**Chapter 91**

**Second Task**

**3 December 1994, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

If he had to be honest – and he would prefer not to with so many eyes and ears focused on the Champions and their substitutes – Neville would say he was terrified by the idea of returning inside the Coliseum.

Sure, he wasn’t going to participate today.

The problem was that this reassurance wasn’t exactly exciting when the key word which could be added to the sentence was ‘yet’.

As if it wasn’t enough, the pretences had dropped this morning, and now it was obvious to everyone the Second Task was about Ancient Runes.

It was a Hogwarts elective he didn’t know much about. His tutors had made him memorise the different glyphs of Futhark in the last months, but...they had emphasized he had years of learning ahead of him if he wanted to use them in a dangerous environment and without proper supervision.

Neville didn’t really want to think about what would have happened if it was him in the seat of the Gryffindor Champion for this Task. Honestly...he didn’t envy Geoffrey at all.

The First Task had been a horrible challenge, but at least you could use your wand. Since Potter and two other Champions were playing with Rune-carving daggers, there was a high risk that-

“Champions, I am Judge Enikö Varga,” the woman in front of them began. Her French had a heavy accent of Central Europe, and her visage was...unremarkable was maybe the best word to describe it. “As the foremost Rune Mistress of the Ministry of Hungary, I have been granted the duties and the privilege to oversee the Second Task.”

Second after second, the clamours coming from the tens of thousands of spectators were rising. The euphoria was completely absent here. Every boy and girl was waiting in complete silence.

“The only magical focus you are authorised to wield without receiving a severe point penalty during this Task is an instrument whose purpose is to carve Runes. If you have not brought it with you, you are going to be given a standard one in a few minutes.”

Neville watched attentively the sixteen Champions. Alexandra Potter had one white dagger in her hands, sure enough. The Russian psychopath had a ruby-decorated sinister dagger, and the Succubus had an instrument so polished and so fragile it almost could pass as a mirror. And...Krum had a dagger too? What in the name of Merlin? The Bulgarian Seeker didn’t even succeed in getting his Tournament Clue!

“You will go into this Task, which will be known as the Runic Duellist Tournament, with this dagger and only the glyphs you have on your skin.”

Please, please let it be a joke...

That was what the future Lord Longbottom was thinking, and by the looks of it, Geoffrey, Cedric and Montague had all the same expression of disbelief on their face. The Champions of Gryffindor and Hufflepuff immediately turned towards the raven-haired girl to their right in the next couple of seconds.

Evidently, the information the Champion of Ravenclaw had given them had been far from exhaustive.

“You failed to mention that minor detail, Potter,” the Boy-Who-Lived heard the Champion of his House whispered angrily.

“Hooper. I told you we were going to potentially duel against each other. Sorry to disappoint you, but I am not so noble to give you everything you need to have a chance against me.”

“Yes, yes...like we have a chance to beat you one-on-one.”

“You don’t have to beat me, oh naive Lion. This is a Tournament. Meaning multiple Duels. Sometimes, exhausting your opponent or forcing him or her to reveal all his or her tricks is a death sentence for the next duel, victory or no victory in the previous game.”

And the exchange stopped there, likely not because Geoffrey was satisfied, but because the music and the clamours of the public made any conversation not shouted or boosted magically an exercise of uselessness.

At last they were on the section before the Judges, the Headmasters, and the ‘Very Important Wizards’ who had come to watch the proceedings.

Everyone was watching them...courtesy of having a true wall of darkness around the arena. The arena where the Champions were about to fight was impossible to distinguish.

“Remove everything you don’t want to take with you into the arena. The Second Task will begin immediately after we have drawn the schedule for the first round of Runic Duels.”

Neville for a second frowned in incomprehension as Alexandra Potter and the two other older witches began to disrobe. But after a brief moment of confusion the reason why they were doing it became clear.

Their skins, once various Charms were dispelled, were painted in glyphs of different colours. The green-eyed Champion of Ravenclaw...seriously, someone must have painted her yesterday, it couldn’t have been done this morning. Her arms were near-entirely blue and green, and half of her back which wasn’t covered by the sportswear had red-black Hieroglyphs shown to the spectators. Even her visage was painted, forehead and cheeks had some sort of elegant calligraphy which was not Futhark.

Maybe there were more Runes behind the clothes, but Neville doubted it. Runes, once properly activated, were famous – or infamous – to burn or destroy every piece of clothing they were in contact with. There was a reason the Celtic tribes went into battle nearly naked, and it wasn’t because they wanted to ‘impress’ their enemies.

Lyudmila Romanov, though everyone called her ‘*that* Russian psychopath’ when she wasn’t around, had made more or less the same choices as the victor of the First Task. The arms, the upper back, the neck, and the forehead had many glyphs, but the paint was uniformly purple-black. The only notable difference was that she removed her shoes too, and everyone in the audience could see there were Runes on her feet. It made little sense to him, but then he wasn’t a Chaos Black Witch.

And after the First Task, it was better to admit every stratagem imagined by the monstrous Champion of Durmstrang was prepared to kill you. It wasn’t going to stop the ‘surprises’ from killing you, but it would decrease the shock of underestimating her in a critical situation.

Krum had one Glyph per hand. Had someone told him for the dagger and nothing else?

But if those three Champions had correctly exploited the rules...the Succubus made their efforts a mockery.

And Neville blushed a lot, when he realised how much the Black Witch of Lust intended to remove.

By the end of the ‘process’ – which was not a strip-tease, no, Sir – the Champion of the Scuola had undergarments and a bra, and little else to preserve her ‘modesty’.

However, it wasn’t just for the sake of shocking the crowd and her fellow Champions. Her skin was covered in Runes...everywhere where it had been possible to paint, someone had done so. Pink, red, gold, silver, blue, green, black, and many other shades of points were there, and the number of Runes waiting to be activated had to be in the high hundreds.

The number of active and/or passive effects the Succubus would be able to trigger with minimal incantations...Sweet Merlin, Geoffrey and all the others were going to be slaughtered if they fought her.

The surprise was total, and it took him a few seconds to realise the Judges had begun drawing the names for the Duels.

“First Duel,” Enikö Varga announced after clearing her throat, “Alexandra Potter of Hogwarts against Graham Montague of Hogwarts.”

Oh shit, Champions of the same school could fight each other in the first round?

Err...okay, it was nice meeting you, Montague. Judging by the evil grin on Potter’s face, the Slytherin Champion was going to die.

“The Second Duel will oppose Eleonora da Riva of the Scuola Regina to Ambre de Courtois of Beauxbatons.”

There was a lot of cheers when each name was called, and soon the enormous blue magical board where the Tournament repartition of duels waited was filled. From top to bottom, it read:

*Alexandra Potter (Hogwarts) versus Graham Montague (Hogwarts)*

*Eleonora da Riva (Scuola Regina) versus Ambre de Courtois (Beauxbatons)*

*Geoffrey Hooper (Hogwarts) versus Romeo Malatesti (Scuola Regina)*

*Boris Viipuri (Durmstrang) versus Lucrezia Sforza (Scuola Regina)*

*Giovanni Ruspoli (Scuola Regina) versus Lucas Gauthier (Beauxbatons)*

*Cedric Diggory (Hogwarts) versus Armand Coularé de la Fontaine (Beauxbatons)*

*Henri de Condé (Beauxbatons) versus Viktor Krum (Durmstrang)*

*Karl Schumacher (Durmstrang) versus Lyudmila Romanov (Durmstrang)*

It would be a superb lie to say Neville was happy with the outcome of this drawing. Two Champions of Hogwarts were going to fight each other, and the Boy-Who-Lived knew that barring a miracle, Montague was going to go join Warrington on the list of fatalities. And Geoffrey was opposed to this bloodthirsty maniac of Romeo Malatesti...the Black Wizard of War had a smile which was really, really disturbing.

At least Diggory had received the luck of the others. The Hufflepuff boy had zero monsters to fight for his first two duels. Reaching the half-finals wasn’t impossible for him...assuming he could show impressive Runic-casting.

“And now, what you’re eagerly waiting...the arena where the Champions you support are going to prove their Runic Duelling Skills!”

The dark barrier dissipated, and Neville gasped like the thousands of spectators.

Like during the First Task, the wizards and witches in charge of the Coliseum had built something incredible.

In this case, the ‘something’ was an enormous Egyptian-looking temple with four metres-tall cat statues, gigantic columns and tablets which detailed imagined or real Egyptian feats of wizardry.

The Duelling Platform, larger than the Duelling standard set by the ICW, was golden and on top of the temple, with several levitating projectors recording everything for the enchanted mirrors dispersed across Europe.

It was beautiful. Neville couldn’t imagine how it was possible to build and enchant something so huge in less than a month, but evidently the Venetian...and their masters of the Dark had achieved it.

Then Neville observed the ‘moat’ surrounding the cat-themed temple and shivered.

Because the enormous maw which had emerged from the dark waters could difficultly mistaken for anything else but a huge saurian.

Meagre satisfaction, Romeo Malatesti was pale and whispering ‘wrestling with crocodiles’.

Neville chuckled.

His hilarity didn’t last long, though. Just the time to see more super-crocodiles reveal themselves.

Reacting on the spot, the best advice the Champion of Fate could mutter was...

“They best not fall into this artificial lake...”

The crocodiles were *big*.

Black-scaled and with large sharp teeth, the massive reptiles were able to give you a few nightmares.

And they were far above them, certainly missing a lot of ‘details’.

More importantly, Neville wasn’t seeing any bridge to cross the water obstacle...

“The first duel will begin in two minutes!”

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One Champion had a starting position next to the Judges, and it wasn’t Alexandra.

The Basilisk-Slayer wouldn’t have cared much if it didn’t mean she had to run slowly to the other starting position as the thousands of spectators screamed and cheered.

It was...distracting, and she had to use a few basic Occlumency exercises to not focus on the wrong things.

The Judges didn’t help, as a few seconds later they began to show up on the enormous enchanted mirrors the current scores of the Second Task.

**Provisional Scores:**

**Alexandra Potter: 1 point**

**Lucrezia Sforza: 1 point**

**Lyudmila Romanov: 1 point**

Three out of six Champions had solved the two enigmas. Of course, for all those who had the eyes to see, it wasn’t exactly a surprise. Painting Runes on your body was all the sign one needed to know you were prepared.

Alexandra shook her head, not thinking about it.

It could wait. What mattered now was to reach the Duelling Platform first, and remove Montague from the Tournament.

“BEGIN!”

One glance at the black lake had been enough to know swimming was not a valid option. Fortunately, there was a nice alternative today.

One step away from her starting position, there was a large block of enchanted stone covered in Runes.

“By the power of the Great Chariot and the Unlocked Trickster, Raido and Eihwaz, reveal what can’t be seen, provide the traveller the next step of his journey! RE!”

It wasn’t delicate or particularly pretty, but it worked. The two runes evocated shone in red, and an instant later a wooden bridge which looked neither safe nor very stable materialised.

Alexandra ran on it, throwing an evocation of Naudiz on it so that the ropes and the wood held for several minutes. And she didn’t look below.

It took her seconds to be on the other side, and the traps triggered the moment she stepped a foot on the white stone of the Egyptian temple.

The mouths of the cat statue facing her opened, disgorging a torrent of stone creatures she recognised immediately.

“Cat Hieroglyphs,” the green-eyed Champion groaned. “Great.”

The real name of course wasn’t Cat Hieroglyphs, obviously, but most Curse-breakers tended to call them that. They were a favourite of the old Pharaohs: these constructs in the shape of cats were powered by Runes and their only purpose was to drag you against the walls of their temples and petrify you. And the more ‘cats’ they were, the easier it was for them to make a very lifelike statue of you.

It was the first duel, and the Ravenclaw didn’t intend to waste time.

“THURISAZ!” The British witch shouted, using only the name and letting the three Runes on her arms do the rest.

The Cat Hieroglyphs perished in a storm of lightning, and Alexandra ran past the columns.

There were large stairs, and ibis statues, which threw promptly arrows at her. Alexandra avoided them easily, before hitting at irregular intervals the glyphs which were necessary to stop the projectiles rain from continuing.

Two stone doors were beginning to close, but the Morrigan Champion was so fast courtesy of her physical training and her Animagus boost that she was able to run under it without crawling and continue her progression.

Overall, compared to some of her previous adventures, this temple wasn’t very difficult. Alexandra avoided a large illusion-covered hole which could likely send you to the Hetkoshu crocodiles, and arrived before a last statue of Thoth which had a large hourglass. Judging by the quantity of sand...half of the five minutes were already gone.

Alexandra ran upstairs, and once again, the sound of the crowd almost deafened her.

Her Occlumency shields were raised again, the Potter Heiress ignored them and touched the golden orb of light which was levitating at the centre of the Duelling platform.

It dissipated in a powerful flash and a victorious melody played. The ‘Clue’ of the first duel was hers. It was a good start.

Alexandra turned around, and watched the other series of stairs which were the second access entrance to the ‘battleground’ prepared for the Champions. Montague had obviously failed to beat her here, but it didn’t mean-

The spectators exploded in raucous laughter, and the Basilisk-Slayer frowned. Surely they weren’t mocking her, right? She hadn’t done anything which could be considered very amusing. And Montague must be fighting his way across the Temple...

Alexandra waited, debating in her mind if it was useful to carve a few Runes on the platform so as to increase her already sizeable advantages. There were a few tricks she wanted to keep secret for more serious opponents.

She waited and Montague didn’t come. A loud gong thundered, and the Ravenclaw Champion sighed in disappointment. Her first Runic Duel wasn’t going to happen this round, it seemed.

Then the crowd burst into laughter again. Now that her victory was assured, Alexandra walked towards the edge of the rectangular platform which was closest to the Judges...and sighed.

“You have to be kidding me...and I thought Warrington was pathetic...”

Graham Montague hadn’t been fighting his way across the Temple, contrary to what she had believed at first.

He couldn’t, since he still was on the wooden bridge...a bridge which was losing height and whose stability was ridiculously low. How was it possible to screw up something so simple when it came to Runes?

The Hetkoshu crocodiles had evidently realised a potential dinner was on its way, and the black reptilian monsters had opened their maws and were trying to best their ‘rivals’ so that they were in the best to position to ‘receive’ the free meal.

Thankfully for Montague, after a few more seconds, the arena handlers managed to stop the bridge descent and then to rise it to its former altitude.

The Slytherin Champion ran back to the starting position he had left a few minutes ago. The Venetian-European public was very vocal with its jeers and insults.

“The Judges are going to slaughter him,” Alexandra murmured before shaking her head. Oh well, it wasn’t her problem. Montague had utterly failed, but a victory was a victory.

Three more Runic Duels to go.

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Lily firmly intended to cheer when her daughter won a Duel, but given the level of the opposition, the red-haired female vampire didn’t have the motivation to do more than twitch her lips.

It wasn’t the fault of her daughter, of course. Alexandra was not to blame for the fact her opponent was a useless pureblood with delusions of grandeur. She had done everything perfectly to arrive at the Duelling Platform in time...only for Graham Montague to prove worse than her most pessimistic estimations had planned for.

“I am really going to have to speak to Severus after this Task,” Slughorn said after swallowing a few appetisers. “I understand my old House may not wish to send its best and brightest, but surely it isn’t possible to be so bad academically when you’re of age to pass your OWLs?”

“Ten minutes ago, I would have said no,” Lily answered. “Now? I think we have been given an excellent demonstration of how amazing the ‘pureblood superiority’ can be.”

According to their sources, the Slytherin teenager had sworn his wand and soul to Voldemort. If the pretender Dark Lord had any sense, he would try to disguise this connection internationally, because what had just happened wasn’t going to improve anyone’s reputation linked to this failure of a Champion.

“I don’t think anyone will deny that...” Slughorn attacked a large pastry before turning his head towards the Judges. “Ah, it looks like they didn’t need much time to deliberate.”

The boards and the enchanted scores indeed changed a second later, the numerous magical advertisements disappearing to reveal the Champion’s scores. And the sentence was implacable.

**Provisional Scores:**

**Alexandra Potter: 24 points**

**Graham Montague: 0 point**

“Not bad,” Horace Slughorn commented between two pastries, “I think they took two points for the rather brusque evocations. The Thurisaz evocation in particular was brutal...effective, but brutal.”

Lily nodded thoughtfully. There was no denying Alexandra could have been a bit more...elegant when it came to her Runic offensive. On the other hand, her daughter had certainly tried to win first and then wonder about the point repartition later. And she certainly couldn’t anticipate she would be graded only on the obstacles, because Montague failed abysmally.

“Let’s hope Alexandra will be able to show the Judges what she is capable of during her Second Duel. She’s going to fight the winner of this duel, right?”

“Right,” her former Potions teacher confirmed. “The Champion of Innocence against...ah, it’s the Beauxbatons witch who survived the Cockatrice, I believe. The former will have a lot of advantages against the poor French witch.”

Lily didn’t voice the ‘indeed’ she had on her tongue. The poor...Ambre de Courtois, yes, that was the young adult’s name, had the bad luck to face a Champion of Magic, and as if it wasn’t bad enough, da Riva knew far more than her about the Second Task, though she hadn’t been able to solve the second enigma.

“BEGIN!”

The student of the Scuola Regina immediately activated the basic bridge which was going to deploy for all Champions during the first duels...but her opponent didn’t. The French witch was singing a Runic evocation, one so complex it wasn’t over by the time Eleonora faced the ‘servants’ of Bastet.

“It is a Phoenician runic scheme, I believe.” Horace declared, visibly intrigued. “Though the purpose eludes me.”

“The girl better hurry...five minutes is a very short amount of time to succeed.”

As proven by Eleonora da Riva, who was using a sort of...was the girl trying to remove the aggressive behaviour of the Cat Hieroglyphs?

It didn’t work. The girl was talented enough to lessen the petrifying effect in time, but the stone claws struck mercilessly, and by the time the obstacle was behind her, the Champion of Innocence had minor bleeding on both arms and one leg.

And then Ambre de Courtois activated her bridge.

Lily was used to meet beings who could move fast, but when the French witch ran, she was a blur.

“Speed,” Horace voiced, a hint of appreciation in his voice, “the core of the Phoenician scheme was speed...”

It took less than forty seconds for Ambre de Courtois to clear most of the obstacles, some of them clearly not registering the presence of the French Champion as she simply moved too fast for the wards to react in time.

Like Alexandra, the brown-haired Beauxbatons Champion wasn’t in a hurry to claim the golden orb representing a clue for the Third Task.

Unlike her daughter’s opponent, Ambre’s duelling challenger arrived in time...barely. And Eleonora da Riva didn’t look good. Where the survivor of the Cockatrice fight had immaculate blue robes and breathed a bit longer than normal, the Champion of Innocence’s white clothes were in tatters on the arms, the legs, and several parts of her back. She didn’t look too exhausted, but unlike her opponent, she didn’t have the time to breathe.

The first-arrived Champion immediately began a new Phoenician evocation, and the da Riva witch imitated her.

It was a mistake, as the water of the artificial lake rose behind her, and slammed behind her back in surprise.

“Two different principles of Phoenician Runes in so little time? This French Champion is promising...”

Eleonora da Riva wasn’t yet out of the duel, of course. The Champion of Innocence materialised a massive net, which immediately imprisoned her opponent...for a few seconds before the water pouring on the platform tore it apart.

The rest of the duel was particularly one-sided. Ambre de Courtois used elemental-based Runic attacks, often carving them in the stone next to her feet, and it demolished blow after blow her Venetian opponent. Eleonora da Riva was constantly on the defensive, and her Magical Champion’s reserves were expended in four or five inadequate defences.

Ultimately, a sort of modified blue Stunning Charm immobilised her.

“The advantages weren’t enough.”

Slughorn nodded.

“It’s a good reminder I suppose, that all the Champions were selected because they showed some impressive performance during their school preliminaries...save the Slytherins of Hogwarts, of course.”

The crowd applauded Eleonora da Riva as she was escorted out of the Coliseum, likely towards the Healer’s wing, proving the popularity of the local Champion would survive her defeat. However, the loss in points was considerable.

**Provisional Scores:**

**Ambre de Courtois: 25 points**

**Eleonora da Riva: 14 points**

Fourteen points out of a possible twenty-five didn’t sound like a catastrophic score...the problem came from the fact that since Innocence lost, it was transformed into fourteen points out of one hundred. And that changed everything.

“Your daughter will need to be careful during the next Duel. This French Champion had the bad luck to fight the Cockatrice during the First Task, but she has the talent and the motivation to remove that problematic start.”

“True,” the red-haired undead Enchantress conceded, “but she will have to show something new in order to bypass all the obstacles the second time...”

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Long ago, Albus Dumbledore had spared the life of one Death Eater named Igor Karkaroff.

After being forced to tolerate the presence of the Dark Wizard for two Tasks, the Defeater of Grindelwald wondered what his younger and naive had been thinking. The Russian-born wizard had clearly not used the years to amend his ways, and his gloating was...very irritating.

The High Master of Durmstrang was using the five minutes of pause before the Duels resumed to mock one of his Champion’s lamentable performance...and adding insult to the injury, the former Death Eater was *right*.

“My Champion was clearly disadvantaged,” Albus tried, only to be immediately interrupted by Headmistress Maxime.

“My Champion,” the pride of the French giant hybrid was evident, “won her duel without having a Tournament Clue or any kind of secret information, Dumbledore.” And the woman who towered over them when she was standing had the gall to pronounce his name ‘Dumb-bell-a-door’ in an exaggerated fashion.

“Three out of four Champions showed to the Judges what was expected of them,” the Succubus, who had chosen a scandalous white robe today, said in a courteous voice, “the fourth...I am almost tempted to pay the financial penalty so that he is removed from the Tournament. Almost.”

Dumbledore gritted his teeth, all the while trying to mask it behind a serene smile. He didn’t know if he was successful.

Damn Graham Montague. The boy had known the Second Task was Runes-related; that was about the only thing every Champion, first-selected or replacement, was reasonably confident about. Would it have killed him to study assiduously Runes before this Task?

Warrington had perished during the First Task, but his performance had not been that ridiculous compared to the one of his successor. Today there was no other word but humiliation to describe the ‘bridge disaster’ the Slytherin Champion had ‘presented’ to the next best thing to seventy thousand spectators.

Much as he wanted to not think about it, Albus knew that after this kind of horrible grade – the first zero of the day, and one received in spite of being alive – this kind of fiasco could only be cleansed by a Task victory. Anything else was going to make countless newspapers cheer about the decadence of the British Isles.

“Don’t bother, Headmistress Sforza,” Karkaroff grinned. “Talentless as he is, this joke a Champion will die during the Third Task. Surviving today was only delaying the inevitable...but now we can see if he was the exception or the rule.”

The silver-bearded Headmaster chose not to react to this barely-veiled insult.

Instead the old Defeater of Grindelwald watched as young Geoffrey Hooper bowed before the Judges before taking position before the Runic-carved stone allowing the Champions to materialise the wooden bridge of dubious quality.

And Albus tried not to show his concern.

If the Gryffindor’s opponent had been the Black Witch of Death, it wouldn’t have been so problematic. Geoffrey had apparently no feud with her, and though he couldn’t dismiss major injuries out of hand, the Hogwarts Headmaster didn’t think the Ravenclaw murderess would go for the kill against him like she clearly intended to do so against Montague before he failed to get across the bridge. Eleonora da Riva, Henri de Condé, Cedric Diggory, and a few others would not kill for the sake of it too.

But the other Black Witches and Wizards present had no reason to hide their monstrous nature, and aside from Karkaroff’s ‘prized sociopathic student’, there was none more bloodthirsty than Romeo Malatesti, Dark Champion of War.

And Fate had decided Geoffrey Hooper would face him immediately.

“BEGIN!”

It was a minor relief to see the young man cast some Runes and activate the bridge within a few seconds. It was less so to hear from Judge Varga that Geoffrey was going to take a penalty for imitating word for word the evocation of James Potter’s spawn.

But Geoffrey was across the bridge, and though the adventure above the lake was far less gracious than other Champions had done before him, the obstacle was soon behind him.

A couple of seconds, Malatesti completed the crossing, his bridge transformed into some sort of cursed metal.

And then the Venetian stopped, while the Gryffindor Champion threw fire balls at the Cats animated by Hieroglyph magic.

“What is your Champion doing, Headmistress?” Maxime asked. “He’s losing precious seconds, and I don’t think this is Phoenician Magic to grant him the speed of a feline predator.”

“I think it’s some kind of...animal-transformation array,” Angelica Sforza placed briefly a modified form of binoculars on her eyes, before shaking her head. “No, there are some Runes which have nothing to do inside it.”

Albus was partially worried...but as the seconds became a minute, Geoffrey was close to the final stairs allowing him to access the Duelling platform, and there was no way the Black Wizard could catch up with him anymore. In fact, even if Romeo Malatesti began running now, it would be extremely difficult to reach the summit of the Temple before the five minutes were out.

“Ah, your Champion has stopped carving! I think-“

“**SOBEK**!”

The name of the Egyptian God was screamed, but it wasn’t the reason Albus Dumbledore and tens of thousands of spectators shivered.

What was the Black Wizard doing? He was the Champion of Ares, not Sobek!

“**I CALL YOU! SOBEK! SLAYER OF APOPHIS! LORD OF CROCODIPOLIS! GENERAL OF MILITARY PROWESS**!”

This was no French, Italian, or English language...it was nothing spoken on the British Isles or the continent...but Dumbledore understood him. And, he was sure, so were the tens of thousands of spectators watching the Task.

One of the enormous black crocodiles was levitated from the lake and thrown into the array.

“**GIVE ME YOUR STRENGTH AND I WILL BUILD YOU A TEMPLE, BATHED BY THE SACRED WATERS OF THIS VALLEY**!”

Someone shouted ‘stop him!’. Albus realised after a few seconds it was him.

“This isn’t against the rules, Headmaster Dumbledore.”

“Whatever he is doing-“

“He is calling for the Aspect of a Power which isn’t his,” The Succubus declared.

Something awful turned its eye towards Romeo Malatesti and the writhing crocodile.

Then the crocodile began to grow.

It was no mere temporary magical increase of size.

It was...evil.

The crocodile grew, and its eyes began to burn in a red fire which was absolutely not something the Hetkoshu species could do.

The paws of the crocodile melted the stone where the black scales entered contact with it. From the maw of this abomination, drops of purple poison fell.

Romeo Malatesti jumped on the crocodile, and the monster began to *climb the walls of the Task’s temple*!

Yes, somehow, the thing which had been a crocodile was climbing walls a human would have a lot of difficulty to, even with magic!

Geoffrey Hooper had thus no warning on the platform before the infernal duo of Black Wizard and transformed crocodile arrived.

Much like everyone sane, the young Gryffindor flinched and was silent.

The baleful influence grew stronger. Animalistic roars mounted from the crowd, many men and women chanting a single word.

“WAR! WAR!”

“**I OFFER THIS SACRIFICE TO SOBEK**!” the psychopath empowered by the Dark Powers shouted in delight.

“Thurisaz, Ur, and Dagaz, Lightning and the Day!” Geoffrey screamed. “Bull of Lightning, smite down this enemy of darkness!”

The Galdr was too short and not prepared enough. The magical construct which appeared was insufficiently powerful, but when it struck, the reptilian abomination screeched and went insane, forcing the Champion of War on an insane ride...a ride he lost, as the Dark creature threw him off his back.

The monster empowered by the darkness then charged Geoffrey Hooper, and many voices screamed in horror as the jaws of death closed on the Gryffindor Champion’s arm...and severed it from his body before it was swallowed in a second.

Geoffrey fell on the stairs he had used to reach the arena platform, screaming in agony.

The enormous distorted reptile appeared ready to follow in order to feast upon him...and then unexplainably, it stopped.

There was a minor earthquake, and the Dark...it faded.

Albus grimaced internally. The Exchequer had activated its Second Seal.

What an irony. If it had not happened, his Champion would have likely perished. As it was...the abomination began to fall apart.

“**Remember your promise, son of War**.” The voice came from everywhere and nowhere.

And then what had been a crocodile exploded into a geyser of black blood.

“Victor of the Duel: Romeo Malatesti,” the female Hungarian Judge announced, before urging the Healers to give their best healing assistance to the Champion of Hogwarts.

As for the Black Wizard...he stood, but he was clearly bleeding, from his mouth and from his nose.

It appeared that his devilry had cost him dearly...but not dearly enough so that the Judges declared a draw.

“And one fewer Champion for Hogwarts,” Karkaroff commented once his fear and his surprise were not so evident anymore.

“At least I can say my students are not blackening their souls learning incantations of murder and corruption like this one!” The Defeater of Grindelwald snapped back.

“In this Tournament, there are only the defeated and the winners, Dumbledore,” the High Master of Durmstrang sneered. “If you haven’t understood this fact, perhaps you need to find a replacement...”

Unfortunately, after the Judges debated, it was obvious they agreed far more with the ex-Death Eater than him.

**Provisional Scores:**

**Romeo Malatesti: 20 points**

**Geoffrey Hooper: 10 points**

And of course, Hogwarts had lost another Champion, because if the loss of an arm wasn’t a debilitating injury, nothing would be...

**3 December 1994, Sumatra, Indonesia**

The Army of Light mages aware of the citadel’s existence believed it was impregnable.

To be fair, there had not been given many reasons to doubt.

Built on a site where five Ley Lines coalesced into one, it was protected by a three centuries-old warding array with seven walls, and there was so much redundancy in the plan that even in siege conditions and all the other priorities a garrison force would have, the Light wizards and witches would be able to power over ten thousand enchanted armours and various magical constructs as military support.

This was a fortress which had broken thirteen massive offensives of the Exchequer, and no force of the Dark had managed to get further than the second wall.

Even as the Exchequer expanded its influence over Indonesia and avenged past defeats, the citadel stood undaunted. Lesser towers, secret caches, and mortal agents may fall, but this redoubt was intact, its protections the symbol of the Dark’s inability to expel the Light when the descendants of the Knights of the Round Table decided lands were theirs and wouldn’t be abandoned under any pretext.

It was a nice reassurance for those aware of the fortress’ existence, for behind the seven walls and the uncountable lethal artefacts ready to be unleashed on any attacker, the Army of Light guarded something arguably more dangerous than Excalibur.

Indeed, somewhere behind the seventh wall, there was a room which figured on no plan. It was an extraordinarily secure vault illuminated and sanctified to have no shadows. And protected by seven deadly Light protections, the artefact which had created the plague Ra had used to strike down his Apprentice Alexander awaited.

It had not been used in centuries. Ra himself was unsure if his brother truly knew which artefact was hidden here or it was simply the obliteration of the citadel itself which was his chief goal.

But the Exchequer had utterly failed in breaking the defences, and in there weren’t many castles which could boast that. In fact, this reputation had led several Light practitioners to send their treasures there, confident the Knights of the Exchequer would never be able to seize them.

But ‘never’ was an absolute which rarely lasted the eternity its most vocal supporters desired.

And the men and women now sworn to Ra should have felt worried by the realisation the Exchequer had not launched a serious attack in more than fifty years.

Would it have changed anything?

Maybe, maybe not.

Unlike the First Seal which had returned the Styx Viper into existence, this small pyramid wasn’t hidden under non-magical buildings and several archaeological ruins.

It was twenty kilometres away, at the bottom of the Indian Ocean.

The Seal had not been supposed to be activated in second, but the Exchequer was going to adapt very quickly.

And in this case, there was no fear the Statute of Secrecy was going to be the topic of the day.

After all, who would think a thirty metres-tall wave could be engineered by mere humans?

Romeo Malatesti, by his reckless summoning of a tiny amount of Sobek’s power, had triggered an earthquake of a magnitude of 8.9. But it was the terrifying tsunami which was created by this detonation which would claim hundreds of thousands of lives.

The citadel of the Army of Light didn’t stop the tsunami. The defences were extremely resistant, but they were designed to resist magical assaults, and the numerous Exchequer assaults had led the permanent garrison to pour thousands of hours in various fields of magic.

But the tsunami itself, for all its tenebrous and bloody origin, wasn’t magical.

The first wall was annihilated by the unstoppable wave, so thoroughly certain stones of it would be found hundreds of kilometres away. The sixth others fared better, but ‘better’ in that case was hardly enough.

There was no miraculous counter-move to be thrown at the tsunami. Even if Ra had been there, he couldn’t have stopped the gigantic wave to destroy the citadel.

By the time the sun would rise again over a spectacle of devastation and death, there was no one alive in the supposedly ‘impregnable’ fortress.

**3 December 1994, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

Susan had observed Alexandra long enough to know her girlfriend was absolutely furious.

“So...” the green-eyed Ravenclaw muttered in a tone which was not at all conciliating, “it appears it is possible for the Champion of a Power to call for another Aspect rather than the one they are sworn to and survive.”

“Survive is exactly the right word,” the red-haired Hufflepuff student replied. “The Champion of War didn’t look so well after his stunt.”

The wizards and witches in charge of the arena had insisted to put him on a hovering stretcher, in other words. His face was so pale he could have tried to pass as a vampire...except he was losing a lot of blood.

“He will recover.” Her girlfriend had visibly no doubt about this outcome. “Champions of Magic have extremely fast regeneration abilities.”

“Yes,” Susan agreed, before asking the important question, “but will it be fast enough to recover in time for his second duel?”

“He better pray not to recover in time,” Alexandra articulated each word coldly, as was the norm when she was in this kind of mood. “Because if I am to fight him for my third duel, I am going to kill him, whatever Aspect he will try to call openly.”

Susan raised an eyebrow.

“I didn’t think Geoffrey Hooper was your friend to merit such a vengeful promise.”

“He isn’t.”

The Heiress of Bones looked at her girlfriend, her expression turned into a silent question.

“This isn’t about Geoffrey Hooper, Susan. It was never about this Gryffindor. This idiot of Malatesti was never in control of the Runic ritual he unleashed. Since Geoffrey’s weak attack was sufficient to break the influence he had over this mutated saurian, it’s rather logical to say that sooner or later the influence of War would have spread beyond the wards. If it hadn’t triggered the trap of the Exchequer, both Malatesti and Hooper would be dead, and we would have an enormous scaly problem on our hands.”

“It is possible it wouldn’t have been that bad,” Morag MacDougal intervened.

Alexandra looked at her Ravenclaw friend like she had suddenly grown a second head.

“Morag...Malatesti,” the name was uttered on the tone of ‘that complete moron’ she usually reserved for Crabbe and Goyle and a few Slytherins, “is an imbecile. Calling a Power is a very, very exhausting process, even if you are the Champion and the Aspect’s relationship is excellent. At the risk of saying the obvious, Geoffrey wasn’t powerful enough to warrant half of the magic expended. A True Champion...most of the True Champions at least...could have crushed the Champion of House Gryffindor in less than a minute. As it is, Malatesti was so busy preparing for the ritual that he lost the Tournament Clue of the first duel while there was no reason to.”

Susan admitted her girlfriend had made a lot of good points. She might have missed a few points, but Alexandra was right: no matter the perspective one thought of, what the Champion of Ares had just done was reckless, inefficient in the extreme, illogical, exhausting, and a few other bad adjectives she would certainly add in a few minutes.

And this led her to the idea...

“You wounded his pride, with your history of ‘wrestling with crocodiles’...”

“Isn’t it more accurate to say she got under his scales?” Alexandra and Susan groaned in unity as Morag made her horrible pun.

The moment of hilarity ended, and Susan took this opportunity to kiss her on the lips...she had a good excuse, there weren’t any Runes painted there.

“This isn’t good for Hogwarts, though.” Hermione spoke as she began taking notes again. The Judges were announcing the names of the next Champions who were going to fight in the arena, namely the half-naked Succubus and the Finnish replacement of Durmstrang, since his predecessor had been torn apart by the enraged Cockatrice.

“You’re preaching a believer, Hermione,” Alexandra said sarcastically. “The Gryffindor Champion has lost an arm, and will certainly miss the rest of the Tournament. The Slytherin Champion has proved useless. Let’s hope Cedric Diggory wins his first duel, because otherwise I have a feeling the newspapers articles aren’t going to be very complimentary for our fair school.”

“I’m sorry, Alex,” Nigel spoke, “but after how ridiculous Montague was, the comments aren’t going to be complimentary whatever Diggory and you do in the next duels...”

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With each duel, the idea that Graham Montague was unworthy as a Champion was gaining strength. He was, after all, the only Champion so far to not have reached the rectangular platform where the Champions duelled.

And for the fourth duel, it was the same scenario. The Durmstrang boy used quantity of time-delayed Norse Runes to bypass the obstacles, while the Sforza Succubus turned the stone and Runic defences against each other.

By Fate and Merlin, this Champion was beautiful...and extraordinarily dangerous, as, much like Potter before her, she didn’t bother really using her dagger before taking the clue and waiting for her opponent to duel.

It was a one-sided beating. Neville had been told many times that the Norse Runes and their casters had a massive advantage when it came to offensive evocations and the like, but the authors who wrote that in their books hadn’t seen the currently blonde-haired female Champion humiliate Boris Viipuri.

When it ended, the Durmstrang Champion had several severe burns, a drugged expression in his eyes and on his lips, several pieces of his own clothes were changed into his own restraints, and his dagger had been thrown into the lake filled with giant crocodiles.

Victory was total for the Succubus...and the previous duel appeared less and less as a mistake and more as the vainglorious attempt of Romeo Malatesti to prove he was in complete control of the Second Task.

**Provisional Scores:**

**Lucrezia Sforza: 25 points**

**Boris Viipuri: 9 points**

“Are you okay, Neville?”

“That’s a stupid question, Ron.”

The moment this duel was over, Neville had nothing to distract himself from the idea that barring the miracle, he was the Gryffindor Champion now.

Geoffrey had just lost an arm, and even assuming the hyper-competent healers of the Scuola Regina were able to regrow it entirely, the Dark Champion had used seriously evil magic here to create the monster which had mangled him. If Geoffrey was allowed to leave the hospital this month, it would already be awesome...but the older Gryffindor wasn’t going to be healthy enough to participate in the Third Task.

And so, the sensation of being completely outclassed by the Black Witches and Wizards participating in the Tournament was more oppressing than ever.

“Sorry, Neville, I just-“

“We’re all worried for Geoffrey...and I don’t want to speak about it.”

Another duel began. This fight was between Giovanni Ruspoli of the Scuola Regina and Lucas Gauthier of Beauxbatons.

Despite having proven several times wrong today, the Boy-Who-Lived hoped those two were more typical of what the two foreign schools had to offer in terms of experienced wizards.

Besides, this Giovanni Ruspoli didn’t like very dangerous. The Venetian boy was very thin, almost fragile-looking, as if the next powerful gust of wind was going to make sure he broke in two. Compared to the constantly bloodthirsty Malatesti or the lustful Sforza, the replacement of the Champion Alexandra Potter had crushed under a Leviathan looked...very scholarly. The teenage boy wore glasses, the only local student Neville had noticed doing so, and when it was time to begin, Giovanni had to be reminded that the book in his hands was not on the list of authorised items.

Five seconds later, the Venetian teenager conjured a bridge of solid flames, and Neville realised the proverb ‘thou shall not judge a book by its cover’ applied here.

The obstacles were incinerated one after another. The thin boy was fond of blue flames, and they were his answer to everything. And the worst part was that according to the female Judge, it was all very basic Elder Futhark but used in several fire combinations.

On the other side, Lucas Gauthier of Beauxbatons was progressing far more slowly. The French boy was using Elder Futhark too, but it was clear Runes weren’t his best class. The stone cats inflicted the curse on the hand who didn’t wield his dagger, and one arrow caught him in his left leg. Gauthier reached the platform with only ten seconds left, and Giovanni Ruspoli immediately conjured a sort of fire orb...the size of a Hippogriff.

It took fifteen seconds for the Judges to stop the match, and the Beauxbatons Champion was going to have ugly burns for the next days.

“Here’s one who knows what ‘kill it with fire’ means...” Leo snarked.

“Yeah, and this pyromaniac is going to duel the winner of the next duel...maybe Diggory...” Neville reminded him.

“Not good,” Angelina Johnson shook her head.

“My dear Angelina,” one of the Weasley Twins suavely spoke, “it is far better than the alternatives.”

“What my ugly brother wants to say is that there were a few Champions to avoid at all costs, and Diggory did. It’s better to fight Giovanni Ruspoli than the Dark Queen herself...”

**Provisional Scores:**

**Giovanni Ruspoli: 20 points**

**Lucas Gauthier: 7 points**

“It looks like the Judges weren’t very impressed with a repetition of fire Runes. And now here comes...”

“CEDRIC!” The Hufflepuff students who had come today to support their Champion, successfully beating the ruckus the Ravenclaws had made for Potter. “CEDRIC! CEDRIC DIGGORY FOR THE BADGERS!”

Neville stopped trying to speak after that; there was no point, the Hufflepuff cohort was simply too loud.

Cedric conjured quickly the bridge, using some Runic Galdr which was a bit slower than his opponent, but turned the bridge into a more solid structure of black wood. The aggressive cats were trapped into prisons of ivy and other nasty plants, and the arrows were slowed down by a loud evocation of Perthro.

But as fast as Cedric was, the Beauxbatons boy he was fighting was not far behind, and while Cedric arrived first to touch the golden orb, for the first time two Champions arrived extremely close to each other, the two having cleared the Temple in around four minutes.

Neville didn’t know enough about Runes to acknowledge the difficulty of what the two Champions did, but it was Elder Futhark against Elder Futhark again, but this time Cedric used the Runes to summon different magical constructs like birds, badgers, and tigers, while his opponent tried one-directional curses.

It was rather slow-going, though each attack and counter-attack was rather powerful. In the end, the French boy made a mistake and forgot several birds which were behind him. When their talons lacerated his back, Cedric’s opponent collapsed.

A second after, it was the apocalypse in the Hufflepuff ranks, and Neville thought he was going to become deaf.

“CEDRIC!” Thunderous applause and enormous cheering followed. “CEDRIC! CEDRIC AND HUFFLEPUFF! TOGETHER WE ARE BADGERS!”

To most of the Gryffindor’s horrors, plenty of Venetian students were joining the crowd’s celebrations second after second...

It took over ten minutes to calm them, and the Judges had to ask first for some calm as they announced the scores.

**Provisional Scores:**

**Cedric Diggory: 21 points**

**Armand Coularé de Lafontaine: 12 points**

“Krum is going to win the next one,” Ron affirmed.

“Careful little brother,” Fred said – unless it was George, of course, “your crush is showing!”

“I think he’s right,” Katie Bell interrupted the Twin Terrors before they could tease their poor brother far more than they already had, “Krum looks like he was prepared and-“

The Durmstrang Champion chose this moment to conjure the biggest flying broom in existence...or was it bridge-broom?

“Okay, now that’s...err...isn’t it against the rules?”

Krum couldn’t manoeuvre very well this massive thing, but in twenty seconds top, he was on the duelling platform. At the opposite end of the stadium, Henri de Condé, the French Champion of Horus looked completely gob-smacked by what the Bulgarian Seeker had done, and for good reason.

The Light Champion conjured a bridge of his own and began the Temple obstacle course with his usual seriousness, but Neville couldn’t help but think there was a measure of desperation in his rush towards the upper Temple.

And of course Krum was carving Runes like a madman, profiting from his unprecedented gains to stack the duel in favour before the first incantation was spoken.

The moment the French pureblood arrived, he was bombarded by a rain of curses, some feeling like very powerful Dark magic.

“It appears,” George or Fred commented, “Krum hasn’t spent his time at school learning only broom-related things.”

Henri did his best. But Krum had the initiative, and didn’t relinquish until the other Champion was to his knees and immobilised by over twenty different curses.

“KRUM!” Ron shouted in approval, and he wasn’t the only one. In a chorus, the Coliseum sang like it was the Quidditch World Cup again.

“KRUM! KRUM! KRUM! KRUM!”

**Provisional Scores:**

**Viktor Krum: 25 points**

**Henri de Condé: 14 points**

Judge Varga informed the stadium and the Coliseum a few seconds after that the Champions had to go through the Temple and clear the obstacles *before* reaching the duelling platform.

It didn’t reassure Neville at all, and some anxious part of his mind whispered to him that now, the Light Champions were all eliminated, meaning the clue Geoffrey had successfully grabbed before losing was certainly their best hope to avoid an humiliation for the Third Task.

All of this faded into irrelevance as the Judges called for the last two Champions who had not yet fought their Duels.

“Great,” Leo coughed, “here comes the psychopath of Durmstrang...and her next victim.”

It said quite something about the Black Witch sworn to Chaos that no spectator in the vicinity replied to his brutal assertion.

Lyudmila Romanov immediately conjured a bridge made of shadows and darkness.

Unlike all the other Champions, she didn’t touch the Rune-carved stone near her starting position, and she didn’t run on the bridge either, it was like...it was like the shadows carried her.

Once her feet touched the stone floor of the Egyptian Temple, the slaughter began.

The four metre-tall statue was pulverised, the smaller cats were ground to dust, and everything which could be more or less considered a threat was blasted apart, consumed by darkness, or disappeared by spells it was better not to wonder what they consisted of.

It was only when this...this Dark Queen arrived on the platform that Neville turned to see what the other Durmstrang Champion was doing...and it could be summed-up in one word: fleeing.

Unlike Warrington, Karl Schumacher had been able to conjure a bridge. It had taken him more time than anyone save Montague, but he had done it. His fight against the stone cats wasn’t glorious; it was long and he was wounded several times. But the moment he had emerged victorious, it was to see Lyudmila Romanov take the clue and waiting for him, some thirty or forty metres above his current position.

And so the German Champion did what no Champion had done so far: he fled.

“TURN AROUND COWARD!” The voice of the Dark Queen resonated fiercely given that the Coliseum had fallen silent. “TURN AROUND SCHUMACHER AND COME HERE TO RECEIVE YOUR LESSON IN DUELLING OR I WILL MAKE SURE YOU REGRET IT!”

If anything, this convinced Karl Schumacher to run faster towards the bridge and salvation.

He was walking on the first plank of the very instable assemblage of wood and ropes when the Dark Queen growled inhumanly.

“So be it. You are a coward, and you will die like one. MUSPELLHEIM!”

A Rune Neville had never seen before in his life blazed into existence above the Temple, and in a second it generated an inferno of crimson and black flames.

In the blink of an eye, a true cascade of...it looked like lava, but Neville was quite sure it was nasty magic which was going to create more terrible consequences...and it was fast.

The German Champion was in the middle of the bridge when the ‘lava cascade’ began to devour it.

It was horrific.

Lyudmila Romanov, for all her abominable skills, had nearly missed her target; ‘only’ the left part of her enemy was badly burned by the attack. But as Karl Schumacher screamed and begged for the pain to stop, three-quarters of the bridge burned and it was already not a marvel of architecture like the Hogwarts’ stairs were.

Everything fell apart, precipitating the unfortunate Durmstrang Champion into the waters below.

Three Hetkoshu crocodiles opened their maws, and Neville closed his eyes.

When he reopened them, there was only a crimson mark left in the black waters, and crocodiles fighting each other.

“How did even Potter hurt her during the First Task?” He heard himself whispering. “Monster...”

“And Krum is against her next...” Ron was pale and shaking...but then the Champion of Fate acknowledged they were certainly all in shock.

It was the first death of the day, and they all knew it could have been anyone unfortunate enough to draw the Russian Black Witch first.

“Maybe the Judges will disqualify her...” Leo tried.

“Don’t be ridiculous, little brother.”

And Fred – or George – was right.

**Provisional Scores:**

**Lyudmila Romanov: 25 points**

**Karl Schumacher: 0 point**

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Had Osiris chosen this moment to attack him, it was entirely possible Ra wouldn’t have been able to defend himself.

“What did you say?”

“Lord Archmage...Sumatra has just been on the receiving end of a tsunami the likes we have never seen before and-“

“The citadel,” the most powerful wizard of the Light to ever be born felt as if the ground was opening beneath his feet. “They triggered a tsunami so that our magical defences would be powerless against them...how...how significant is the damage?”

“Lord Archmage...as far as we can tell...the entire citadel has been devastated. All the fortifications and the wards are gone.”

This was so bad there were no words in any language to properly describe the size of the disaster.

“Give the order to the three best strike teams of Asia we have available to join me on the Observatory. This outpost should still be intact.”

“Yes, Lord Archmage! Err...you mean you intend to-“

“I leave immediately for Sumatra, yes.”

“But Lord Archmage...if there is another Seal triggered in your absence...”

“Oh, I sincerely doubt there will be another Seal activated today.” Ra glared in direction of the lodge where the presence of the Master of the Exchequer waited, eminently recognisable. “Our enemies will all be too busy congratulate themselves for the next hours.”

“The Champions of the Dark?”

“Analyse their weaknesses, but don’t attempt an assassination right now.”

Someone should have drowned the daughter of the Tsar before she was ten, but it had not happened. Ra would have to take care of the elimination of this Chaos vermin when he was back; it wouldn’t be the first Champion of Loki he’s killed with his magic, and the Light willing, it wouldn’t be the last.

“You will regret this, Osiris, I swear it on the feathers of all the Phoenixes in existence.”

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“The Archmage is leaving the Coliseum, your Majesty.”

“**Thank you for the information, Knight Herald. Ra is getting predictable in his old age, it seems**.”

It was that or the sheer scale of the blow they had just inflicted upon the Army of Light had temporarily removed the prudence from his brother’s skull.

Really, what could a powerful wizard, even one as gifted and experienced as Ra, do in such a situation?

The artefacts the Light had hidden in their Sumatra bastion were now either under several metres of mud and water, or under massive quantities of debris, one not excluding the other. Assuming the Knights of the Round Table had some measure of competence in their entire organisation, the artefacts couldn’t be summoned by wand or any existing focus. They would also be extremely difficult to locate.

Digging and searching could be done the magical way, obviously, but it would take a lot of wizards in the know to distinguish what was a pile or garbage and what was a container filled with millennia-old relics.

“In all honesty, your Majesty...I would have preferred the plague artefact was destroyed by the activation of the Seal. A Tsunami is all very efficient at breaking their defences, but the contents of the most secure vaults certainly survived.”

“**It’s true War is not the most...efficient Power when it comes to make certain something is destroyed**.” The King agreed with his subordinate. “**And since we can be honest here, I don’t know why our young ‘ally’ the Champion of Ares decided it was time to do something so blatantly stupid. The Greek God of War is a jealous Aspect. If there hadn’t been blood from the start, Romeo Malatesti would have died screaming**.”

And when a Power decided His Champion had done something which broke the link existing between the mortal and the deity, the sentence was always the same: death. And not a quick or painless one. The enraged divine party tore apart the soul and magic of the guilty servant, before devouring what it wanted and throwing the scraps to Death, where eternal torment awaited.

No one, no Avatar, could protect you if the irate Power decided punishment was the order of the day.

“Do you want me to go to the infirmary wing and-“

“No. This course of action was almost suicidal, but Romeo Malatesti’s...deed has its use.”

“The tsunami is certainly going to be spectacular, and will nicely hide our plans.”

“**Not just the tsunami, my Knight. The Seal was triggered by War. That it was Sobek who was called and not Ares doesn’t make any difference in that regard. Wherever the wave strikes, once the water recedes, the hearts and the souls of the populations will be prompt to burn in hatred. There will be hatred for the incompetence of their governments, anger for the scientists who failed to warn them in time, and many other more violent emotions**.”

Ra had not realised it, but a great deal of the former East Indies has just been lost to the Exchequer. All Osiris had to do was to wait and pick the fruit.

Ra would spend a lot of time trying to find a secure hideout for his artefacts, including the plague-inducing one. But the Exchequer had gained much experience into finding and destroying them, and with their ever-dwindling resources, the Light couldn’t rebuild even a pale copy of what had been destroyed.

Thus when the time was right, he would seize the artefact and throw it in the nearest volcano with due celerity.

What point was there trying to impose his vision upon the world if everyone was dead?

“**Please keep one eye on the Champion of Loki, Knight Herald. Her first opponent trying to flee has not been able to satiate her battle-lust. She is certainly going to try something...annoying**.”

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There had not been supposed to be fifteen minutes of no-duel after the first round, but the ward-masters had decided to reinforce the wards protecting the public after Romanov sent her fellow Champion to hell.

Or to be accurate, they had reinforced the wards and modified the layout of the temple. Now instead of cat statues, there were enormous representations of Anubis, Egyptian God of the Dead.

But now the interlude was over, and it was her turn to fight.

“Good luck! And don’t underestimate your opponent.”

Alexandra huffed after hearing Morag’s show of support.

“Believe me, underestimating her is something I have no intention to do.”

The Champion of the Morrigan wasn’t ashamed to admit that if she had been allowed to place bets on a duel outcome, her choice wouldn’t have been on Ambre de Courtois before her confrontation with Eleonora da Riva.

Morale of the tale: Champions of Magic were many things, but they weren’t invincible.

And the Runic skills of the Champion of Innocence were simply too weak to stand up against the French Champion.

So no, Alexandra had no intention to see her opponent as a warm-up before the real fights. If she thought that way, elimination was on the menu in the next minutes.

The question was what to do in order to avoid this fate.

If the French girl had another Runic Galdr which increased her speed to incredible levels, Alexandra had to use something which would allow her to equal her impressive celerity. But even a Hydra Animagus couldn’t read that fast...

Alexandra glanced at the lake on her right while she walked, where several Hetkoshu crocodiles had decided to use the bridge ruined by Romanov for their Sunday bathing. The reptiles weren’t affected too much by Malatesti’s call of Sobek, but they were nonetheless very dangerous. Karl Schumacher would have vouched for it, if she had not seen his soul depart for another plane of existence.

But as she looked at the bridge, Alexandra suddenly had an idea. The cursed fires of Chaos had killed a Champion, but the antithesis of fire was ice. And ice could build a lot of things...

It wasn’t without drawbacks. The temperature inside the Coliseum was typical of an Egyptian spring, so that the crocodiles weren’t inconvenienced and creating ice was going to cost her a lot of magic.

But Alexandra had the runes and the power.

And it wouldn’t do her any good to keep most of her power in reserve if she was eliminated against her second opponent.

The moment the Potter Heiress heard ‘BEGIN’, she started her incantation.

“By the power of the murmurs of the blizzards, the frozen peaks of the mountains, the wrath of winter, Izaz before, Izaz behind, Izaz to my right, Izaz to my left, Izaz below, Izaz above, Izaz at the core, I usher a new era of cold, drown this world into a new ice age! JOTUNHEIM!”

The ice-based Lokk was naturally imperfect. It was using Elder Futhark instead of Norse Runes, therefore wasting a lot of power. But Alexandra hadn’t learned more than the basics about the Ancient Runes of the Scandinavians, and a Tournament Task wasn’t the place to experiment.

Anyway, it worked.

In two seconds, she had a gigantic ice bridge.

But she didn’t stop there.

The Izaz Lokk was both a travelling boon, a shield, and a weapon.

Let the arena and its Egyptian temple be drowned in ice.

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Ambre was nervous.

She wasn’t as worried as she would have been if the opponent was the Dark Queen of Durmstrang, but the duellist she was supposed to beat was no joke. This was the girl who had killed a Champion by crushing him under a Leviathan and wounded the Dark Queen. Thankfully from everything they had been able to observe during the last month, the British girl was far more emotionally stable than the Russian monster.

It didn’t mean she was going to be an easy opponent. Arriving first on the duelling platform was absolutely necessary.

Ambre began to prepare the Phoenician incantation of lightning that would grant her these seconds of superiority...and suddenly shivered.

The arena was suddenly far colder.

And then the opposite of the arena exploded in ice.

There was suddenly an enormous arch-bridge over the lake-obstacle, and as the crocodiles plunged to avoid the ice spikes forming, Ambre saw the ice was spreading...pretty much everywhere.

The structure of the temple was coated in frost. Damn it, she had no choice but to run now!

Walking over a bridge while a powerful cold wind of snow and ice raged was difficult enough. Fortunately, the obstacles waiting afterwards were all frozen, unable to activate.

Ambre wasn’t reassured in the least by that. If they were frozen on her side, then the defences of the temple were in a worse taste for her opponent.

When she passed by the hourglass held by a statue, the grains were unable to descend, as the enchanted item had been frozen by the extensive large-scaled runic attack.

And of course, she arrived second, the British girl had already grabbed the Tournament Clue.

Looking at the determined green eyes, and the dagger shrouded in magic, Ambre de Courtois was not happy about her chances.

This duel was going to suck.

But she was an expert of Phoenician Runes, and she had her pride. A girl three years younger than she was going to have to show some impressive stuff if she wanted to beat her!

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Alexandra was happy to not have underestimated her opponent. Even with the ice slowing down the French Champion, she had reached the top of the temple in three minutes, and no ice stalagmites or other Izaz-generated attack had been able to scratch her.

The moment Ambre de Courtois arrived, Alexandra released her hold upon the Izaz Lokk and attacked again.

She would have preferred to keep this Hieroglyph curse in reserve for the Dark Champions, but circumstances forced her hand.

“I bow to the will of Maat, and accept the price to pay for working Peh Remu. I am Hekait, and I stand over Hesi. Protected by Mequer-t, curse the fortune of my opponent, bind her to the winds of misfortune, let no Sa parry my bow! ANKH!”

Alexandra had only tried three times the Curse of the Pyramid’s Fall. Each time it had been magically exhausting, and the fourth time proved to be no exception.

A ray of intertwined gold and black magic shone in her hands before striking the Champion of Beauxbatons.

Ambre de Courtois took several steps back...but blinked in surprise as she saw she was still standing.

“You screwed up something, apparently,” the older girl remarked in French, before carving a Phoenician Rune on the platform, which promptly shone blue as an incantation was muttered.

“TA-“

Her opponent was suddenly caught into a miniature tempest, just as two ice cubes struck her in the back.

A moment later, Ambre’s own evocation blew up in her face.

Fortunately for Ambre de Courtois, the Runic incantation was not fully empowered; she would survive with only minor wounds.

But she was now lying on her back, stunned by the explosion and how everything had been undone in mere seconds.

“How?” The brown-haired girl managed to ask.

Alexandra considered not answering, but then it wasn’t like she was going to be able to use this attack against future opponents.

“I cursed you with the Pyramid’s Fall. It is one of the most powerful Runic Misfortune Curses the Egyptians ever invented.” Well, one of the most powerful she was ready to use on someone she didn’t want to kill. The Pyramid’s Fall was already a nasty thing if you didn’t utter the counter-curse after a couple of minutes.

The magical effect was simple: everything that could turn wrong for you, would.

Like it had just done for the Champion of Beauxbatons.

“Surrender.” Alexandra didn’t bother saying more, playing with the athame in her hand.

“I...fine, I surrender.”

Immediately, Alexandra whispered the counter-curse...before wincing as the strain of the ice-based attack and the Egyptian cursed truly emptied her lungs of air momentarily.

Ouch, in hindsight, two big attacks like those in such a short time were going to be a problem for later duels...

The thunderous applause from the crowd stopped her from continuing these thoughts.

And the Weasley Twins firing multiple fireworks proclaiming ‘BEST PRANK OF THE TOURNAMENT’ brought a tired smile on her lips.

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**Provisional Scores:**

**Alexandra Potter: 49 points**

**Ambre de Courtois: 39 points**

“POTTER MINISTER! RAVENCLAW FOREVER!”

Artemis Cassius gave an amused expression as the section of the stadium where the supporters of Ravenclaw House were seated celebrated the new victory of ‘their’ Champion.

To be fair, it was an impressive victory.

The Egyptian theme of the arena looked very strange now, as snow and ice covered the statues and the temple in a white and blue mantle. The winter atmosphere had invited itself, and as fireworks burst in the sky, there were only the chariots filled with presents missing.

“She has talent,” the High Sentinel of the Soul Drinkers acknowledged out loud. “Her victory in the First Task was certainly no accident.”

Artemis certainly didn’t regret buying a ticket for one of the expensive lodges the Scuola Regina proposed to the clients in measure to afford their expensive amenities. It wasn’t strictly necessary for her; with a Daylight ring on one of her finger, the elderly vampire could have taken a seat in the middle of the crowd, but she liked her privacy, and so did her husband.

“You are right,” Valerian added as the cheers and the manifestations of support from the thousands of spectators increased when the victorious Champion shook hands with her defeated French counterpart. “But Alexandra Potter is still very young.”

Her husband didn’t mention anything else; there didn’t need to be. Many great covens of Eastern Europe, while respectful of Lillian’s daughter accomplishments, would prefer to wait for a few years.

Chosen of Death or not, as far as the traditions of elder vampires were concerned, the young witch was not old enough to be a reliable political ally.

“She needs to work on her endurance and her finesse too. As it stands, her offensives are implacable and devastate everything in her path, but any enemy able to withstand them is going to cause her huge trouble.”

And some of those opponents were participating in the Tournament, waiting for their turn to duel.

“We will have to speak to her magical guardian after the Task.” Artemis spoke as the Judges’ subordinates threw a powerful fire spell which began the general meltdown of all the accumulated ice and snow.

It said quite something that while Alexandra Potter had done it alone in a few minutes, a dozen wizards and witches were necessary to remove it. Granted, the adult arena experts weren’t going all-out, but still...

Valerian Cassius stood from the comfortable couch they were using.

“I am going to speak with Lily,” her beloved told her as she showed an interrogative expression on her face.

“Only to speak?” The High Sentinel smirked, knowing there was going to be more than that. “Don’t do anything I would disapprove...”

Her husband left, and Artemis turned her head back to the arena, where the next duel was about to begin.

On the Tournament mirrors broadcasting the Tournament brackets of the Champions, it was certainly an attractive duel on paper: Romeo Malatesti against Lucrezia Sforza.

Alas, looking at the two Champions, this idea was quickly dispelled. The male Champion was magically exhausted before the first Runic evocation was cast. And physically, the Malatesti Heir didn’t look so good either. His arrogant stunt during his first duel had cost him whatever chances he had to win the Second Task.

Something confirmed in the next minutes. While Lucrezia Sforza conjured a bridge of roses and wood, and strolled down carefully while breaking walls and counter-enchanting traps and stone constructs, the Champion of War exhausted what little reserves he was able to rebuild after his brief stay with the Healers.

The duel on top of the defrosted Egyptian temple was more a succession of punishments, with the Succubus Champion knocking out the arrogant male in less than twenty seconds.

There were many boos for the Champion of War after that. The spectators had been terrified into submission by his first duel, but it had also given high expectations for the second.

And now, the critics were raining down, while the Scuola Regina supporters preferred to cheer upon the daughter of the Headmistress...and it didn’t help Lucrezia Sforza was a very, very beautiful young woman. Ah, the Succubi...

And of course, the Judges’ sentencing was implacable, as always.

**Provisional Scores:**

**Lucrezia Sforza: 46 points**

**Romeo Malatesti: 25 points**

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The beginning of the Second Task had been disastrous, but there were motives of hope.

At least, this was what Albus was trying hard to convince himself of.

It was true, somewhat. Geoffrey’s loss was grievous and had certainly been the death knell of any ambition the poor Gryffindor might have for the Tournament, but his deeds had made sure Romeo Malatesti paid dearly for his victory. And Hogwarts had two Champions for the second phase of the Runic duels. Beauxbatons had one, and Durmstrang two. Only the Scuola Regina had three of its Champions still competing.

And after two duels out of four, Hogwarts was guaranteed a Champion in the half-finals.

If only this Champion was a prodigy of the Light...but no such luck.

Like during the First Task, the salvation of Hogwarts was not coming from a Gryffindor or a wizard Albus Dumbledore would be proud to recruit in the ranks of the Order of the Phoenix.

It was Alexandra Potter who was saving the score of his school, and the Defeater of Grindelwald was sadly confident a few journalists wouldn’t fail to ask him a comment or two on the topic when the post-Task interviews came.

“That promises a very interesting duel,” the Succubus next to him purred, “my daughter against your little prodigy.”

“I completely agree with you,” Albus couldn’t help but worry to see there was no sneer on Karkaroff’s face. “This will be a duel worthy of the half-finals. I can’t help but think however that no matters who wins this duel, they will be too exhausted to mount a challenge against my Champion...”

Albus Dumbledore was tempted to roll his eyes. The only thing which prevented him from doing so was that for the time being, Karkaroff’s confidence in the Black Witch of Chaos had not been misplaced.

But it had cost Durmstrang a Champion. The ruthless psychopath had clearly no issue cutting down her own schoolmates to claim victory.

The conversations died down again as two Champions returned to the starting positions which would lead them into the arena. And one of the two Champions was Hogwarts’.

“BEGIN!”

Cedric Diggory went with a solid conjuration of a stone bridge first, far more elaborate than his previous attempt.

It was a wise choice, because the Venetian Champion had decided to take a page from Potter’s book and threw a long-range fire attack at his creation. If it had been wood...well, Albus preferred not to imagine what would have happened. Seeing Karl Schumacher devoured by the crocodiles had filled the quota of horrors for the day.

This wasn’t the end of the obstacles, unfortunately. Four man-sized statues of Anubis tried to bar the way of the Champion of Hufflepuff, and it took over a minute for the favourite of Pomona to vanquish them.

And the exhaustion shown on his face wasn’t reassuring at all.

Meagre consolation, the Scuola Regina Champion was meeting the same difficulties. And if the Champion of Hogwarts was varying his Elder Futhark combinations, his opponent was not showing a lot of new things. It was still fire, fire, and fire Runic evocations. Did he mention fire?

Both young men were lightly wounded by arrows, and the enigma where they were trapped into a sealed room and had to find the cobra Hieroglyph took them precious seconds.

Cedric Diggory arrived first and claimed the golden orb of the Tournament Clue, but as his fingers touched it, the Venetian Champion was climbing up the final stairs.

The Duel began immediately. From the start, it was clear it wouldn’t be as spectacular as some of the previous duels. Cedric Diggory and Giovanni Ruspoli were not at their best, and each evocation required ten seconds of catching their breath.

And from the very beginning, the Hufflepuff Champion was confronted with a monumental flaw: his summons, be they birds or some other animal, were unable to handle the cursed flames.

The duel was still incredibly long, and Albus was proud of the student of Helga’s House. But as the gong announced the end of the fifteenth minute, there was no doubt victory had escaped Hogwarts’ Champion. Cedric Diggory’s clothes were burned and the young man himself was not unharmed, while his opponent had been able to evade the claws, talons, and beaks of the Runic-conjured beasts.

It was a good showing. But it wasn’t enough. Giovanni Ruspoli was announced the winner.

**Provisional Scores:**

**Giovanni Ruspoli: 42 points**

**Cedric Diggory: 33 points**

Interestingly, the Succubus didn’t brag that much about the victory of her student.

“His repertoire of Runic spells is frustratingly small, for someone who reads so many books.”

“Fire spells are indeed a very...restricting field,” Headmistress Maxime agreed. “And this lack of flexibility hasn’t escaped the vigilance of the Judges.”

“He is too exhausted.” Karkaroff said bluntly. “Any of my two Champions who are about to duel can take him.”

The way the High Master had to insult everyone who didn’t meet his lofty standards of ‘evolution’ proved he wasn’t an impostor, but this was cold comfort to the ‘everyone’ who had to tolerate his presence.

“Aren’t you a bit worried the Archduchess is going to add a second victim to her list today?” the Succubus asked while asking the butler for food and drinks. Albus refrained to imitate her. If it was as bloody as he feared, he didn’t want to have anything in his stomach.

“No.” There was no hesitation in the reply. “I only lament the bad luck which saw most of my Champions opposed to each other. The Durmstrang Institute could have claimed far more than one place in the half-finals.”

In the mean time, Albus could only marvel internally at the silence which fell upon the Coliseum.

And no, the international crowd assembled in the stands didn’t do it for anyone else.

There simply was no one else which could spread this aura of alpha predator and sheer terror while doing nothing but walking.

Dumbledore didn’t like Durmstrang and its students, but at that moment, he very much pitied Viktor Krum.

“BEGIN!”

Reality screamed, and Chaos magic erupted at the other extremity of the arena.

As the darkness rose, something emerged from it.

It was a giant wolf.

Dumbledore was about to shout ‘Fenrir’, but he realised quickly this wasn’t the wolf of Norse mythology. It was too small...and there was more than one, and no Black Witch could change into several different monsters.

These were merely constructs born of evil magic, and between their maws, they dragged a flying boat of hellish appearance across the crocodile lake.

The light of the winter sun seemed to weaken as shadows engulfed the arena, and one by one the obstacles of the arena were engulfed by the darkness. When it dissipated...the Anubis statues and more or less everything was *wrong*.

The jackal-headed now proclaimed the glory of Loki, Power of Chaos. The corridors were filled with wolfish or snakelike creatures. Many walls bled black blood, and the enchantments had been altered from Hieroglyphs into Norse glyphs of loathing and vengeance.

The Black Witch arrived on the platform in one minute and thirty seconds, and did not pretend to have done something magically tiring.

Viktor Krum arrived more three minutes later. For all this duration, the tsar’s daughter had crossed her arms and stayed immobile.

The crowd chose this moment to shout its support for the Bulgarian Seeker.

“KRUM! KRUM! KRUM!”

The Russian psychopath showed no emotion at this sign the spectators weren’t on her side.

Instead she drew her dagger and carved a Rune in the very air.

Dumbledore had never seen it the likes of it...and when it blazed white, he gripped his seat, knowing the attack was going to be something out of an average Champion’s league.

He wasn’t mistaken.

The magical shockwave distorted the air and crumbled the already damaged stones.

Krum had just the time to conjure a red shield before it struck.

It certainly saved his life, judging by how far he was thrown away from the platform.

For an instant, Dumbledore feared the Durmstrang Champion was going to be thrown into an improvised bath with the crocodiles, but the impact had been so powerful Krum hit the magical shields protecting the public instead...and in his fall, he fortunately met powerful Cushioning Charms.

“Victory goes to Champion Lyudmila Romanov.” Judge Varga announced after Viktor Krum feigned to be knocked out – even Karkaroff made a thin smile as his Champion didn’t know how to fake seriously a bad injury – and it was clear there would be no resumption of the duel.

“This was...” the Succubus needed to clear her throat, unusually. “It was a quick duel.”

“Let’s hope your Champion...Giovanni Ruspoli, is that it? Let’s hope Champion Ruspoli will provide a better challenge.” Karkaroff said with a satisfied smirk.

Neither Albus nor the two other Headmistresses answered something defiant. The Black Witch had already been impossible to kill during the First Task, but one month later, what she was showing was an entirely different level of danger and Dark Magic.

And there were now only three Champions capable to stop her from winning the Second Task.

**Provisional scores:**

**Lyudmila Romanov: 49 points**

**Viktor Krum: 38 points**

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“Alexandra?”

“Yes, Hermione?”

“I know it’s not in your nature to quit, but have you considered losing deliberately the next duel?”

Alexandra blinked and then huffed.

“Not really, no.” The young Champion considered the idea for a few seconds...and then shook her head. “I know why you said it, but it won’t work, Hermione.”

“You would avoid the payback she has in mind for what you did during the First Task,” Morag told her, “just saying.”

“And?” Alexandra turned her head to stare at her friend. “I won’t deny it would guarantee I’m leaving the arena in good health today, but in the long-term, would it really help? There are five Tasks after this one. And if I do not do my best during the next duel, Romanov will have one or two more Clues than I for the next Task. I doubt it will be duels again, but I could face her again next month...only with a larger handicap.”

“You are the Champion,” Morag shrugged.

“And of course I have to win the third duel first,” Alexandra grimaced. “If I had Ruspoli as my opponent, I think it would be in the bag without using the battle-runes. But he isn’t.”

And as if it couldn’t get worse, this idiot of Malatesti had indeed wasted all his daily magic on his stupid stunt with the crocodiles, giving an easy victory to the Succubus.

Alexandra had been able to keep a lot of things under wraps thanks to Montague’s uselessness, but so was Lucrezia Sforza, and at a more interesting stage of the Runic Duels.

“Well, nothing to do but go ahead and fight.” The Champion of the Morrigan breathed out. “At the very least, the spectators will have something to remember.”

Nonetheless, Alexandra took her time, walking slowly to bow before the Judges again. The more time before the duel started, the more seconds her reserves had to replenish themselves. And for her ‘fashionable tardiness’, Alexandra arrived first.

But when Lucrezia Sforza arrived, Alexandra froze.

The Succubus had changed her appearance. By itself, it wasn’t that surprising; all the Hogwarts Champions had seen the Scuola Regina Headmistress’ daughter change her hairstyle, her hair colour, her nose shape, and a lot more things dozens of times per days. Much like the Metamorphmagi of different countries, the Succubi loved changing their appearance whenever they desired.

This time, it was absolutely deliberate for the duel ahead. Because Lucrezia looked very much like Susan...or rather, how her girlfriend would possibly look in a few years, once she celebrated her seventeenth birthday. And at the risk of saying the evidence, Lucrezia was still half-naked, and the bras this time were really insufficient to-

Alexandra turned her head towards the Judges and tried not blush. Judging by a few amused glances, the Basilisk-Slayer wasn’t going that good of a job.

But of course a lot of Ministers and important wizards and witches were openly drooling as her opponent curvaceous body-

No, she had to stay focused.

“May I compliment you for your excellent choice of girlfriends?” the damnable Succubus purred. “This redhead is already delicious, but just imagine how she will look in a few years...”

Alexandra looked deliberately in the other direction.

“You realise I am going to pulverise you for that, right? You won’t destabilise me, and the Imperial Thunder has a Runic incantation...”

“We will see...” the Champion of Lust wasn’t discouraged in the least by her outward frostiness and profited from the fact she was looking elsewhere to kiss her on the right cheek. “I’m open to all sort of ideas, you know. Ciao!”

Alexandra had the urge to smack her, but unfortunately, this time it was her who was beginning near the Judges, and the Succubus who had to walk over half of the arena.

And she did it strutting all her assets...Alexandra only looked at the crocodiles for several minutes, listing every Runic spell which could be considered useful against a Dark Champion.

“BEGIN!”

This time, Alexandra didn’t use Elder Futhark Runes. Silently, she conjured five Runes of Ogham, and in a few seconds an enormous bridge of magnificent wood grew until it could likely rival a young baobab.

Good, it should be enough to stop all attempts to destroy it. Ogham-reinforced wood was incredibly tough, and the three enchantments poured via her magic were going to last long enough for her to be on the other side.

Alexandra ran.

She was nearly past half of the crossing when her right cheek burned and-

Oh no. The kiss had been not to annoy her. It had been to put a tracking Charm on her. She had to-

A gigantic explosion disintegrated her world.

The good news was that she had the time to transform partially into her Animagus form, and the debris and the magic washed away, leaving her with no wounds whatsoever.

The bad news was that save the ropes conjured at the start for an additional level of security, there was nothing left for her to walk upon.

And the ropes she was holding with the full strength of her arms were beginning to cede.

Alexandra looked at the lake below. The crocodile-infested lake below.

“I shouldn’t have taunted Fate so much those last days,” the Champion of Death admitted. “This is going to suck.”

And then the ropes broke, precipitating her into an impressive free fall.

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Everything was fair in love and war.

Lucrezia had to admit it though, this time she had blatantly cheated.

But it was necessary. The Champion of the Scuola Regina had absolutely no intention to fight Alexandra Potter head-on. This kind of explosive confrontation was for the likes of Lyudmila Romanov. If you hadn’t the raw power of Chaos incarnate at your disposal, it was best to make sure the other Champion never reached the platform.

And besides, it wasn’t like it was going to kill her. Lucrezia would just have to offer a few nice presents after the Task so to-

The Succubus Champion’s thoughts were brutally interrupted as a dark shape went flying like a javelin and missed her bridge by a good four metres.

It was a Hetkoshu crocodile! By everything that was desirable, the British girl had used a crocodile as an improvised weapon!

That was...very bad.

Throwing her into the lake had been supposed to be a duel-winning move, not just a delaying action!

Lucrezia began to run, grimacing as she heard the roars of the crowd. Wrestling with crocodiles indeed...

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For those wondered, no, fighting crocodiles with nothing but your bare hands was *not* a good idea.

And when the crocodiles were of the Hetkoshu breed, it was worse.

Fortunately, Alexandra was a Hydra Animagus. And in a lake like this, her inner animal delighted in showing her superiority to the predators the Judges had loaned from the Egyptian reserve.

It didn’t mean it was exactly easy. Hetkoshu crocodiles were enormous things of fangs, spikes and impenetrable scales, and the only thing which would have led them to flee in seconds, a full transformation into the Lernaean Hydra, was out of the question here. Not only it would mean forfeiting, but Alexandra had no intention to reveal her inner animal to tens of thousands of wizards and witches.

And so the Ravenclaw Champion fought. She threw violently crocodiles left and right, grabbing their tails and using them as projectiles against the Temple, the bridges, and everything which could be a worthwhile target. Her evocations shut their maws before her body did a lake rodeo on their backs. Feral instincts twice took over and she punched, kicked, and bit them, convincing several to find greener pastures at the bottom of the artificial lake.

At last the beasts understood the lesson, and Alexandra was able to climb her way out of this watery pit.

And if she did it again once more in her life...well, it would be one time too many.

Blasting apart the statues which were enchanted to block her path, the green-eyed Champion promised herself she wouldn’t taunt Fate again like she did with her wrestling of crocodiles.

She arrived on the platform with roughly fifteen seconds of sand left in the hourglass, and naturally, the Succubus was already there, the stones next to her brimming with red-pink magic.

After the battle she had been forced to fight, the appearance of an older Susan was literally not registering anymore. In fact, as the Hydra was too close to the surface of her emotions, it was more enraging than anything else.

“That was...spectacular.” Her opponent recognised.

“This was just the prelude.” Alexandra hissed between her teeth. “Laukaz, Isaz, Naudiz, Dagaz, Odala, Raido, Mannaz, Sea and Ice and Hand, Darkness of Forgotten Days, Burned Lands, Chariot of War lighting the Ancestors, Talisman, Tyranny, Warriors, Riders, Eagles, Navigators, and Magic, let grow-“

Lucrezia Sforza began to bombard her with countless curses, and in spite of her Hydra’s scales protecting her skin, it hurt. But any word not of the incantation would screw up the evocation, and Alexandra ignored it with difficulty.

“Wake up and guide, protect his spirit, free from the unfathomable depths, allow the spiral crux to birth the link with the Powers! Disappear and free the sovereign of flames and air, for he will devour the Age of the Sun! DRAGON!”

For a second nothing happened.

Then the ground opened, and many stones and debris melted. The magic of the arena was siphoned in a storm of dust and matter, gaining in intensity by the second.

And as Alexandra struggled mentally to control the spell, a black-coloured magical protection came into existence, hissing and manifesting its displeasure.

Eyes which belonged to no living creature fell on her, and Alexandra had no doubt this entity belonged to the Dark Powers in essence and soul.

And that it would have loved annihilating her at the first lapse of control.

“Do what you were called for, ***Dragon of Lindworm***.” The Basilisk-Slayer spat blood after saying the words. Damn, the incantation was already taking its toll...

The dragon obeyed. A maw far larger than the ones of the Hetkoshu Crocodiles opened...and it was like all fires of hell were unleashed.

Alexandra counted for five seconds...and then uttered the words of banishment.

The dragon disappeared, and for a brief moment, it was like she was bathed into a lake of corrosive liquid.

Then the Hydra regeneration fully activated, and it was more bearable.

Alexandra breathed out heavily. Most of her magic had gone into this attack, and it was going to take her a few hours before anything powerful could be cast again.

The smoke cleared, and the cursed draconic fire – which was burning black and light green, she noticed – temporary calmed.

Alexandra also smelled something. The smell of a powerful animal which wasn’t a crocodile or a hydra, and though she was pretty sure she had never met one, the idea of having beaten it seemed to delight her inner animal.

Therefore she wasn’t very surprised to see Lucrezia Sforza struggling to stay conscious, the burns caused by her attack already in the process of healing.

“A small kiss?” the Succubus Champion managed to joke.

Alexandra sighed.

“I wondered if being nearly dead would prevent you from teasing me...I think I have my answer.”

The Champion of Desire showed absolutely no shame...in fact, now that whatever ‘clothes’ she had were burned, she seemed to delight showing Alexandra her body.

“This won’t work again. Surrender.” To make sure her words had weight, she poured a trickle of power into her athame.

“You realise...” Lucrezia swallowed, before her voice fell until it was a whisper. “You realise you’re going to have to fight Chaos after what you did, right?”

“Now I do...” Alexandra replied sarcastically, “and I would have had far more magic if someone had not thrown me into the lake...now surrender, please.”

“You’re no fun,” Lucrezia pouted exactly like Susan did, receiving a dark glare for her attempt. “Fine, I surrender.”

The spectators exploded in a cacophony of screams and cheers behind them. Alexandra only shook her head. She was tired, and there was the worst duel possible to fight left...

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**Provisional Scores:**

**Alexandra Potter: 71 points**

**Lucrezia Sforza: 61 points**

“You don’t see that every day.”

When it was Igor Karkaroff saying this, it meant the end of the world was at hand, or the duel which had just been graded was so awe-inducing you couldn’t say anything insulting.

In this particular case, Albus knew it was definitely the latter.

And the ten Judges agreed, since they had decreed a ten minutes-long Interlude. That and they needed to repair the duelling platform.

“No,” the Succubus replied. For some thirty seconds the servant of the Dark One had been displeased, but now her face had returned more or less to her usual amused expression. “I think the last time someone tried to call the *Dragon of Lindworm* was in 1944 during Operation Bagration.”

“You have a good memory,” Karkaroff praised her without a trace of mockery. “Yes, I think it was around that time. Six Russian mages recently graduated from our school used it to wipe off the headquarters of some group part of Grindelwald’s elite. And three were still alive when the dragon faded. It’s...astonishing there was no death this time around.”

And it was a clear indicator how terrifying the power of Alexandra Potter truly was. The Black Witch had fought a major Runic duel before. By all rights, after drowning the arena in ice and casting the Pyramid’s Fall – a Curse not all adult wizards successfully cast in perfect conditions with a wand focus-variant – throwing around that much magic in the *Dragon of Lindworm* should have killed her long before the first spark of draconic might materialised.

But it hadn’t. And it was terrifying.

It was now a given that if...no, *when* it was time to eliminate her, Albus would have to duel her personally. No one else had the raw power and the knowledge of esoteric spells amongst the Order of the Phoenix to survive this kind of magical inferno.

“It was a pity she fell for the trap of your daughter, Headmistress,” Headmistress Maxime affirmed. “As much as watching her fighting crocodiles pleased the crowd, it resulted in her losing the third Tournament Clue and arriving tired and with few good options on the duelling platform.”

“Indeed,” the Succubus Headmistress bared her perfect teeth. “Strategically, I am pleased by the reasoning and the actions of my daughter. She tried her best-“

“She cheated all the way, you mean,” Albus intervened, leaving most of his displeasure out, but giving a warning note to the Dark Creature.

“Come on, Dumbledore!” The former Death Eater gloated. “Your young prodigy kept her Animagus abilities active since she began to fight the crocodiles. And I’m sure she used no Runic evocations for that!”

It was very annoying and-

“All Champions have the privilege of challenging a duel’s outcome once per Task if they feel the outcome was biased in their disfavour.” Angelica Sforza reminded him with a smirk. “And neither your Champion nor mine look like they were willing to upturn what happened in the arena.”

The Defeater of Grindelwald grimaced internally. At first when the Black Witch had emerged from the lake under the applause of the crowd, Albus had really thought she would give up and send a complaint to the Judges. But no, the spawn of James Potter had continued her progression, and somehow found the strength to claw her way to victory. And he couldn’t accuse the Succubus Champion of conspiring with the Black Witch he had to tolerate: the two of them had thrown against each other such powerful Black Magic there was no way he would be considered sane if he said it aloud.

“Both have cheated within respectable limits,” Headmistress Maxime nodded, clearly unwilling to support him against the two other Heads of school. “And the public clearly liked it.”

If they were being honest – and Albus would prefer they weren’t – the tens of thousands of magical beings who watched the duel had done far more than ‘enjoy’ it. Unlike the Dark Champion of War’s ritual, there was no question Lucrezia Sforza and Alexandra Potter had cast things they had absolutely mastered, and thus the magic was not only spectacular, it looked *controlled*.

And that was another big problem. The Dark in this Duel had not been that insane and recklessly dangerous. It was powerful and attractive.

As a consequence, the leader of the Order of the Phoenix was very worried.

“Your Champion deserves her place at the top of the Tournament, Dumbledore,” the Dark Creature said. “But I don’t think she will win this Task. Not against the one who is going to be opposed to her in the other half-final.”

“So little confidence in your own Champion, Headmistress?” Igor Karkaroff resumed his gloating.

“Giovanni Ruspoli has respectable skills in the noble art of the Runes.” The Succubus slightly raised her voice as if to defend the fourth Champion of her school. “But as I said before, he lacks versatility beyond fire-themed Runic casting.”

And though she didn’t say it, the young man lacked raw power and a physical body to channel all his magic. Out of sixteen Champions present today, the Headmaster of Hogwarts was reasonably confident Giovanni Ruspoli was the only one who had never played Quidditch or an intense Quidditch activity.

And he was going against the Russian psychopath, who was a predator in every aspect one could imagine.

Albus prepared himself mentally.

This was going to get ugly.

Judge Varga’s commands were lost as the public began to cheer for the Venetian Champion.

As in the last three duels, this vocal opposition from the spectators did nothing to trouble the Dark Champion of Chaos.

Again, a Black Witch took inspiration from the other. A thousand arrows infected by Black Magic began to rain over the obstacles of Giovanni Ruspoli while the psychopath was hovering over the lake and the statues over an enormous shadowy beast which looked vaguely like a mutant vulture.

To his pleasant surprise, Ruspoli managed to dispel every threat without losing too much time.

“He’s made a lot of progress since the last duel,” the High Master of Durmstrang commented as the student of the Scuola Regina finished the Temple’s obstacle course. His opponent had already seized the clue, but it was nonetheless a very good showing, with a flurry of different Rune languages. “It is most-“

There was a new explosion directly on the platform, one which smelled like very powerful Black Magic.

When they were able to watch again the details, many in the crowd gasped: Giovanni Ruspoli had somehow transfigured his arm into a monstrous appendage which was...somehow...an oversized claw.

And against all expectations, the two pincers were pressing against the throat of the Russian Black Witch.

“Surrender!” the single word echoed strangely in the mouth of the young man. Not because it wasn’t his voice, but because there was some ecstatic sense of fanatical joy coming from a scholarly-looking Champion who had kept his emotions under wraps so far.

Had Giovanni Ruspoli deceived them for his first two duels, tricking them into believing he was weak so that his current opponent didn’t take him seriously?

“Surrender!” But this time the word had a touch of worry, because the pincers failed to pierce the flesh of the Durmstrang Champion.

And in his sneak attack, Giovanni Ruspoli had only neutralised one hand, it appeared. The other hand of the Black Witch had managed to free itself, and now a rune of black fire was taking form.

There was no evocation shouted at the top of her lungs.

The Russian Black Witch kept the orb of fire which had materialised in her hand...and then pressed it against the flesh of the Venetian competitor.

Giovanni Ruspoli screamed as his torso was exposed to curse flame, and his lack of concentration disrupted everything he was trying to keep active. His arm began to return to its normal state.

The next instant, a second blue Rune blazed into existence, and the damned soul of Chaos struck.

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Lyudmila chose to ignore the arena handlers who glared at her.

They should thank her, truly. After all, had she not spared Giovanni Ruspoli despite having him at her mercy?

Instead she had transformed her opponent into a blue pig.

Hey, she was a Champion of Loki, and she had a reputation to uphold!

And for the first time, when she bowed to salute the crowd, there was some applause. Not much, but that was something.

Note to self: cursing other Champions into animals was far more popular than killing them.

“Champion Romanov,” one of the members of the security force addressed her, “could you please return Champion Ruspoli to his human appearance? He isn’t in position anymore to win the duel...”

Idiot. Giovanni Ruspoli had never had the skill to win the duel.

Because while it had been the body of Giovanni Ruspoli participating, the saying the eyes were the windows of the soul had held true once more.

The puppet-master had tried his best, but Lyudmila had had her doubts the moment ‘Giovanni’ evaded her first attacks.

And when he cast several curses that even the main Romanov library didn’t possess, the Champion of Loki had been able to observe the irisless grey eyes.

Giovanni Ruspoli had been the puppet of a Dream Walker for the entirety of this Duel.

It was supposed to be impossible. For millennia, the Light had done its utmost to slaughter every line which manifested this magical gift, to the point even Imperial lines like House Romanov had not been able to find a single survivor.

And yet the Exchequer had one in their service. Which meant...

Lyudmila glanced at the spectators. Suddenly, the presence of over sixty thousand people was far more sinister than it had been before the Task. Unless you were a Champion of the Powers, or you had sworn voluntarily your allegiance to a Champion body and soul, there was no passive defence against a Dream Walker. Supposedly House Romanov and a few other Houses had inherited ancient magical ‘shields’ which protected their servants, but the Durmstrang Champion was pretty sure they were inactive right now.

After all, the Dream Walkers were extinct, right?

Hel and Loki, she was going to have to return to Saint Petersburg and dig into the archives. And there was no guarantee there would be answers to be found.

But there wasn’t a lot of choice. The Exchequer wouldn’t have revealed this kind of trump card if they weren’t willing to use it. And unless she figured how to break the hold of the Dream Walker, it was an extremely good move, Lyudmila acknowledged that.

A Champion of Loki could easily kill one or two hundred wizards with one spell. But she couldn’t do anything if sixty thousand wands cast a Blasting Charm at the same time.

And while as Fenrir she could regenerate fast, sixty thousand offensive spells would do a massive amount of damage.

“Champion Romanov?”

“Fine,” the Dark Queen muttered the counter-curse, returning Ruspoli to his human appearance...minus the tail. As the Champion of Chaos, she had a reputation to uphold, after all...and Giovanni Ruspoli had ‘challenged’ her, Dream Walker or not. There had to be some retribution, or the Tsar was going to begin to think she had gone soft. “Happy?”

Lyudmila didn’t wait for the man to comment upon the tail or anything else. This duel had been more interesting in the Dark sense of the word, but she had other things to do. Like ensuring she had a final duel to fight in the first place...

**Provisional scores:**

**Lyudmila Romanov: 70 points**

**Giovanni Ruspoli: 55 points**

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Until the duel began, Alexandra had hoped that Giovanni Ruspoli could cause some damage to the arena or delay the final duel somehow.

No such luck. Even if the Venetian fourth Champion who had replaced Lorenzo de Medici had fought better and more intelligently, his defeat had been quick, and though some wizards ignorant of the Dark Queen’s skills may think it had been a close duel, Alexandra knew better.

Ruspoli had been crushed, and it was only because Lyudmila wanted to amuse the crowd that he hadn’t shared the fate of Schumacher.

“She’s coming this way...”

Alexandra snorted.

“I’m tired, Morag. I’m not blind.”

“When it comes to duel that kind of monster, I’m not sure the difference is that huge...”

This was, to be fair, not a bad point at all.

She wasn’t in condition to fight the Dark Queen of Durmstrang. Morrigan’s ravens, she wasn’t even rested enough to duel a Champion, be he or she from the Dark or the Light.

If Lucrezia Sforza had not gone down immediately from the Dragon of Lindworm...of course, the Champion of Desire should have been dead at the end of it, not merely ‘battered down’. That she wasn’t implied she was a powerful Animagus in addition to her Succubus inheritance.

“I hope you’re not thinking about forfeiting our duel.” The French was correct, but the Russian accent was not so easily silenced.

“Sorry to disappoint.” Alexandra turned to meet the green eyes which still had sparks of chaotic magic burning in them. “And please, don’t look that disappointed. You know I’m exhausted, while you...you are just beginning your warm-up.”

Which was more than a little terrifying, when you thought about it. Every Champion who had the time and the knowledge to unleash his or her Runic arsenal had been able to bring down a lot of firepower on his or her opponents.

But somehow, Lyudmila Romanov, despite casting enormous Runic attacks, was looking as fresh as if she was just out of bed in the morning.

Something that couldn’t be said for her. A lot of Runes had been washed out when she fell into the water, because while the paint was resistant to water, the Hetkoshu crocodiles infused their ‘pool’ with a remarkable dose of magic, and then Alexandra had been forced to partially transform, lessening the potency of the Runes transfiguration after transfiguration...

“A forfeit would mean a zero for you in the next duel.”

“That just means I would finish second.” Seventy-one points was not the score of someone who failed in the Second Task, not when eight Champions were under the twenty points mark.

“You would disappoint the public.”

“That sounds a more acceptable point,” Alexandra inclined her head, and the Champion of Loki smiled...until she completed her sentence, “but not enough to convince me to throw myself into the arena.”

“Unacceptable.”

“Why do you want to fight me so much?” This time, Alexandra really didn’t understand the Russian witch. “You have won. I’m not in a state to fight you right now. Magically, I’m spent. And the same is true for the other competitors of the half-finals. In fact, it is likely the only guy who is still able to cast more than one big attack before keeling in exhaustion is Krum.”

“Because I want to win the Second Task against the girl who defeated me in the First Task, not by forfeit!”

“Well, tough luck,” Alexandra smiled. “But if you wanted that, you should have rigged the Judges’ repartition of the Champions this morning. With all the Dark Champions in the upper bracket, it was more or less unavoidable whoever won the half-finals was going to be exhausted.”

Maybe if Malatesti had not been an imbecile, it could have been different...but there was no use pondering a ‘what if?’.

“Then let’s duel the traditional way.”

Alexandra raised an eyebrow.

“The traditional way?”

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Henri came back from the infirmary just in time to see the two female finalists salute the Judges and walk to their starting positions.

“Well, Potter is far braver than I am,” the Champion of Horus remarked as he took his seat next to Eleonora da Riva. “If it had been me, I would have forfeited the duel immediately.”

Henri had not seen the first three duels of the Champion of Loki, but he had heard of the carnage she left in her wake. Karl Schumacher, transformed into fodder for the crocodiles. Krum had been directly sent into his adoring public. Giovanni Ruspoli had been trapped into a pig body for several minutes...and he still had the tail to prove it.

Yes, he hadn’t had the time to read the true rules of the Second Task, but apparently you only had the right to forfeit *if* you had reasons to believe participating was including high odds of violent death and you had already participated in an exhausting series of duels. The British girl could definitely have played this card. It wasn’t like the Judges were going to penalise her after what she had done to Sforza.

“They spoke to each other for several minutes,” Eleonora told him. “I don’t know what they said, but Chaos must have found a way to motivate Death.”

Henri glanced at the Russian psychopath, wondering what sort of attack angle the Russian Champion could have found to ‘convince’ a girl who thought levitating a sea snake was fun. Threats would have been of very limited utility; Alexandra Potter was not lacking in magical power, and veiled menaces against her friends would likely bring significant retribution, as several past events had proved.

All this internal questioning went to second plan when the psychopath immediately unleashed her power and began to flatten the temple, breaking pillars, and ground statues to dust.

Needless to say, no one in the crowd applauded this wanton act of destruction, and for good reason.

The power of Chaos was on the rise, and it was something incredibly frightening.

And then the onslaught stopped, as abruptly as it had begun.

Of the Egyptian temple, little remained. In fact, the only thing which was still the same was the crocodile lake surrounding the structure. The non-submerged part of the arena was now a ruin, most of it a more or less flat terrain on half of its total surface.

It was only ten seconds after that the two Champions activated their bridges and descended into the arena.

Henri wondered what sort of game had been decided beforehand. Judging by the surprised expressions of the Judges, the duel was going against the scenario of the second Task.

His question was answered not long after he asked it in his mind.

The Champion of Death activated three Runes painted on her skin, and screamed the name of the Rune Ansuz.

A miniature portal of darkness was born, and the black-haired girl plunger her right arm in it, withdrawing it a few seconds later.

But when she did, the arm was holding a silver weapon all members of the Trinity and the Army of Light had been told to stay as far away as possible.

“Clarent.”

The stands were far away, but there was no way this silvery sword could be a different magical heirloom. It was the Slayer of Kings...and rarely was any title that deserved, because after absorbing the poison of a Basilisk, any wound not healed by a Phoenix would be lethal in two minutes...assuming there weren’t other poisons at work.

Lyudmila Romanov’s ‘reply’ was no less spectacular. Reality seemed to break, and for an unpleasant second, Henri glanced at the shadow of the Chaotic realm. Mercifully, it lasted only a second.

And then there was an enormous golden spear in the hands of Loki’s Champion.

Henri de Condé was speechless, and so was Eleonora.

“Wait a minute,” the female Champion of the Scuola Regina blurted out, “she’s...how in the name of the thousand Pantheons did she manage to get her hands on *Gungnir*?”

“I don’t know...”

Eleonora’s surprise was completely justified. The spear of Odin was a Great Treasure of the Norse Pantheon. It had disappeared centuries ago...but it belonged to the Light!

“Some as tainted by the Dark shouldn’t be able to touch it, never mind wield it!”

But evidently, the Dark Queen of Durmstrang didn’t care about this minor issue, and went into a fighting stance. About twenty metres away, Alexandra Potter did the same.

Two seconds passed. The Coliseum was silent.

And then, answering to no audible signal, the female Dark Champions charged each other at a speed which was properly inhuman.

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Parry. Strike. Parry. Strike. Parry. Strike. Feint. Strike.

Why had she thought it was a good idea to challenge the Champion of Loki to a weapon duel?

Oh, right.

She was magically tired.

Parry. Strike. Parry, parry, and parry again, before strike, strike.

She had to go on the offensive. She had to disarm her.

Why had she believed having Fragarach would give her a massive advantage?

Why had she believed the Dark Queen wouldn’t have secured a weapon able to endure the blows of her enchanted sword?

Because she had. And as if it wasn’t bad enough, it was *Gungnir*.

And the spear was long enough to give her opponent an advantage in reach.

It had been weeks since she hadn’t fought Flitwick, but by her estimate Lyudmila was a bit slower than her Charms teacher.

Alas, the young woman of House Romanov may not be as fast, but she was blessed with a phenomenal endurance and the same reflexes Alexandra enjoyed.

As a result, their blade exchange had to look like a whirlwind of silver and gold as her blade and opponent’s spear clashed again and again, creating blasts which would broken bones if they weren’t passively using their Animagi passive abilities to reinforce each other.

Parry, and then strike again.

Staying on the defensive for too long was a defeat sentence here. They both attacked with everything they had, because the best defence was unrelenting offence.

And inch by inch, Alexandra felt exhaustion beginning to take its toll. Her link with the Hydra was part of her, but it was still magic. And she had begun the duel magically exhausted. Romanov had disintegrated the entire arena and somehow was not feeling the strain.

The Champion of the Morrigan knew one fraction of a second before the metal of the weapons touched she had been a bit too slow, and only Hydra and battle-reflexes allowed her to jump away.

But Fragarach was thrown in the air, far out of her reach, and there was no way she could summon it back before Lyudmila Romanov impaled her with Gungnir.

“I surrender!” She shouted, and ignored the disappointed expression of the Dark Queen. No way she was going to continue with an Animagus duel against this tireless opponent...

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There was nothing positive to remember about this Second Task.

The Light Champions had been humiliated, not one of them able to win a single duel.

The Champions of Hogwarts had fallen one by one. Geoffrey Hooper was going to miss the Third Task, and if the medical innovations of the Italian peninsula didn’t reattach his arm or somehow gave him a new one, his part in the Tournament would be over. Graham Montague might be very well be not considered given how lamentable his performance was. Cedric Diggory was excellent for a Hogwarts Champion, but on this interschool competition, the Hufflepuff Champion was average.

And Alexandra Potter, for all the Dark powers granted by her fell patron, had been unable to best the monster of Durmstrang.

Albus ignored the gloating of Igor Karkaroff. He heard the myriad of Venetians, French, Austrians, Germans, and so many Europeans in the public cheer as the two female finalists saluted the spectators and waited for the rewards’ ceremony to begin, and this was a ruckus which made him deeply ill-at-ease.

During the last decades, the Light had done a lot of good on the world stage. How fast they were ready to discard all the goodness and the prosperity for games and forbidden spells’ exhibitions...

“Ah, I think the Judges have stopped deliberating.”

“It must be said,” Headmistress Maxime gave them a thin smile, “this final duel did not proceed according to their rules...”

No. No, it had not.

Tens of thousands of soul had been given a ten minutes-long duel of sword against spear, and a reminder why they should never, absolutely never, challenge either Alexandra Potter and Lyudmila Romanov to a cold steel duel.

**Final Scores:**

**Lyudmila Romanov: 85 points**

**Alexandra Potter: 79 points**

The Durmstrang students naturally went wild, as their psychopathic Champion was four points behind Hogwarts’ Black Witch after the First Task, and the difference here was six points.

Truly Hogwarts and its Champions had lost everything in the Second Task.

Now there was only drinking the dark chalice with the hope there was only one bottle of that undrinkable Potion.

And of course, they would have to find a solution quickly, because it was out of the question to live the same humiliation during the *Third Task*...

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This time, the Judge had not invited every Champion which had successfully completed the Task.

There would have been no one facing the Judges in that case, as they had been informed with ironic expressions. The Dark Queen and she had not gone after the final clue, and thus the fourth and last golden orb would remain unclaimed.

As a result, it was the fighters of the half-finals who were rewarded. In addition to Lyudmila Romanov, there was Lucrezia Sforza – who had thankfully donned conventional clothes and returned to her blonde appearance – and Giovanni Ruspoli, who was fiercely glaring in direction of Loki’s Champion whenever he thought she wasn’t looking.

After how difficult and stressful the Tournament Task had been, Alexandra was very satisfied being one of those four Champions.

She had lost the leadership position, but it wasn’t a bad thing at all. Dumbledore may have a different expression, given how displeased he looked when he observed her, but who cared about Dumbledore?

There were five more Tasks to compete in, and the second place had very nice rewards. Evidently, her mother had not come to reward her this time, and the laurels of victory seemed an eternity away. But five hundred Galleons was a not small sum, and that was what she received first.

Predictably after that came the books. The theme of the Second Task was Runes, and...yep...they all received books about Runes. The Potter Heiress had no problems with that, by the way. Five books on Hieroglyphs and four books on Elder Futhark would go to enrich her ever-growing library. And yes, before everyone asked, those books were nowhere to be found near the Scuola Regina or the Hogwarts Runic sections.

Alexandra also was granted two pair of gloves in crocodile skin. And if you bet the gloves were black-scaled...you would be right. The Hetkoshu crocodiles were going to follow her spiritually for a long time.

To this respectable list of ‘presents’, there were three athames of Egyptian manufacture. Alexandra had no intention to replace Susan’s gift for the sake of it, but she had to admit those were first-rate carving instruments.

And last but not least, a ceremonial mask of an Egyptian Priestess, which was in all likelihood Morgane’s way to remind her the Exchequer was satisfied by the ‘spectacle’ of her exploits.

All in all, it was a very respectable amount of rewards, all for a Second Task she hadn’t won and where she had suffered no wound save to her ego.

“What do you intend to do with all those books anyway?” Giovanni Ruspoli asked on her left. The Potter Heiress noticed he had been given ‘only’ two out of the nine books she had.

“Well, read them,” the green-eyed Champion smirked.

“There aren’t enough hours in the day to read those tomes and attend half of our classes,” the Venetian Champion muttered petulantly.

Alexandra offered him a charming smile.

“Exactly.” The Hydra Animagus sniffed in disgust. “Why do I suddenly smell an odour of dirty pig?”

“Hey!” Giovanni protested.

“Because the reward of the Second Task’s winner has arrived,” Lucrezia Sforza giggled as four wizards dragged an enormous black animal over the new bridge thrown across the artificial lake after the duels concluded.

“I am supposed to take care of *that*?” the imperturbable expression of Lyudmila Romanov didn’t bask; it completely broke. “Can someone tell me what this nauseating insult to everything clean and proper is?”

“I think...” Alexandra coughed. It was that or burst in laughter, and she didn’t know if the Dark Queen wouldn’t try to kill her, podium or no podium. “I think it is a Calydonian Boar. At least it looks like the photos of a Calydonian Boar I saw on various Greek animal books.”

And yes, it looked uglier than sin. Imagine a pig. Then triple its size. It had eyes of fires, it breathed lightning, and of course there were spikes everywhere on the neck and the back. Most of its muscles and appendages were grotesquely distorted, and Alexandra could smell the stench of the fur and everything else, and it was best compared to sewers or something similar.

Ah yes, it was a boar, and its tusks were dripping with poison.

“Has it...an use any of you are aware of?”

“It might be edible?” the Succubus they shared a podium with tried in an unconvinced tone.

“Right...I am almost afraid to discover if it can get me an indigestion as Fenrir. Care to exchange it with your Ceryneian Hind, Death?”

“No, Chaos, I am suddenly discovering a deep and long-lost passion for the magnificent animal I named ‘Ciri’.”

Thankfully for the temper of Loki’s favourite, this was not the best ‘reward’ the Second Task’s winner was entitled to.

Books, gloves, robes, one thousand and five hundred Galleons, and many relatively respectable items were offered.

And then the Judges, led by Rune-Mistress Varga, presented her what they called the ‘Egg of Cleopatra’: an enormous golden egg, based on the Faberge egg of the non-magical jewellery. It had a very noticeable theme of corcodiles...and it had four magnificent sapphires to support the twenty-four carats of gold the egg was made of.

“That however I am willing to exchange against my Hind,” Alexandra lightly commented.

“I pass,” the Dark Queen grinned carnivorously. “The Egg of Cleopatra is mine, and woe to anyone who tries to steal it.”

“Don’t forget your Boar!” Lucrezia remarked as the arena handlers tried to drag the smelly animal towards the podium.

“As if it was possible to forget it...”

There were several minutes of photos, and a good hour of interview with journalists after that. It was a very welcome relief to have her friends around her in the Coliseum’s stands after that minor trial. Nope, she wasn’t joking. Why were the journalists always asking the same question over and over? A bit of originality wouldn’t kill them!

Fortunately, Susan was here, and her kiss and smile made all the interviews tolerable.

“I have reserved a restaurant table somewhere near Venice, Heiress Bones.”

“My, my Heiress Potter...how audacious of you.” Her girlfriend teased her. “And the rest of the evening?”

Alexandra blushed and was struck speechless.

“I’m just joking,” the redhead Hufflepuff reassured her. “You villa will be perfect for us. Now go wash all this paint off your skin, you look like you have fought several wars the Celtic way.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

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**European Magical Tournament Individual Rankings of the Second Task:**

1st: Lyudmila Romanov – 85 points

2nd: Alexandra Potter – 79 points

3rd: Lucrezia Sforza – 61 points

4th: Giovanni Ruspoli – 55 points

5th: Ambre de Courtois – 39 points

6th: Viktor Krum – 38 points

7th: Cedric Diggory – 33 points

8th Romeo Malatesti – 25 points

9th ex-aequo: Eleonora da Riva and Henri de Condé – 14 points

11th: Armand Coularé de Lafontaine – 12 points

12th: Geoffrey Hooper – 10 points

13th: Boris Viipuri – 9 points

14th: Lucas Gauthier – 7 points

15th: Graham Montague (not deceased yet) and Karl Schumacher (deceased) – 0 point

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**European Magical Tournament School Rankings of the Second Task**:

1st: Scuola Regina – 155 points

2nd: Durmstrang – 132 points

3rd: Hogwarts – 122 points

4th: Beauxbatons – 72 points

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**European Magical Tournament Individual Rankings after the Second Task:**

1st: Lyudmila Romanov – 177 points

2nd: Alexandra Potter – 175 points

3rd: Lucrezia Sforza – 151 points

4th: Henri de Condé – 98 points

5th: Romeo Malatesti – 95 points

6th: Eleonora da Riva – 93 points

7th: Cedric Diggory – 70 points

8th: Viktor Krum – 69 points

9th: Ambre de Courtois – 67 points

10th: Giovanni Ruspoli – 55 points

11th: Geoffrey Hooper – 39 points (wounded)

12th: Lucas Gauthier – 15 points

13th: Fleur Delacour – 10 points (wounded)

14th: Boris Viipuri – 9 points

15th Karl Schumacher – 3 points (deceased)

16th ex-aequo: Graham Montague, Cassius Warrington, Lorenzo de Medici, Pyotr Karamnov – 0 point (all deceased save Montague)

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**European Magical Tournament School Rankings after the Second Task:**

1st: Scuola Regina – 394 points

2nd: Hogwarts – 284 points

3rd: Durmstrang – 258 points

4th: Beauxbatons – 202 points

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**Author’s note**: And I think it will be enough for the Second Task. Hope all the readers will enjoy it!

I think it is the biggest chapter I’ve written for this story, though with the traffic stats of fanfiction.net being down, I will have to wait a few days to be sure.

Now the remaining days of December await. The Champions have clues to decipher...and there’s a Winter Ball among other things.