of Romeo Malatesti – who was to be trapped as a duck in some large iceberg, for those who were interested in that sort of prank – but the Durmstrang psychopath had not allowed them to leave their trap easily.

They were nearly frozen ten times, and when they were finally in a zone which was relatively warm and safe, it was to be informed they had barely avoided disqualification.

To sum-up: Neville was lagging far behind Champions like Henri de Condé or Lucrezia Sforza, never mind the Dark Queen, and if he didn't brew something in thirty minutes, he was to be eliminated.

The Boy-Who-Lived was going to be honest; he hadn't the slightest idea of what he could do to go through the third section of this great obstacle course with Potions.

And by the way...he already didn't like the class before because Snape was the teacher.

This was before having a plunging view of what could only be described as 'Potion hell'.

Six great rectangular pools containing some terrifying substances...and the future Lord Longbottom was sure one would be more than enough to transform him into a corpse.

Swallowing his pride, the Gryffindor Champion decided to intercept Cedric Diggory before they entered their individual 'brewing space'.

"Cedric...err...not that I'm trying to cheat...but do you have an idea how to cross...err...that?"

The answer came immediately, and brought no relief at all.

"No, I do not." The older Seeker admitted, looking absolutely not happier than Neville likely looked. "I tried my luck with the Wolf Summoning Potion and the Thousand Ropes...my strength has always been in summoning magical combinations of Potion and Transfiguration...but that's useless there. What one need is something that will protect your body from six different deadly Potions...what about you?"

"All my Potions are those of the *Thief's Compendium*," the black-haired Gryffindor wizard said grudgingly, figuring it didn't matter anymore. "I used the Potion called the Thief's Imagination for the first challenge, and the Thief's Hand of Light for the second. But I need someone to copy the Potion from...and there aren't that many Champions left to...err...duplicate the content of the cauldrons?"

"Call it cheating," Cedric grimaced. "I would loudly proclaim breaking all the rules is bad, except I would do it in a hurry if there was a hope of winning this bloody thing."

"Winning...yeah, I think it's a bit beyond our wand range now," Neville Longbottom's attempt to put some humour in his voice miserably failed. "Potter must have won the Task, or be so close to it that it makes no difference."

"Yeah," the other Hogwarts Champion definitely was as unhappy as he was. "A pity we can't pass through this crazy 'Labour of Potions' like she did."

Suddenly, Neville had a mad idea. It was, if he said so as a Marauder, a completely crazy idea.

But if it worked...

"Except...we can," the Boy-Who-Lived whispered. When it came down to it, yes, it was too late to win this Task, but the very reason Potter had left them all in her dust was not her sheer talent in Potions or ability to destroy the laws governing the mixing of Alchemical reagents.

It was because of one 'factor'.

"FRED! GEORGE!" The Champion of Fate screamed after casting the Charm to amplify his voice. "I NEED YOUR HELP!"

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Alexandra had been a bit disorientated by the Portkey the Judges had used to let her exit the throne room – for some reason, they didn't quite trust her to welcome properly the other Champions whenever they got to the fourth section.

The young witch might have been offended, if she hadn't had a few evil contingencies to screw with some Champions, be they Dark or Light.

Anyway, the Third Task was over for her, and as the green-eyed Champion bowed in front of the Headmasters and Headmistresses, then addressed a large salute to the crowd, she really hoped the Fourth Task was going to have similar flaws in the rules allowing her to cheat.

Yes, yes, cheating was bad, but when it was authorised, why not abuse the hell out of it?

The magically amplified voice of the Boy-Who-Lived chose that moment to remind her that there was a Task ongoing for the rest of the Champions.

"FRED! GEORGE! I NEED YOUR HELP!"

Alexandra giggled.

Of course the Boy-Who-Lived did.

Looking at the third section, the Champion of Ravenclaw could see the strategic situation had been simplified one hour after the Task's beginning.

Lyudmila Romanov was in the lead. It wasn't a surprise. The Dark Queen looked like she had almost finished her third brewing phase, stirring something which looked like a pool of purple flames in her cauldron. How the metal container was able to handle that kind of punishment, Alexandra hadn't the faintest idea.

Lucrezia Sforza and Henri de Condé were in the middle of the brewing phase, give or take it. By her estimates, they still had somewhere around ten to fifteen minutes to finish whatever they wanted to use in the next challenge phase. Frode Falk was brewing too, but whatever the bigoted Champion of the Light was doing, he was badly lagging behind them.

And the rest...including Longbottom...but also including Krum, Diggory, and da Riva had yet to begin taking the ingredients they needed for a Potion, never mind boiling some water or combining several Alchemical reagents.

By simple logic, unless the Fenrir Animagus showed some spectacular incompetence that wasn't in her character, she was going to finish second, with Sforza and de Condé finishing third or fourth.

This was...sub-optimal. There were still four more Tasks, and being a handful of points ahead of the most dangerous Champion of Durmstrang was anything but a guarantee of victory.

And, as if her immortal patron was answering a nonexistent question, Alexandra remarked the Judges had brought a communication mirror near them so they were in contact with several handlers outside the stadium. Those disciplined men and women appeared to keep an eye or two on the Weasley Twins and the trebuchets.

"Fred. George."

Her voice must have been sufficiently sarcastic, for the red-haired pranksters stood to attention with military salutes.

"Yes, oh mighty and terrifying Lady?" the Gryffindor near-adults spoke together.

"You see those moats?"

"Yes, my Lady!"

"Champion Potter, what are you-"

And the Champion of Ravenclaw uttered the fatal words.

"I don't want to. Bombard them with all the Crystal Dream you have left. Let's see how quickly the remaining Champions can improvise!"

Ten seconds after she had spoken, the formidable siege engines, pride of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw ingenuity, went into action.

The result was...a little apocalyptic.

This wasn't mere walls they were firing at this time; this time the targets were really volatile Potions. Wherever the crystal-transformation Potion fell, the result appeared completely random; in the acid it seemed to erase the moat entirely, but in the cursed lightning it seemed to create a sort of sapphire-coloured 'bridge' over the deadly liquid.

Alexandra cleared her throat before raising the power of her voice so that the entire stadium could hear her.

"Do not say again in my presence that I have not helped you, Longbottom, Diggory. Supportive actions and loyalty aren't just for the Chosen of Helga Hufflepuff. Nobility isn't just for the heirs of Gryffindor."

And then the Potter Heiress let herself be 'escorted' to her seat by a trio of very amused security personnel, who may be thinking that the less she spoke to Fred and George, the better it was for this Task's good continuation.

"The current progress in the third brewing phase has been completely overturned!" Judge Felix Norris exclaimed three seconds later. "We all believed Champion Romanov was going to take second place, but now the Champions are on equal standing!"

Alexandra wasn't sharing this opinion at all. Unlike the other Champions, the blonde Russian witch had a completed Potion, and she didn't waste time using it, throwing a vial into the first pool...and suddenly the explosive storms and the explosions which had not stopped since the Crystal Dream's bombardment began were repelled, the purple flames forming a clear path the Dark Queen of Durmstrang could use.

Behind her, it was complete chaos...and it wasn't a joke.

Eleonora da Riva arrived at the same time as Frode Falk, and the Champion of Wisdom proved beyond doubt he wasn't a team player by pushing the Venetian witch into the first 'moat'. Her scream when she touched the substance...Alexandra winced.

The Light Champion of Innocence must have had an Animagus form with very impressive regeneration capabilities, though, because for all the terrible burns the orange fire was inflicting upon her, the Champion of the Scuola Regina managed to drag herself out of the moat before collapsing, her clothes considerably dissolved and her flesh showing quantities of burn wounds which looked awful. The Healers were already rushing to save her life.

Without a care for the 'ally' he had nearly killed, Frode Falk continued to run over the 'bridges' and 'paths' the Potions' weird reactions had created.

In the middle of flames, lightning, acid, and so many powerful magical explosions, it took a certain courage, Alexandra was not going to take that away from him.

It was extremely dangerous, and Viktor Krum had apparently decided to try his luck brewing a Potion first, judging that the conditions to cross the moats were not safe enough.

The Bulgarian Seeker was clearly the only one to have self-preservation instincts.

Sforza, Diggory, Longbottom, and de Condé were all trying to catch up with Falk.

And Falk was trying to take the second place away from the Dark Queen...and what the hell was that vial the Light Champion had on his belt?

It couldn't be what he had brewed in the third section, said liquid had been abandoned before it could be stabilised in a proper Potion, and now several Guild Masters were trying to neutralise the rubber-like white *thing* the cauldron and its contents had turned into.

"He really intends to challenge her...oh well..." Alexandra sighed. "His funeral, I guess..."

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Lyudmila did not know if she was supposed to be happy or angry as she ran and the gates before her opened in a tumult loud enough to wake up dead people.

Chaos was always a good thing, this was what she had learned these last years. Chaos was where she thrived. When chaos reigned, she won.

It was...both funny and raging to be the target of a joke, and not be able to do anything at all to counter it.

Let's see...

Alexandra Potter had turned her advantages to ashes in a single minute, the gains seized in the first three sections had turned into nothingness, she had two Champions of the Light mere metres behind her, all her Potion vials were now empty, and the Archduchess of Novgorod had the confirmation her rival had won the Third Task.

It didn't matter.

There were other Tasks. This Tournament was far from over.

And whatever was in this Throne Room, Lyudmila was confident she could deal with it-

"By the damned souls of Niflheim, what is an Imperial Jade Dragon doing here?"

The throne room and a particularly lavish decoration had been expected.

The enormous reptile and its marvellous jade scales – the Tsar's daughter had to admit they could have been mistaken for gemstones, such was their exceptional colour – was definitely not something she'd thought she would ever encounter.

The dragons of this breed were extinct, after all. The Light had made the species the scapegoats for several pandemics and other disasters they had themselves engineered, resulting in the Chinese Emperors ordering the Jade's extinction. It was a move typical of the narrow-minded fools. Mere centuries later, said 'Heavenly Emperors' had become very supportive of the Light, taken them as advisors...and entered a period of decadence and weakness which had eventually ended in their utter destruction.

Evidently, however, the species was not completely extinct.

"I am going to-"

Lyudmila jumped fast, and once again her reflexes saved her life, as a horrible-smelling Potion splashed upon the ground, and proceeded to make holes in the rather good-looking carpet.

It took her only a few seconds to recognise what the substance was.

"The Tartarus Pit Venom? Seriously?"

This was a really nasty poison, but it was completely inefficient against her. If being a Fenrir Animagus didn't give her a perfect immunity against poisons, Loki's Champion hadn't the slightest idea what was supposed to prove it wrong.

"Come on," the Servant of Chaos chuckled while watching the livid face of the Light fool. "Surely this was your opening move...trust but verify, I believe the proverb says? No, surely even someone who licks the pretentious fossil's boots twice a day must have a few aces up his sleeve to make me shiver..."

It wasn't going to come from the other Champions, that, at least, was a near-certainty. They were staying close to the first metallic doors, leaving the other Durmstrang Champion and she staring at each other.

"This is only the beginning, Spawn of Chaos!"

This could have been a nice threatening gesture and speech of defiance, except that Frode Falk had run in the direction of the cauldrons, and activated the standard wards indicating he was ready to begin the fourth brewing phase.

"This is really pathetic."

Lyudmila had survived plenty of assassination attempts, but this one...this was just a monumental disappointment. She knew the Falk sycophant was weak, but this was below her most pessimistic predictions...

Honestly, if Death had not erased her advantages, there would have been no attempt at all. And after being given this opportunity he squandered it in mere seconds?

"The Light has really come close to impotence," Lyudmila declared while turning around. She didn't even bother keeping her eyes on that sad excuse of a wizard; the wards to brew Potions could only be activated once; if Frode Falk tried to attack her again, she would have all the justification needed to use his head as a footrest. "Now let's finish this Task of unanticipated cheating..."

As predicted, there was no trace of the Hogwarts Champion who had preceded her, and the empty cauldron lying near the paws of the dragon quite indicated that whatever distraction Potter had used – this had been her only brewing phase – it had quite evidently worked. Her rival was not so weak as to let herself be beaten by a single dragon.

"A good thing the Judges haven't forbidden Animagus transformations," she said aloud to the dragon. "With a rule like that one, you could have been a troublesome opponent-"

"*I think you will find it is not easy to evade my vigilance, pretentious female*!"

Lyudmila gaped.

This had to be a joke.

*Loki. I swear if that is one of your ventriloquist acts*...

**No**. **I assure you it is exactly what you think it is.**

*Why did you never tell me it was a possibility*-

**Because you never asked**. **I told you dragons were really clever. I told you they were bankers, lore-guardians, fierce warriors, and kingly advisors. Did you really think they could have achieved all of it without mastering human languages**? **Shame on you, my Champion**.

And the laughter of the Chaotic Power echoed so loudly Lyudmila was surprised that for all the fact it was her link giving him access to this plane of existence, the other Champions weren't able to hear it.

"Hel and Chaos..." The Durmstrang Champion growled, before nodding. "Right. This doesn't change anything. So you're a talking dragon. How extraordinary. You know what I am, and which power I can wield, Potion or no Potion. Be a nice dragon, and move aside. I have a throne I need to sit upon."

"*Not before bribing me like the first Champion did*..."

This was the instant the Archduchess acknowledged there was another smell in the air.

Lyudmila was sure she hadn't smelled it before today, but she had no problems guessing what it was.

"Sugar," suddenly the conversation she had before the Winter Ball was making irony reach the height of Mount Everest in a single explosion. "She bribed you with *sugar*?"

"*It was excellent, and it was cinnamon Alchemical sugar, you ignorant peasant*!" The dragon unveiled its enormous tongue. "*Now*-"

"Peasant? I am Lyudmila Romanov, Archduchess and Champion! I have won-"

"*Not interested in hearing your ridiculous litany of undeserved praises*," the Jade Dragon interrupted her incredibly rudely. "*Now make yourself useful, Champion! Since you know the recipe of this divine sugar, bring me immediately another cauldron, and I will let you walk freely towards your goal. By the beards of the Emperors! Why aren't you moving? The cooking isn't going to do itself*!"

Loki's Champion transformed her hands into paws, and let part of her Fenrir nature take over in her eyes and the rest of her body.

Her fangs lengthened. Her heart pumped a colossal amount of magic, and Chaos began to swirl around her.

"I think," Lyudmila growled, "that your head is going to make a superb trophy to welcome any visitor inside my villa!"

"*Oh? But I was just looking for a wolf pelt to decorate my living quarters*!"

The Fenrir Animagus howled and attacked.

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Being the Champion of Horus prepared you for some fascinating and extremely dangerous situations.

Having a monstrous wolf straight from the Age of Myth jump towards an even bigger dragon from a species which by all rights should be extinct was not included in his preparations.

Lyudmila Romanov – for it was the Russian psychopath revealed in her Fenrir Animagus form – did not manage to complete the attack. The tail of the dragon struck her faster than his eyes could follow, and there was a terrible shockwave.

Henri shouted an incantation which closed the enchanted wooden doors.

It was good he did, because moments after the deed was done, the 'barrier' was on the receiving end of a very destructive air blast. And then another.

By the third, the wooden door also received some kind of fire attack.

This was two seconds before an enormous spike of stone got itself impaled in the gate.

Needless to say, if that had been a human instead of wood, the person attacked would have suffered a mortal injury...and quite probably the funeral ceremony would happen with a sealed coffin.

The French Champion had just enough time to think this before the fire was extinguished by water, and more shockwaves and attacks tore the wooden barrier apart, enormous pieces of it collapsing in a dreadful symphony...almost drowned out by the cataclysmic battle raging between Animagus and Dragon.

Henri de Condé, Champion of Horus, swallowed heavily.

"Okay...going through...that...is going to be a problem..."

"You're not worried about Falk?" The Champion of Lust smirked. "After all, he's closer to this mess than-"

"ARRGHHH! HELP! HELP ME! BY THE LIGHT, HELP!"

The blonde-haired Champion saw a vaguely human silhouette move near the ruins of half a dozen cauldrons...apparently the wards made by the Judges were insufficient to protect someone from the collateral damage of this battle of monsters.

"Whether he dies or not...I won't intervene."

Henri had been too far away to help Eleonora, but that didn't mean he hadn't seen what the Champion of Frigg did. There had been little doubt before the Task that Frode Falk was a despicable individual, but trying to assassinate someone just because you were too close to him?

Henri wasn't going to cast the weakest Water Charm he knew to save him.

"I was just checking," the Succubus purred as all the surviving Champions were forced to take cover. "Oh, it looks like the Judges used a Portkey to save him."

"The cauldrons?" Cedric Diggory, the sole Champion to not be serving one of the Powers there, asked. "I thought they were a bit too enchanted to be normal..."

"It is likely a good guess," the daughter of the Scuola Regina's Headmistress nodded before grimacing as an entire section of the ceiling not far from them showed impressive fissures forming and a rain of dust began to fall. "Damn, Loki's Chosen is getting the fight of her life there."

It was...accurate. The Fenrir Animagus hadn't yet managed to inflict a single serious wound upon her opponent. Her fangs, claws, and other natural weapons were impressive, but the elemental-themed magic of the dragon was denying her a combat at close-quarters.

It was as if this was the perfect opponent to counter Fenrir...wait a minute!

"You knew," the Light Champion accused the young Succubus, "you knew the psychopath was going to fight this!"

"Don't be ridiculous," the wealthy and aristocratic Dark Champion looked once more at her perfect nails. "I didn't know the details of each Task, and my Headmistress, like the other Heads of school, was not given the Task details until the last moment."

"Then," Neville Longbottom intervened, "you wouldn't mind doing something useful, would you?"

The hair of the Champion of Lust turned black, and without one more word, Henri knew the comment had done more harm than good.

An opinion more than justified when a purely malicious expression illuminated every facet of Lucrezia's visage.

"As you wish," the curtsy was noble, flawless, and definitely made to insult them. "Judges, I forfeit."

The Venetian Champion then ignored their flabbergasted expressions and ran back towards the third section where they had gone through small rivers of dangerous Potions.

"Ahem," Cedric coughed, as a Fenrir-sized projectile hit a wall, something which didn't discourage the psychopath from attacking again the dragon with greater ferocity. "Was that part of the plan?"

"No," Henri recognised while feeling easily ten times his age, "but then today's plans were pretty much thrown to the four winds the moment your fellow Champion entered the arena..."

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"Sforza is not a friend, but I think she made the right decision," Henri de Condé sighed. "We have to...Longbottom, what are you doing?"

"**We must reach the throne of Light**," Neville's voice, his voice, echoed in a bizarre manner...and his body moved.

He moved towards the Throne Room of the Third Task.

"You are going to get yourself killed for nothing!" Cedric shouted. "Stop this stupidity!"

Neville should have agreed with the Champion of Hufflepuff.

He should have felt really afraid and agreed with him, in fact.

It was like...it was like the danger was unreal. It was like nothing bad could happen to him.

There were flames between him and the throne.

There were two huge monsters tearing the fourth section apart.

Both of them were sworn to the Dark long ago, though the Champion of Chaos was far, far more dangerous the jade Dragon could ever be?

"You don't know..."

"**The victory of the King can happen here and now if there's no one to touch the second Throne**." Neville didn't know how he knew that, just that it was true.

The Champion of Fate saw it like it was written on the walls and the statues carved for the castle ritual. The Final Seal awaited to be triggered under those thrones. In a single heartbeat, all the Seals yet inactive would detonate, and the Seal of the Dark would break.

For something impossible would have happened: the Dark would win a genuine, lasting victory.

It mustn't happen. Fate had not approved, and so it wouldn't come to pass.

Neville ran.

He didn't know how it was humanly possible to evade Fenrir and Jade Dragon, the beasts were so huge, and the throne room was not that wide, but he did.

One instant they were in front of him, on his right, and on his left, and the next...

They were behind him.

They were behind him, and Neville climbed up the last carpet-covered stairs like an army of Dementors were on his heels, which, now that he was thinking a bit more clearly, would somehow be preferable.

"**Not today, oh Avatar of the Dark**," and Neville was sure that Fate made sure the recipient of the message heard it loud and clear, "**not today**."

And his fingers touched the second throne.

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Albus Dumbledore sighed in relief.

Many things had turned out to be catastrophic today, but two Champions of Hogwarts had completed the Third Task in first and second position respectively.

Given what he knew about young Neville's skill at Potions, this was downright miraculous. And-

There was another gigantic explosion, and the throne room disappeared in a maelstrom of dust and debris.

It seemed that the violence of the fighting between the monstrous Champion of Chaos – and by the feathers of Fawkes, Dumbledore had shivered at the sight of this lupine abomination – and the talking dragon had destroyed a lot of the floor, precipitating their fall into the underground machinery of the Coliseum.

The arena handlers ran towards the formidable hole which emerged after the smoke began to dissipate.

The Champions which remained, and it was just Henri de Condé and Cedric Diggory, Viktor Krum having abandoned during the third brewing phase, decided wisely to forfeit.

"Ha!" As was too often his habit, Ra had arrived without warning by his side. "Osiris will have one more failure to add to his list of defeats after today. His pathetic attempt to give some symbolism to thrones of Light and Dark had failed utterly!"

The Defeater of Grindelwald was almost ready to agree with him...but as he caressed his long beard, an unpleasant idea manifested itself.

"Did he really fail?"

The self-proclaimed 'Supreme Archmage of the Light' threw him a look of pity.

"He failed to trigger more than one Seal, and since this throne-themed one wasn't, he won't be able to activate it anymore! We. Won."

Dumbledore had to admit that in his life, he had sometimes made quite arrogant statements. But he was pretty sure he had not employed a 'we' in a battle where he had absolutely not been involved.

"Last time I checked," the Headmaster of Hogwarts said coldly, "it was a Champion of the Dark who won the Third Task...much like the First and the Second were. Yes, there has been no activation, and maybe that was the purpose of the thrones...but I fail to see how urging Fate to empower her Champion at the last minute was anything but a last-ditch desperation move."

"Careful, Dumbledore. You are speaking of the Will of the Light, Providence made Reality."

If anything, Albus was far more worried by the words than the events themselves.

The famous Headmaster was not going to be lying, he really, really disliked the Dark Champion of Death, also known as Alexandra Potter.

But today, Albus was realistic enough to acknowledge that without her help, young Neville would have failed at the third brewing phase. The silver-haired Headmaster had known too well the expression his student harboured when facing the third challenge, and it wasn't the kind one made before tricking Judges and audiences with something exceptional. The same applied to the young son of Amos, Cedric Diggory.

And worst of all, those actions had taken place because the Champion of House Ravenclaw had finished the Task five minutes ago.

In other words, if the Task had been done without any additional trebuchet intervention, Neville Longbottom would have been more than one hour away from completing it...in a very optimistic succession of events.

Some – including Ra, it seemed – were ready to call it the invisible hand of Fate.

Albus Dumbledore was ready to call it for what it was: they had been extremely lucky one of his Champions was willing to help the other when they were about to lose badly.

You couldn't rely upon that all the time. It was like, pardon him the analogy, as if he had expected Gellert to drop his wand and quickly surrender when they fought their famous duel in the middle of Berlin.

There was a tiny chance it could happen, but you couldn't rely upon it. It would be not only courting disaster, but kissing it, asking for its hand in marriage, and consuming it for seven days and seven nights.

And yet, as Albus watched the millennia-old wizard – who was completely ignoring him now, since he was about to walk away and see if the wounds of Champion Falk were not too serious – he couldn't help but think Ra had been deadly serious.

The leader of several Light organisations really relied upon Fate's intervention wherever Dark Lords and their plans of domination threatened the Wizarding World.

"It was...a really surprising Task," he began as all the Heads of the different schools returned to their seats. "I'm really curious what interpretation the Judges will make of the performance of each Champion..."

"You're saying that because your Champions have egregiously cheated!" Karkaroff snapped back. "I want the youngest one checked for Felix Felicis! The way he got through the throne room was absolutely not natural!"

"High Master Karkaroff," effortlessly, the Succubus managed to force the ex-Death Eater to adopt a more respectful stance, "whether your accusations are accurate or not, there is a protocol to respect."

"You...you are right, Headmistress, my apologies." The black eyes couldn't be mistaken as anything but evil during those last seconds. Karkaroff muttered something unintelligible in some Slavic dialect, before addressing them again. "How long do you think the Judges are going to take to deliberate?"

"I don't know," the Dark Creature replied sincerely. "But given how shocked some of them were when they went back to the quarters prepared exactly for this sort of situation...a few hours?"

"A few hours?" Headmistress Maxime repeated with a frown.

"At least," the Succubus Headmistress made a sound which could be either a sigh or a sound of amusement. "This Task was surprising from beginning to the end, but I wouldn't like to be one of the poor souls ordered to determine the scores of each Champion..."

**Author's note**:

And so ends the Third Task. You will get the scores of each Champion next chapter, I promise. For now, I'm afraid the Judges are really in need of several drinks after the surprises Alexandra has given them...

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