**Chapter 86**

**The First Task**

**5 November 1994, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

Dawn was here, and for once, Alexandra wasn't the only one awake. Though the sleepy expressions she was getting from the four other Ravenclaws told her the majority would prefer returning their beds.

"I don't anticipate any of you being involved in this Tournament Task." The Potter Heiress finished her small speech. "Stay careful, and in the event we are indeed competing four-by-four or individually, please write a few notes about the other Champions' performance."

"Any preferences?"

"The fields of magic they use and their speed of casting," Alexandra answered Cho's question after a moment of brainstorming. "Since it's the First Task, everyone will have to impress the judges...one way or another."

And when faced with danger, a wizard or a witch generally resorted to the magics he felt were more apt to get him out of danger and eliminate the opposition...the Ravenclaw knew that from solid experience.

"Err...okay..." Roger looked at the full-body swimsuit she had donned and that she was busy hiding under a 'normal' Hogwarts uniform. "You aren't going to wear true armour? I know Diggory, Hooper, and Warrington all intend to wear one. I mean, it's possible you are wrong with your idea of naumachia..."

Alexandra chuckled loudly.

"Alex, please stop laughing at your poor substitute."

"Morag, come on..." her red-haired friend gave her a stern look. "Fine, fine. To answer your question Roger, no I am not going to use armour. I have my own ways to protect myself, but even if I didn't, armour is a very bad idea."

The Champion of House Ravenclaw watched the red-bluish sky for a few seconds before shaking her head.

"Most likely we are going to fight in this nice Coliseum with my fellow Champions and a XXXXX-class creature. Let's take for example one of the most famous specimens of this category: the dragon. Do you really think a dragon will be discouraged by some metal protection?"

Roger swallowed. No doubt the old image of a knight unable to move being cooked in his armour by dragonfire was dominating his thoughts right now.

"No, but dragons aren't the only potential...opponents you will have to fight."

"No," Alexandra admitted. "But armour is similarly useless against them. Dementors? Armour or no armour, if you aren't able to cast an Ecclesial or a Patronus, you're screwed. Against all aquatic beasts, having that much weight is a death sentence if your enemies manage to send you to the bottom of the arena."

It wasn't the case for her, fortunately, but it would put her out of the Trial for the good minute it took to get rid of such a burden.

"A Basilisk doesn't care about armour. A Kraken won't even notice you have any. Manticores? Hydras? I can continue for a few hours. The only five 'X' where it does some good are the werewolves and the other skinchangers able to curse you with their bite and claws. But no Tournament organiser will consider putting them in an arena."

Especially as in Venetia, the English Ministry's 'beasts' were considered citizens here.

"You're taking your wand as your focus, I take it?" Cho Chang asked.

"I do. I would have loved to bring Fragarach with me," Ra's anger alone would make her day, "but we are restricted to one focus, and while I can channel magic through my sword, it just isn't versatile enough."

And for this Tournament, the 'rule of cool', as the Gryffindors so clearly supported it, was best forgotten.

The chief goal was to survive all the Tasks and be able to celebrate her fifteenth birthday. If the judges and the public were impressed and the former gave her a lot of points, it would be excellent, but survival remained the priority.

"Good!" the Asian-looking witch said brightly. "Now if you'll excuse me, I am going to see Cedric. I want to wish him good luck."

"More than good luck," Roger Davies commented after the Ravenclaw Seeker was past hearing range and unable to take offense. And he left too.

"So," Hermione coughed. "This is it."

"Yes, this is the big day." Morag added. "I hope you're not going to give us a new speech or telling us that in fact, you intend to flee as fast as possible right now?"

"No." The green-eyed Champion sighed. "I really have no wish to pay the scandalous financial penalties we were warned about in the never-ending paperwork. Don't mistake me, between certain death and economic ruin, I would choose the latter, the former is far more...permanent. What I was wondering these last few hours was...how did it come to this?"

"You will have to be more precise, I think."

"Where has the Age of Legends gone? Where are the true heroes to represent the good of humanity? Did they ever exist in the first place?"

The longer Ra was around, the more Alexandra doubted that. The 'Archmage' wasn't a creator, a ruler, or someone to further push the limits of what was done in the name of prosperity and the satisfaction of millions.

"Where now the horse and the rider?" the young witch sang. "Where is the horn that was blowing? Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing? Where is the hand on the harpstring, and the red fire glowing? Where is the spring and the harvest and the tall corn growing? They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind in the meadow. The days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow. Who shall gather the smoke of the dead wood burning, or behold the flowing years from the Sea returning?"

The Coliseum continued to stand, but in this period of semi-obscurity, it appeared inexorable...and a bit sinister.

"How? How did it come to this?"

**5 November 1994, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

It may be a bit selfish, but...Neville was really glad he wasn't a Champion, today.

The pressure, the thousands of eyes upon the Champions...it was making him nervous, and he wasn't at the heart of the public's attention.

At first, the Boy-Who-Lived had thought that the large crowd present at the Opening Ceremony, politicians and students of the Scuola Regina, were the worst they were going to receive aside from the grand solstice balls and maybe the Carnival.

Evidently, the future Longbottom had been completely wrong. The atmosphere of several days ago was just the prelude, a tiny warning, compared to what had happened since they had arrived at the Venetian school proper.

Not only had the entire population of Magical Venice seemed to have gathered for the event, hundreds of students from Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, and of course Hogwarts had been invited. And all these wizards and witches were commenting upon the competition, making their bets, and supporting their favourites, not caring if unfriendly ears listened to them. To bolster their numbers, there had to be over two dozen Ministers of Magic – Minister Fudge wasn't here, but those of France, Spain, Germany, Portugal, Bavaria, Bulgaria, and Greece, just to name a few, were present. The Wizengamot members who had bought seats were significant in numbers, but they were massively outnumbered by the European aristocracy present for the Tournament.

Under masterfully-painted artworks and their looks constantly seen in the mirrors, it was both like they were invited to a sporting event...and a political battle.

The fact that when he had said so to his grandmother he had received an expression of approval had not reassured the Gryffindor substitute in the least.

A ring tolled in the distance, and the senior judge for this task...Mohammed ben Qassim, that was his name right? Yes, the Moroccan wizard politely saluted the crowd before addressing the Champions.

"Champions, it is time."

The sixteen boys and girls all stood with stern or grim expressions...with the exception of the blonde witch of Durmstrang. But then as Neville had learned too many times these last days, this Dark Champion was utterly insane.

Crazy and monstrously dangerous, the Dark Magic swirled around her like a beast about to pounce.

Neville shouldn't show it, but he was...very relieved when she left the room. For once, he was happy the substitutes didn't have to follow the titular Champions' schedules.

Not that they were free to simply be the average spectators for the First Task, really. Neville and all the other substitutes of Hogwarts had a good hour of journalist interviews ahead of them, then photos, then parading either on a sort of levitating carriage or aboard the massive gondolas of the Scuola Regina.

It felt like an eternity, but more realistically they had to have lost two hours doing everything before they joined up with the Champions again, who all looked on edge.

Understandably, since they were all introduced on a platform dominating the arena they were going to be tossed into very soon.

The Moroccan Judge was there, and didn't waste any time keeping up the mystery.

"As you have already all guessed, the First Task today will see you opposed by an opponent which can be best described as a dangerous magical creature. Thanks to this Coliseum's advanced architecture and machinery, you will face them in their own environments: in their order of appearance, Fire, Air, Earth, and Water."

The Beast-Tamer of Africa cleared his throat.

"Your goal, and this I can't insist more, is not to fight the creature you will face. It is to retake your Tournament Clue, which has been stored inside a chest and will be located somewhere inside the arena. Since the animals have not been trained to guard them specifically, you will have more than your fair share of chances to seize them. No Wards or Enchantments have been cast to prevent you from sensing which treasure chest contains the Clue necessary for you to complete this First Task."

Mohammed ben Qassim stared at the sixteen Champions in a very aggressive stance.

"Killing the magical creature or inflicting serious injuries will be penalised, no matter how pure your intentions. The same will be true about opening chests which aren't yours and trying to hide or otherwise hamper the recovery of another Champion's Tournament Clue. Moreover, your time inside the arena is limited. You have only thirty minutes to recover your Clue. There are, after all, four sets of Champions to get through, and we don't want to be here all week. If the thirty minutes are over, you will be informed of your failure and you will leave this arena. Not doing so if you are able to move towards the exit will involve the removal of additional points."

"And if we are wounded?" Henri de Condé asked.

"If you are critically wounded and the arena's handlers believe it is necessary for you to receive help and healing, you will be evacuated," the Tournament's Judge assured the Light Champion in excellent French. "Whether the thirty minutes are over or not, we have a large security detail which will intervene if they think your life is at risk and there is no point in you continuing the Task. However, make no mistake, it is not guaranteed insurance they will be able to save you. In this arena, your best help will be yourself."

The Judge's words were somewhat good in that there was no lie...but they weren't reassuring either.

"Now let's begin the selection process." An enormous silvery basket was brought out, and for a few seconds Neville could see sixteen bowls inside, four red, four blue, four grey, and four brown. Then it darkened and became as opaque as night. Next to it, another basket was arriving, this one no doubt containing the names of the Champions. "No Champion of the same school will compete together."

What followed was several minutes where the tens of thousands of spectators began to scream every time a Champion's name was called. Neville had heard from Professor Dumbledore that this was certainly where some manipulation would happen, but everything appeared fine...which was kind of the point, he guessed.

"The selection is over." The Judge announced at last. "Here is the line-up for the First Task."

Immediately, the enormous magical panels all around the Coliseum flashed the information in bright golden letters.

*First Contest: the Fire Trial*

*Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: Geoffrey Hooper*

*Académie de Magie Beauxbatons: Henri de Condé*

*Durmstrang Institute: Karl Schumacher*

*Scuola Regina: Romeo Malatesti*

*Second Contest: the Air Trial*

*Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: Cedric Diggory*

*Académie de Magie Beauxbatons: Lucas Gauthier*

*Durmstrang Institute: Viktor Krum*

*Scuola Regina: Eleonora da Riva*

*Third Contest: the Earth Trial*

*Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: Cassius Warrington*

*Académie de Magie Beauxbatons: Ambre de Courtois*

*Durmstrang Institute: Pyotr Karamnov*

*Scuola Regina: Lucrezia Sforza*

*Fourth Contest: the Water Trial*

*Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: Alexandra Potter*

*Académie de Magie Beauxbatons: Fleur Delacour*

*Durmstrang Institute: Lyudmila Romanov*

*Scuola Regina: Lorenzo de Medici*

Neville should have felt relief for the Hogwarts Champions. Geoffrey and Cedric had strong opposition, but they should be able to handle it...in theory, at least.

And in some way, the Boy-Who-Lived felt relief...he was trying very hard to convince himself of that.

Because looking at the four Champions chosen for the Trial of Water, Neville was shivering.

*All* the Champions of that Trial were Champions of Magic, two for the Light, and two for the Dark. And then there would be this 'beast', which was certainly not going to be something small.

"This Trial is the grand meeting of the monsters," someone muttered next to him.

And Neville was tempted to tell them it was likely underestimating the size of the problem...

"Now that you are aware of who is going to compete with whom," the Judge spoke, "the twelve Champions who are not chosen for the Fire Trial will go to the waiting room. As for the four courageous Champions chosen to brave the flames of the arena, they will soon meet the deadly guardian of their artefacts...the mighty CHIMAERA!"

Any thought that Neville might have had about the Gryffindor Champion being lucky was banished.

Shit. They were truly going to face XXXXX-class creatures *and* the other Champions, weren't they?

**5 November 1994, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

Albus Dumbledore kept his calm as the crowd burst into cheers. By Fawkes' feathers, it was harder to do so than when attacked from every side at a Wizengamot session. At least during those, he could safely say there wouldn't be any deaths; the mere casting of an offensive spell was grounds for severe punishment and after a few Lords had tested him upon it in the late 1940s, no one had tried again.

But this wasn't a political joust he was going to be the spectator of today.

It was a fight against one of the most infamous cross-breeding results of the wizards of Ancient Greece: the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a dragon.

The sum of these parts was known as a Chimaera, Chimera, or 'Monstrous Beast', depending on who you asked the question to. And four Champions were going to have to fight this...unnatural creature in a fire environment, surroundings which gave an advantage to the XXXXX-class enemy, as if it needed more than the crazy wizards believing they faithfully served the will of the Powers as it had been expressed to them millennia ago.

"A Chimaera? Really?" Albus took it a triumph of diplomacy he was able to keep his voice the very embodiment of politeness itself.

"Yes, a Chimaera," the Succubus in her indecent yellow dress answered with a bright smile. "Some ICW Delegates wanted to use a Manticore, but I vetoed it. The possibility of seeing one feasting on human's flesh was too high, and besides one wrong move, one accident, and the Manticore's poison gives you instant death. While the committee wanted to give the Champions a high challenge, I felt that was too dangerous."

Dumbledore completely approved of this stance, not that he thought the Chimaera was really 'safer'. Assuredly there was no poison to slay Champions, and it was way slower than the Manticore, but its magical resistance was still extremely high, and the Manticore had not the ability to breathe a less potent version of dragonfire.

Predictably, Karkaroff scoffed.

"Too dangerous," the High Master of Durmstrang's Italian was crude and hardly pleasant to the ears. "Two-thirds of my graduating students have killed a five 'X' before they graduate."

"Strange," Sforza's smile didn't vary at all. "I was under the impression it was more in the league of one in ten."

This time one didn't need to imagine things to see the anger in the former Death Eater's eyes.

"Ridiculous rumours. Our Monster-Hunter Guild has no rivals, and we have..."

The Defeater of Grindelwald let Karkaroff bluster and pretend all he wanted. Yes, Durmstrang had a core of students who regularly fought dangerous beasts...but he didn't think it included Chimaeras. The preserves where wizards kept these creatures were all located in Greece or in the Ottoman Empire...which was certainly why both of these nations had one Judge each representing them.

"By pure curiosity," the Headmaster of Hogwarts took a glass brought by a butler and smiled after a word of thanks, "what are the other three magical creatures the Champions will have to face?"

"I admit I am also extremely interested," Madame Maxime, the giant hybrid serving as the Headmistress of Beauxbatons, intervened in the conversation.

"It is a surprise." Angelica Sforza replied, evidently savouring their inability to pierce the secrecy surrounding what exactly the First Task was about. "Fear not, Headmistress and Headmasters, I assure you it is going to be *extremely* impressive."

Yes, this was exactly what Albus was afraid of.

Alas, shouting high and loud they had to stop this Tournament would not make anyone see reason and save lives while there was still time. It would result in one political suicide, *his* political suicide, and the Tournament would continue, minus one Headmaster of Hogwarts.

And thus Albus remained silent as the latecomers of the eighty thousand-strong public – there certainly had to be that many souls in the Coliseum – found their seats and the wizards of the arena finalised the creation of the 'Fire Arena'.

It was not pretty-looking, but that was the point of using basalt and other volcanic stones, really. Forming a dark circle around the centre of the arena, there were multiple small mountains which were releasing fire at irregular intervals, artificial volcanoes which weren't telling their names.

In mere minutes, the terrain was installed.

And then the centre of the arena opened from below, and the great machinery of the Coliseum delivered a massive cage containing the monster.

Meagre consolation, it looked calm and remarkably not hungry or in a fit of anger. But this was a really meagre consolation when one saw the fangs of the lion head, the spikes of the tail, or the adamant hooves which could, according to the books, kill you in a few precise strikes.

And of course the four chests were mere feet away from the cage, which vanished in a flash of lightning, leaving the Chimaera absolutely free to roam inside the volcanic imitation of its favourite lair.

"The Champions are not going to have an easy fight," the Succubus Headmistress said.

"You have so little faith in your Champion, Headmistress?" Karkaroff would have been a perfect Slytherin at Hogwarts, given how many times he sneered. "For myself, I have no doubts my Champion is going to perform splendidly. Champion Schumacher is a scion of a family which has hunted down many dangerous beasts in Germany and beyond it."

Albus gave a glance to the blonde-haired Durmstrang student. He was certainly looking the part, the Headmaster conceded. Athletic, with a light scar on his jaw, the German wizard was seemingly not hearing the screams of the public and the wand in his right hand was not trembling. The blue eyes of Schumacher were in fact entirely focused on the Chimaera, analysing all its moves – so far, the creature was turning around the chests and the artificial volcanoes, feeding itself magically on their fire to increase its power. Add the long red robe Durmstrang-style Karl Schumacher was wearing – heavily enchanted against fire, the ex-Supreme Mugwump was ready to bet – and the young German wizard made for a splendid showing of his High Master's philosophy of life.

No less impressive was the Champion of Light ready to step onto this volcanic battlefield. Henri de Condé had donned gleaming white armour, something that wasn't going to be of great help in tricking the bestial enemy, but his Light Magic was flaring, and there wasn't a single inch of doubt on his face.

Unfortunately, there was also a Champion of the Dark. Built like a colossus, Romeo Malatesti should have been called Ares like his Dark Power, because all in him seemed to create violence. He was the tallest of the four Champions...no, of the sixteen Champions. And unlike his opponents, he had deliberately chosen to not descend into the arena with his wand, but with a sort of...it was like one had merged two swords together, leaving an ugly bronze handle in the middle. Was it as flexible and efficient as a wand? Albus Dumbledore hardly thought so, but he had not studied magic-channelling weapons for long several decades ago.

In the end, the Champion of War and Carnage had done everything to inspire fear. He was wearing heavy black armour into which screaming faces had been sculpted, and when the helmet descended on his face, there were plenty of whispers for it was the vengeful mask of an angry war god who was presented to the crowd.

Geoffrey Hooper was the fourth Champion, and Albus Dumbledore could only pray the Gryffindor had come up with a strategy in the few minutes the Champions had been granted before being led to the Coliseum's gates where they would enter the arena. Fortunately, the Champion of Minerva's House was taking things very seriously, as his red armour and the many enchantments someone had cast upon him were proving.

A gigantic hourglass was created by one of the Judges, one which would represent the thirty minutes the four wizards had to open their chests and return to the gate from where they had entered.

"CHAMPIONS! ON MY MARK! 3...2...1...BEGIN!"

And the crowd roared as the gates opened and the Chimaera, finally understanding they weren't going to let her live in the arena without a fight, began to breathe fire. A lot of fire.

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Lily Evans sat in the lodge right in time to hear to the judge-speaker's command to begin.

"Right in time, my dear," Horace Slughorn smiled. "I was wondering if you hadn't lost yourself in this crowd."

"Not at all," the female vampire returned the smile to the man who had been her Potions' mentor. "There were just concerns about the fourth beast. It woke too early, and now it wants to...well, play."

Slughorn nodded as Karl Schumacher and Romeo Malatesti ran directly towards the Chimaera, having decided on the direct approach against the fire-spitting creature.

"May I assume your presence here means the problem is...ah...resolved?"

"For now," the green-eyed Enchantress allowed the other member of the Exchequer to see her wince. "But it isn't going to stay calm for long. When the Calming Draughts lose their potency, it will be eager to play again...and in the arena, it is not going to see a difference between handlers and Champions."

"I suppose you're not terribly happy about your daughter being chosen for the Water Trial, then," Horace caressed his large moustache before taking a few sweets from the plate before him.

"No, I'm not," the red-haired vampire confessed. "However, the 'lord of the arena' may be the lesser threat compared to the Champion's competition."

Two Champions of the Light and two Champions of the Dark, and the former were the Army of Light's chosen blades? It was going to be a bloodbath...which was absolutely what the organisation she was swore to hoped for, evidently. The objective of this one was to break the First Seal, and for this one the death of a Champion at another's Champion hand was to be the trigger.

"I fully support your position upon that. Now what do you think of the four Champions fighting so far?"

"The Durmstrang Champion is too aggressive," all four young men had cast Flame-Freezing Charms to protect themselves from the fire balls of the Chimaera, but the blonde of Durmstrang was the only one who hadn't stopped his progression. "He's too reckless, he's going to get-"

The Chimaera jumped aside to avoid a streak of black light – that was a really bad curse, no way to pretend the contrary – and its tail struck like a snake. It was so fast Lily doubted the other Champions had been able to properly see the attack coming...maybe not.

Karl Schumacher, clearly, had not seen it, because the tail had impaled him above the knee, and for the first time, human blood was spilled inside the arena.

The Champion of Durmstrang screamed, and then spat several words, his magic instantly illuminating itself in a purple light of bad omen.

The Chimaera roared in anger as suddenly wounds began to materialise on its back and goat's legs.

"Not bad," Slughorn approved. "This is an interesting Blood Curse. But it's too slow, the Chimaera has phenomenal regeneration abilities..."

And its opponent was far too close to it. The beast charged and in a blow which made a lot of people wince, the German wizard received two hooves right in the chest, throwing him away...and the tail caused more damage as it left Karl's leg.

"Broken ribs at the very least," Slughorn announced with a grimace. "This Champion won't win the Trial."

The security teams definitely supported this opinion, for they immediately intervened to save Karl Schumacher, who was trying to crawl away, leaving a lot of blood on the volcanic rocks...that they were fiendishly hot had to increase the pain. Thank the Powers, there were so many wards that it was impossible for the odour of blood to reach her senses so far away.

In the shadow of Slughorn's lodge, Lily couldn't avoid a shiver of thirst arriving in her throat.

"Three minutes and already we have one Champion eliminated," the Potions Master commented. "Maybe this Trial is a bit too difficult for nearly-graduating students, no?"

"It depends on the students, I suppose..."

The round of observation was over. The Magical Champions acknowledged the obvious: they wouldn't be able to beat the Chimera by limiting themselves like they had done so far. When the Chimera spat fire again at Malatesti, the Champion of Ares' answer was a storm of black blades he had conjured from the basalt of the arena.

The Chimaera received two of these improvised swords in the belly, and would have received far more, if a storm of light reacting like sand had not vanished most of the conjuration in the next seconds.

"GET OUT OF MY WAY!" The student of the Scuola Regina's shout was heard by the entire stadium, and generated a lot of laughter...before Romeo Malatesti conjured more blades. A lot of blades. Thousands, at the very minimum. And then they rained down over the stadium.

In mere seconds, the volcanic ground was brutalised as the Chimaera and the Champions of Horus and Ares fought a merciless three-way fight.

"Can that sword do something more than conjuring weapons, Lily?"

"I don't think so. It is certainly a legacy of Ares to his Champions. And this Aspect of War isn't a versatile thing." Romeo Malatesti was throwing around axes, spears and javelins, daggers, maces, hammers, and other types of weapons, but his magical focus, his double sword, wasn't able to do anything more than that. "I think he should have taken his wand for this Trial."

"Perhaps or perhaps not," the old wizard touched his moustache before returning to eating the delicacies he loved so much. "It certainly doesn't seem to do any good for that poor Hogwarts Champion."

"Ah yes, the Hogwarts Champion...what is his name again?"

To be honest, the green-eyed vampire had almost totally forgotten him as the Light Champion summoned an avalanche of ice and Malatesti did his best to change it into a large torrent of water.

"Geoffrey Hooper," the Potions Master chided her gently. "I believe he's a Gryffindor."

"He's out of his league." And that was her being polite. Oh, the brown-haired boy was regularly casting the Flame-Freezing Charms upon himself and throwing various ice spells to not be burned, but it was the kind of basics anyone was expecting from a Champion today.

Unfortunately for him, Lily supposed, his Transfiguration abilities weren't even able to hamper the Chimaera or the two other Champions. Fortunately, the main threats had no wish to waste their time on someone who managed to conjure one or two dogs from stones...the canines lasted less than ten seconds after being transfigured.

"Now I regret not asking Alexandra about the other Champions..." the mother of the Champion of Death admitted. "Surely Minerva McGonagall has someone better in her House?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," Horace Slughorn shrugged. "Like your talented daughter and I mutually agreed, we didn't speak of politics during her Potion tutoring. I know the Gryffindors are lamentable in the noble Art to which I dedicated my life...but I knew that already from the preliminary I watched."

"Severus' spite towards Gryffindors will be the doom of several generations of Potion-makers." The shadow of the girl she had once been was extremely disappointed in her ex-friend. But it wasn't exactly a surprise. The self-proclaimed 'Half-Blood Prince' was a true genius in Potions...and one whose mind was best suited to cutting-edge research and high-level brewing, not teaching. "You haven't tried to recruit him for your division?"

"I petitioned the Queen once after Riddle's soul experiments finally got him killed while trying to play with prophecies," the bald wizard revealed to her. "It was deemed too risky given his...dubious allegiances."

The Apprentice to Angelica Sforza could have told Slughorn she was sorry to hear that, but it would have been a lie. Snape and she had cut ties long ago, and now nothing remained of their friendship, even the memories felt bitter and rancid.

The fight in the arena had been going on for twelve minutes when the Light Champion finally did something which gave him a decisive advantage: he transfigured a cage of rocks and metal for the Chimaera...before summoning a strong gale which pushed the Champion of Ares straight towards it.

"YOU WILL PAY FOR THAT!" the irate Dark Champion bellowed.

"And that's why Athena always won over Ares in the myths," Slughorn shrugged as Henri de Condé ran to open a chest, and by the way the French pure-blood smiled grabbing a miniature ankh of silver, he had opened the right chest.

"Shouldn't we be more worried about-"

A horrid screeching and a roar assaulted her ears at that moment.

Turning her head to focus her vampiric vision on the duel below, Lily frowned. Romeo Malatesti and the Chimaera were entangled in a mortal embrace...which should have been the death of any human, Champion or not.

But the spikes and the natural weapons of the dragon's tail were unable to shed the blood of the Champion of Ares like they had shredded his black armour. For there was no skin to pierce anymore, but metal. The skin had turned into bronze metal.

"Ah," Slughorn stopped eating and showed a very serious expression, "so that's his Animagus form..."

The Champion soon lost all resemblance with a human, as gigantic wings unfurled from his back, and a monstrous beak materialised to bite deep into the Chimaera's flesh. Powerful talons went on to replace the legs. Soon there was a gigantic – and very ugly – avian creature dominating physically the Chimaera.

"A Stymphalian Bird," Lily said.

"I always preferred the name 'Stymphalian Vulture', personally," Slughorn replied. "And it certainly seems the Champion of Horus has decided discretion is the better part of valour."

"He is a smart Champion," his former student spoke the words with amusement. "Far more intelligent than what I was told to expect from an agent of the Trinity."

Yes, Henri de Condé was running like all hells were in pursuit...which was not far from an exaggeration.

A gong rang as the Beauxbatons student successfully left the arena in a time of fifteen minutes and a few seconds.

"And we have our victor for the Trial of Fire."

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The waiting room reserved to the Champions was absolutely superb. The Elves and the other members of the support staff were answering within seconds to each and every request a Champion made, no matter how difficult.

And Alexandra was sure it was not a coincidence most of the decoration was Bacchus-themed. It was subtle enough to not raise any suspicion – after all to most people, it was just the God of Wine and Madness, right?

Only the Champions knew Dionysus/Bacchus was a Power of Madness...Madness and Confusion, truly, though sometimes under certain aspects and a few eras, it had been considered part of Desire or Corruption.

But it had always been considered part of the 'Dark deities'. And the Champions of the Light present in the waiting room were aware of it.

The Champion of Innocence, Eleonora da Riva, was taking it as a good joke. The same couldn't be said about Fleur Delacour or Lorenzo de Medici. These two were glaring at everything and everyone, though when they appeared to look at her, the scowl was turning to outright hatred.

And she was going to fight the Water Trial with those two. Joy.

The Potter Heiress was finishing a conversation with Cedric Diggory about Fred and George Weasley organising gambling wherever they went when the red lights next to the door flickered out. It wasn't a major loss of light, as the other illuminations gained in brightness, but no one could miss the signal.

"So the Fire Trial is over," Lyudmila Romanov opened an eye and closed it again before yawning. "Did anyone die?"

The question could have been directed at anyone, but Alexandra had no doubt she was the intended recipient.

"No," the green-eyed Champion of Hogwarts answered. "No one died from this Trial. I can't say more than that, however."

"I feel Romeo's presence," Lucrezia grinned. "He is alive...and embarrassed. Or is it angry and frustrated?" The Succubus passed a hand on the absolutely ridiculous tiny piece of clothes she used as her 'Champion's robes'. There were bikinis which showed less skin than that...and Lucrezia hadn't even the excuse of being part of the Water Trial and needing a swimsuit. "I think the Champion of Horus beat him."

"Karl Schumacher," Viktor Krum began in a grouchy voice, "is no novice when it comes to dangerous animals."

The Dark Queen barked in laughter. It was short, but everyone went instantly silent.

"He doesn't understand when he's outmatched, Mr. Bulgarian Seeker. Be careful to not follow in his steps."

The door opened and one of the ten Judges appeared. It was the Greek wizard, Konstantinos Hippasos, who happened to be a Transfiguration Master and a retired Monster-Hunter.

"The Fire Trial is over. The Air Trial is about to begin."

There was nothing more to be said. One by one, Cedric Diggory, Lucas Gauthier, Viktor Krum and Eleonora da Riva abandoned their seats and left the waiting room. The door closed magically thirty seconds later, leaving the last eight Champions to wait again.

Waiting. This Tournament certainly made controlling your nerves and relying on your patience a trial in itself.

"If Hooper is alive, Diggory should not-"

"Shut up, Warrington."

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"Good news, Geoffrey Hooper survived the First Task...and the Healers should have no difficulties healing his burns, no?"

Morag thought Hermione was too optimistic here.

"They will have no trouble keeping him alive, at least. But no complications from those burns?" The Irish Heiress grimaced. "The Chimaera roasted him several times, at the end."

Once the Champion of Beauxbatons had broken the deadlock, the situation had brutally changed, and not in Hogwarts' favour. Condé successful, Romeo Malatesti had slammed into the Chimaera and wounded it long enough to recover his 'Tournament Clue' before flying away and completing the First Task in seventeen minutes and three seconds. As a result, Geoffrey Hooper, Champion of Gryffindor, had found himself against a very angry Chimaera which had just been wounded. Incidentally, the species was noted to be extremely violent even in good circumstances.

Geoffrey had done his best, but alone against a XXXXX-class beast, his best wasn't good enough. His repertoire of Transfiguration and Charms using ice were pitifully small, and the Gryffindor was far slower than her, never mind Alexandra.

"He lasted thirty minutes and made a good showing," Nigel said as he wrote notes at a frantic rate. "The judges will grade him better than Schumacher."

"Schumacher is going to get himself demolished by the judges." Morag raised her head. "And speaking of the Basilisk..."

The two Champions who had no need of the Healers were back in front of the ten Judges. They were quite a contrast, these two. Condé was really pretty, and his armour and his protections were near-immaculate and undamaged. Romeo Malatesti, by contrast, had his entire equipment ruined, with the exception of his massive double-sword. He towered over the Beauxbatons Champions, he was that tall, but his disappointment was visible from the other side of the Coliseum.

The visage of Condé flashed first, and ribbons of blue light came out of the Judges' wands. It was mostly a mix of '8' and '9'. Not surprising. The blonde French had not been fantastic, but he had completed the Task by being clever and his spells had done the job. On the magical mirrors and the diverse projection instruments, the result materialised a second later.

**Henri de Condé: 84 points**

"Not bad," Daphne Greengrass commented from behind her, "he's not going to win the First Task, but he hasn't lost that many points. I'm ready to bet he's going in the top five after everyone has been in the arena."

"Fred, did someone say the word 'bet'?"

"I think so, my dear George, I think so..."

"Shush you," Hermione called.

"It's the Champion of the Scuola Regina next," Lyre de Male-Foi ignored the agitation and kept her eyes on the Judges. "A lot of '7', they weren't impressed by how he tried to feed the Champion of Beauxbatons to the Chimaera...and failed in the bargain."

"Looking at him," Morag declared, "that Champion is aware he screwed up."

But there were six other Tasks after this one. And while the Venetian Champion had lost many points and squandered the element of surprise for his Animagus form – and seriously, how many mythical animals were there to wait in the shadows? – but he had not suffered a major reverse. At the end, the Stymphalian Bird Animagus received eight '7', one '8' and one '6'. The addition was rather easy to do.

**Romeo Malatesti: 70 points**

"And now for Hogwarts..." Fred's voice was rather serious for once. "Oh damn, that's not good."

The first Judge, Mohammed ben Qassim, had indeed begun with a '2', and the South American woman after him agreed, as she showed the same number. It was a bit better after them...in that they were a lot of '3' and even two '4', but the Greek Judge gave him another '2'. The final result was without appeal.

**George Hooper: 29 points**

"Harsh," George criticised. "Come on, Geoffrey was close to opening his chest twice! And his Transfigurations would have worked as distractions if Malatesti didn't constantly blow them apart."

"I think they took it into account," Hermione replied. "The problem is...was...he didn't succeed in getting his artefact. If he had, they would have given him fifty points. At least I think it is how they are grading."

"Well, I think it is unfair," Fred said while throwing a small firework in the air to provide some animation. Ironically, with the Durmstrang seats not far from them, the attention of the crowd was far from them. "At the preliminaries, we were-"

"This isn't the preliminaries anymore," Morag interrupted him. "This is the real Tournament. And the Judges aren't paid to be your friends."

As if to approve her words, the scores for the fourth and last Champion arrived.

**Karl Schumacher: 3 points**

"Look at the face of his Headmaster, I think the guy isn't going to be complimented..."

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"Merlin's pants," Angelina swore. "Geoffrey got himself properly destroyed against this Chimaera. Do you think we can go visit him?"

"Not while the Trial is happening," Neville replied, remembering the information from the papers they had been forced to sign. "We will have to wait until all Champions have participated."

And by the time everything was over, a few more Champions would certainly be in the hands of the Healers. This Tournament...it was certainly no joke.

"What was up with this ugly bird?" Ron asked. "Its feathers and body were made of metal...that should be outright impossible..."

"It's a Stymphalian Bird," Neville declared. "It's one of the animals the Champions are given as Animagus form by their Powers..."

Neville didn't like coincidences, but seriously, one of the creatures involved in the Trials of Hercules here and with a Champion of the Dark? Seriously?

"At least Cedric won't have to fight him in the Trial of Air." Angelina frowned, all the while Neville was thinking it would have been best to have Geoffrey not against that monster...but what was done was done. "And what are they doing to the Coliseum?"

In mere minutes, the black-coloured arena, which had looked like a miniature volcano for the Chimaera Trial, was transformed into...a rather mountainous landscape. There were enormous rocks, but brown and covered in grass. They were gigantic pillars, Roman-style, but so immense they couldn't have been used for any house. And then from nowhere gigantic ropes were summoned, and uncountable wooden catwalks were added. The sum of these magical creations created a sort of air labyrinth...which was very, very high above the ground.

Leo swallowed nervously, and Neville wasn't far from imitating him. A fall may not be fatal...maybe.

The Chimaera was long stunned and disappeared into the Coliseum's depths when the central hole opened again, revealing a gigantic animal Neville and all Gryffindors recognised instantly.

"A Griffin! They have brought a Griffin to the Tournament!"

The bird screeched before sitting on its backside and waiting.

Seconds later, miniature tornadoes began to materialise in the arena, and after long seconds, the winds grew more powerful. Something which did no good for all the catwalks and the ropes above it.

And the chests containing the Tournament Clues? They were atop the tall pillars.

"The Griffin is made more powerful by the winds...better to not take the wrong chest." The Boy-Who-Lived said weakly. The Champions had only thirty minutes to succeed. There wouldn't be time enough for three tries.

"CHAMPIONS! ON MY MARK! 3...2...1...BEGIN!"

None of the Champions had seen the disastrous example of Schumacher, but none of them raced to imitate him. The winds were violent, and the maze of ropes and catwalks was as much a mystery to them as it was for the public. Plus there was the Griffin, which for the moment stood unconcerned, but if the legends were true, the higher they rose, the more risk the noble animal of Godric's coat of arms would consider them a challenge to its mastery of the skies. And the front half, including the big beak and the talons, were those of a giant eagle...

"Go, Diggory! Go!" Leo shouted. "It's your chance to shine!"

But it wasn't Diggory who acted first. It was Krum.

The professional Quidditch Player had almost been buried by the journalists on his way to the Coliseum, but now he was transfiguring rocks into...

"Is he trying to build himself a broom?" The words escaped his mouth before Neville controlled them.

"It looks like it...wow, the Braking Charms are complicated..." Angelina was incredibly impressed now. "It isn't going to give him a Firebolt, but..."

Krum finished his work in record time as the Beauxbatons Champion and Diggory were barely trying to stay on the edge of their first catwalk...the support platform was moving like it was caught in a violent storm, and it wasn't far from the truth.

Then Krum jumped on his broom and soared in the air.

The reaction of the Griffin was immediate. While until now, the majestic animal had been content to make sure his feathers were impeccable, now it soared high and fast, in pursuit of the Bulgarian Seeker.

Krum, who had been fingers away from touching a chest, was forced to move his hand as a large beak snapped very close to where it had been.

Human and avian eyes met each other...and the pursuit began.

Neville fancied himself to be a very good Seeker, in all honesty. But when he saw the air moves Krum was doing right now, the Gryffindor boy had to admit the Bulgarian was surpassing him so much he was nothing more than a talented amateur. The Griffin was fast. And there was a maze of ropes to navigate through. And yet, Krum was holding his own, managing to keep the Griffin several feet away for several minutes...enough time for the blue-armoured Beauxbatons Champion to arrive on the last catwalk next to the western pillar.

The Griffin reacted promptly. One powerful screech, and it abandoned Krum's pursuit, before racing to attack the brown-haired French. He tried several powerful Charms...and none of them worked, as the Griffin used debris of the storm to parry the magic.

The Griffin slammed into the surprised Champion, and struck him with its right talon.

The Beauxbatons Champion – Lucas Gauthier – fell from the catwalk and if the wizards handling security had not all cast 'Arresto Momentum' immediately, he would have died from the fall. As it was, the wound on his chest looked incredibly serious and he was evacuated in all haste to the Healers.

Some tales said Griffins had extremely long memories, and now the eagle-headed predator justified them. It jumped from the catwalk and raced to resume the pursuit with Krum. The Bulgarian Seeker tried to use both wand and transfigured debris to lose his pursuer, but two minutes later, he committed a mistake...and that was all the Griffin needed.

And after evading what had to be powerful Bone-breaking Curses, the Griffin was in no mood for mercy. Krum barely had the time to descend one metre above the ground before the winged animal's vengeance descended upon him. His back lacerated, his improvised broom reverting to rocks, the Durmstrang Champion was going to have several nasty scars from this Trial. And he was eliminated, just like that.

"Cedric has nearly reached his chest! He is going to open it!"

"Yeah...and the Griffin has seen him."

And that wasn't the sum of the bad news. Neville had been close enough at the ceremony to see which 'Tournament Clue' the Champions had received each. He didn't need to wait for the disappointment to show on Diggory's face to know it wasn't the good artefact.

But the Hufflepuff Champion reacted fast, perhaps his reflexes of a Seeker.

"AVIFORS! AVIFORS! AVIFORS! AVIFORS!"

The Transfiguration spell was powerful. In four incantations, the older boy had changed countless ropes and two catwalks into hundreds of golden birds, something that troubled the Griffin greatly...

"The Griffin is a protector of birds," Angelina explained before cheering for the Hufflepuff again. "Cedric has found a good distraction! Go for the next chest, Cedric!"

Tens of thousands of voices shouted alongside her, so whatever she shouted wasn't heard...and it was too optimistic, in the end. The Griffin had seen Cedric, and it didn't forget him. Plus all that Transfiguration had exhausted him.

Unlike Krum and Gauthier, Diggory avoided the talons. He couldn't avoid the powerful tornado the Griffin conjured with its wings. The Judges had to cast their Charms for the Badger not to die as he crashed against the ground, and another Champion had failed the Trial.

Three out of the game...there was only one Champion left.

Eleonora da Riva hadn't moved at all in the last ten minutes, making a lot of wand moves for no visible result.

Finally she shook her head and placed her hand back in her pocket. Then she drew an enormous steak from another pocket. Yes, a true steak...Neville knew instinctively it wasn't a magical conjuration.

The Griffin's reaction was once again fast. It landed right in front of her...and the Champion of Innocence began to feed him.

"Err..." Leo was gob-smacked, like much of the stadium. "Isn't it...against the rules or something?"

"We heard the Judges' rules," Angelina reacted from the shock which had seized the spectators. "There is nothing forbidding you from feeding the poor misunderstood XXXXX-class creature..." The Gryffindor Chaser laughed nervously. "I mean, who would have thought about that?"

After the feeding, petting time. The Champion of Vesta – suddenly her white armour was appearing less and less like a coincidence – began to caress the Griffin like it was her new pet. And the gigantic half-eagle half-lion was particularly eager to let her touch its white and brown claws.

"What is next? She's going to ask it for a ride to the top of the pillar?"

"Err...Leo..."

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"That was...unconventional." Headmistress Maxime's words had the merit of accurately summing-up what had just happened...though only as a considerable understatement.

It certainly wasn't every day you saw a witch charm an XXXXX-class creature, and a Griffin in particular, into becoming one's friend instead of an opponent. And while people had successfully ridden on the backs of Hippogriffs for centuries, the number of wizards who had befriended Griffins was far smaller.

"This is cheating!" Karkaroff seethed. "Evidently, your Champion knew what sort of opponent she was going to face! I demand-"

"Be careful about your allegations of cheating, High Master Karkaroff," the Succubus interrupted him, her golden-painted nails almost returning to their natural shape of claws. "The ICW security teams captured several individuals of ill-repute near the Coliseum yesterday. And no, I certainly didn't inform her of what this First Task was about."

"A majority of the XXXXX-class predators love raw meat as a light snack," Dumbledore was forced once more to approve the creature's words, something which sickened him, but Karkaroff wasn't exactly presenting good arguments. "I suppose Headmistress Sforza's Champion bet on the magical beast being carnivorous. It is a...reasonable assumption. It would have worked on the Chimaera too...maybe."

The Chimaera wouldn't have refused the meat, Albus was sure of that much.

"I'm unsure if the Aria of Serenity Champion da Riva cast beforehand would have worked on a Chimaera." The Succubus added. "But it worked beautifully on the Griffin...not a feather out of place, isn't it remarkable?"

Albus hated this. He really hated this. But there was no way he could pretend the Scuola Regina had not won the Air Trial of the First Task.

"High Master Karkaroff?"

The Headmaster of Durmstrang grumbled but did not leave his seat. If his eyes had been able to cast lightning, Angelica Sforza would have been a dead Succubus. But he wasn't, and the Dark Creature wasn't intimidated by mere glares.

There was nothing to do but wait for the scores, which came promptly.

**Eleonora da Riva: 79 points**

"Not bad," the Succubus remarked, "most of the points she lost must have been for the time she took befriending the Griffin."

It was true that out of the three successful Champions, the Champion of Innocence had taken the longest time, so far. Yet her score was higher than the Dark Champion of War. A small victory for the Light, Dumbledore thought.

It was then Champion Diggory's turn...and the grimace was deep inside his head. For all the warnings of severe grading, Albus had not prepared for such bad results.

**Cedric Diggory: 37 points**

It was better than Geoffrey Hooper...but not that much. Worse, it was the second Champion of Hogwarts who failed to get his 'Tournament Clue'. Half of his Champions would go into the Second Task without any warning unless there was something to discover from other Champion's knowledge and secretly-delivered information.

**Viktor Krum: 31 points**

"What? His flying alone was worth forty points!" Karkaroff raged.

Well, the Transylvanian vampire – a former professional of Quidditch himself – had given him a '10'. The other Judges hadn't shared his enthusiasm, unfortunately for the Bulgarian Seeker. But yes, Albus agreed it had been remarkable flying. And that it hadn't been enough to seize his goal.

**Lucas Gauthier: 8 points**

The half-giantess sighed but didn't vocally protest. The boy's strategy had not been that good, and his spells had neither been imaginative nor appropriate to deter the Griffin from striking him down.

Still, the Defeater of Grindelwald wasn't going to speak about it, not when Beauxbatons was ahead of Hogwarts so far.

Albus could have accepted some draws or losses by a few points, a second place here and there. But Hogwarts wasn't in second position right now; it was third, with no Champion having successfully completed the First Task. Beauxbatons had one. The Scuola Regina had two. Only Durmstrang had managed to fail more badly than his two Champions...and it was mostly for the Fire Trial, because if he had to be honest, the performances of Viktor Krum and Cedric Diggory had ended close to each other. His Champion had just showed more magical proficiency than broom-making.

There were only two contests to save the day. Except the Trial to come was the Earth Trial, and it was Cassius Warrington who was the Champion of Hogwarts for this challenge. Albus tried to not think badly of the...follower of Tom...but the Slytherin Champion had hardly impressed him during the preliminaries.

Did the boy have what it takes to face one of the most dangerous creatures of their world?

"What sort of magical creature did you select for the Earth Trial, by pure curiosity? A Wyrm?"

Those were tough and could soak up a massive amount of spell-fire, but weren't true wizard-killers.

"I'm afraid not. To be honest, this one I wanted to veto, but Judge ben Qassim was particularly insistent in bringing it to face some Champions. He called it...a symbol for the new European Magical Tournament."

"Please," Karkaroff scoffed before watching seriously as the amused expression of Sforza was nowhere to be seen. "You aren't serious. The Champions are going to face..."

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"Hermione, please tell me it's a nightmare."

The bookworm of the Exiled shook her head.

"If it's a nightmare, we're both living it..."

"Shit," the MacDougal Heiress whispered. "Morrigan save us, they've chosen a Cockatrice to be the third monster."

Cockatrice. The description seemed funny if you explained it from far away. The head of a rooster, the wings of a bat, and the tail of a reptile, with a body whose upper half was rooster and the lower half –minus the talons – was half-reptile.

Who was afraid of a rooster? No one.

Who was afraid of a Cockatrice? Nearly everyone sane.

The wizard who had cross-bred so many species into one animal body had not left his name to the next generation, likely because his creation had killed him.

See, the problem wasn't so much that the wizard had crossbred a rooster with a bat and a lizard.

It was that he had infused it with so much magic that the final result was the size of a middle-sized dragon.

Now, this could have been bad enough to make it a XXXX-class animal on its own. But the – insane – creator had believed it wouldn't be enough. The talons of the 'gigantic rooster' had been changed until they were powerful enough to break stone. The wings were still too small to allow the creature to fly, but it could make jumps few animals could equal. And the reptile tail had been altered until there was a bone mass at the tip, making it a weapon which could destroy most enemies in a single blow...including humans and all non-magical creatures.

And then, in what had to be a fit of madness, the petrifying breath was added into the Arithmantic equation.

The Cockatrice was so dangerous there was no question it deserved its place into the XXXXX category. It was terrifyingly fast, it had all the weapons to be a wizard-killer...and it never shied from using them against wizards and witches when it had the opportunity.

It went without saying the breeding of Cockatrices was forbidden, and only their unnatural long life had made sure the species wasn't extinct. That and no one was exactly sure how to kill a Cockatrice. Its skeleton was ridiculously magic-resistant. It regenerated horrifyingly fast from lethal injuries.

And one Cockatrice was single-handily responsible for ending the ancient Tri-Wizard Tournament. During one of the contests of 1792, the 'not-rooster' had gone on a rampage, killed all three Champions, destroyed its surroundings, massacred half of the judges, severely wounded the Headmasters of the schools which were the other half of the jury, petrified hundreds of spectators, and generated a monstrous chaos the likes of which had led to the immediate cancellation of the Tournament.

What giants, mass assassinations, dragons, political feuds, scandalous love affairs, and unofficial wars had failed to accomplish, a Cockatrice had achieved it.

"There's a silver lining to this."

"You will have to tell me, Hermione, because I'm not finding it..."

"Alexandra won't have to waste her time going after Warrington.'

Morag stared for a second or an eternity, before nodding.

"Right, right...they're summoning the Champions to let them see the beast from above."

"It's the first time I am really feeling sorry for a Death Eater."

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"You're feeling it too?"

"Yes," Alexandra grimaced openly. "There's a Dark Creature in the arena."

If anything, her words seemed to increase the good humour of the Dark Queen. So much the Potter Heiress began to really wonder if the Champion of Durmstrang was really weaker than normal in watery conditions.

"They're going to have fun..."

For once, Alexandra and the two other Light Champions looked at each other and shared the same thoughts; the tsar's daughter was utterly crazy.

"No, fun isn't among the top hundred of words I would have chosen," the Champion of the Morrigan replied. "They can't have selected a Basilisk for the Earth Trial, but there aren't dozens of XXXXX-class beasts which are inherently Dark. I sincerely doubt given...past disagreements that the British Ministry agreed to release Dementors. That leaves..."

"It's a Cockatrice," the Champion of Loki confirmed. "I saw one in a Greek preserve once. I never had the opportunity to fight one, though."

Of course, trust the Dark Queen to be disappointed to not have fought a beast most wizards were terrified to be introduced to...

Fleur Delacour smirked. In her blue-gold magical armour, she was looking like a Princess...a very blonde, very arrogant royal princess, it had to be said.

"At least we're going to be rid of a Champion of the Dark within thirty minutes. The whore has no chance of surviving against a Cockatrice."

Alexandra raised an eyebrow at this...extraordinarily bigoted affirmation.

"Oh, you find my words offensive, abomination of Death?"

"I don't find it very polite," the green-eyed Ravenclaw replied icily. "But I am more concerned by the reasoning which leads to an idiot pretending her competition has no chance when she is wearing heavy armour when we're going to fight in a gigantic lake."

The daughter of the French Minister laughed. Okay, she was indeed very stupid.

"They aren't going to drown the entire Coliseum and make it an internal sea, little girl," French was a beautiful language...except when it was wielded with the condescension the blonde used. "There will be a cascade and a semi-river at best. Besides, what sort of XXXXX-class monster do they have available? No reserve will allow their aquatic monsters to leave their boundaries..."

The interesting reaction came not from the Champion of Life, but from Romanov. Suddenly, the Champion of Chaos had flinched, as if Romanov finally acknowledged that the fight was going to take place outside of her element of predilection...

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Henri was pleasantly surprised to survive his Trial, and unharmed to boot.

The Fire Trial had been tough, the de Condé scion wasn't going to deny it, but it had been manageable. The opposition had not been that strong, or in the case of Malatesti, powerful but not strategically gifted.

As he entered the lodge reserved by the organisation for him, Henri saw the Champion of Ares glare at him as they both climbed up the stairs, returning from the vast infirmary wing where their presence had been made mandatory. The Dark Champion of War was going to be a problem for the next Tasks. Not so much because he was loyal to the Exchequer; in fact Henri didn't think the young Venetian noble was more than an ally of the Trinity's hereditary enemy...but during this Fire Trial, his skills had decisively scored a victory against Romeo Malatesti. And the student of Scuola Regina was going to think that he'd been done a wrong and come back for a revenge match. This was...problematic. For all the knowledge granted by the Trials of Hercules, Henri didn't know how you got rid of a Stymphalian Bird. The fires of Chimaera had failed to burn the metal feathers, and that had been no normal fire.

But that could wait for another day. The beast at the centre of the arena wouldn't...it attracted all his attention the moment he saw it.

"Is it a Cockatrice?" He asked rhetorically to his father.

"Yes, son," the Head of House De Condé nodded. "Congratulations on your first place and your victory."

"Thank you, father."

A quick look at the mirrors still showing the rankings confirmed his father's words: he was still in the lead, though Romeo Malatesti had gone down from second to third place. No wonder Eleonora had seemed so pleased when she arrived a few minutes ago – they had not been able to speak with each other, of course, the Healers were too busy examining them to ensure there were no post-trial wounds which were ignored.

Yes, so far, he had made an excellent Trial...five points of lead against Eleonora, fourteen against Malatesti, and the other Champions were so far behind they weren't in the same contest...assuming they weren't replaced by their substitutes for the Second Task. Horus knew Lucas was certainly going to be out for it, since the Griffin had not missed him with its talons, and the natural weapons of a XXXXX-class creature bit deep...and his fellow Champion had made an impressive fall which would have killed him if the Judges had not slowed it down.

But back to the main threat present...the Cockatrice.

The bell tolled to announce the beginning of the Earth Trial, and none of the Champions rushed to face their rooster-headed enemy.

Good, they weren't raving madmen...and madwomen.

"What is the Champion of Lust doing?"

The question had come from his mother, as Lucrezia Sforza was...kneeling in her very indecent attire...no, not kneeling...

"She's conjuring herself some armour from the very power of the arena... armour imbued with the power of-"

Of course. The Griffin had been sent away, but despite the changes to the arena, its power had been spread around, and for all the change of decoration - mainly piles of rocks, fake trees and the like – the air magic was still strong.

"She's going to have armour which will negate the petrifying breath of the Cockatrice," Henri said as the Scuola Regina's Champion stood in new argent armour, which while still body-tight, was far less revealing than her previous choice of clothes...and far more adequate to fight something as dangerous as a Cockatrice.

"The beast has other weapons, son."

"And I'm sure she has a plan to deal with them..."

Fleur Delacour had so constantly lambasted the Succubus Headmistress' daughter that it was almost easy to forget this Champion of the Dark had won her preliminaries fair and square.

Several elegant moves of her hands, and an illusion flashed into existence; where there had been one Sforza, there were now dozens, and they all charged towards the Cockatrice.

The beast naturally took it as a challenge – which it was, to be fair – and roused itself from the position it had chosen to watch over the chests. Its first tail strike vanished four or five illusionary opponents, but the Champion of Lust conjured more and more, before throwing what had to be overpowered Tickling Charms.

Tickling Charms? Yes, they were exactly that. Advanced ones, though...and they worked. The Cockatrice was frustrated striking empty wind, and relied more and more on its petrifying breath to saturate the zone near the chests while circling around, which was all the opening Lucrezia Sforza needed. In a formidable, inhuman jump, the Venetian witch evaded the Cockatrice, raised more illusions, this time both of she and enormous...roosters, further enraging the Cockatrice and providing plenty of distraction. Five seconds later, she had her Tournament Clue in hand, a scarf of red metal and rubies, and was sprinting back to the exit, relying on her illusions to cover her retreat...which absolutely worked, as when the Cockatrice had finished dealing with all the unreal opponents, the armoured Succubus was long beyond its reach.

Henri de Condé knew this Champion was going to be a pain to beat in the succession of Tasks...before she finished in eight minutes and forty-six seconds. Horus' wings, the Succubus was going to be at ninety points if the Judges were fair...and so far they had been.

"This was an extremely good performance," his father applauded like tens of thousands of spectators, and his mother and himself joined him. The Venetian seats were particularly ecstatic, as after all they knew like him that with a performance like this, the Scuola Regina had definitely won this contest, and with three out of four Champions having achieved the main objective, the host school was going to win the First Trial. Cheers went louder and more delirious as the seconds passed.

"Yes, I think everyone is going to consider her a favourite for the Tournament's victory now." Henri admitted freely. "I can't say the same about the three Champions still in the arena."

Ambre in her golden armour was trying to throw conjured weapons at long-range, while the Durmstrang and Hogwarts Champions showed their proficiency in offensive Dark Curses. Which was kind of expected for the Institute, far less so for Hogwarts...

"What would you do if you were in their positions, son?"

Henri frowned. That was a very good question.

"I would try to use powerful Wind battle-spells, so that the petrifying clouds are banished every time the Cockatrice breathes them," save the chests, protected by powerful enchantments, the centre of the arena had taken a lifeless grey appearance, as the vegetation and the rocks bore the full effects of the Dark petrifying power of the Cockatrice. "Then like Sforza I would try to create a maximum of physical conjurations, preferably human-sized, to hide among. I am not good enough at illusions, but Transfiguration should be an equal alternative. A few spells like the Disillusionment Charm to hide from view and trick the Cockatrice's senses...really, given the destructive power of what they're against, frontal assault is impossible."

"It seems two of your fellow Champions aren't of the same opinion as you, son."

Henri almost had the urge to strike his head against the floor when he saw that indeed, after a brief conversation, the Champions of Hogwarts and Durmstrang had decided to unite their efforts...and rush towards the chests, totally disregarding every prudent move they'd made so far. What were they thinking? Yes, the sand in the hourglass was near the half-mark now, but-

The Cockatrice jumped.

Henri froze, like he was sure both his parents and most of the stadium had.

Intellectually, he knew the Cockatrice had the ability to do that, but to read about it in a book and to see it in reality were two entirely different things.

The Champions didn't freeze like he did.

It didn't matter.

The Cockatrice landed, far too close to the Hogwarts Champion and its beak struck so fast...

The Champion of Hogwarts was devoured and then the Cockatrice spat out two parts which were more or less the upper body and the lower one...with enormous parts missing.

The handlers and security wizards precipitated themselves, rising shields against the Cockatrice, but Henri knew there was no saving the fallen Champion.

First death of the Tournament, and the cross-breeding of a rooster, bat, and reptile mixed with vile Dark Magic turned its malign intelligence against the Durmstrang Champion...

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Before this autumn, Alexandra wouldn't have felt the death of a Champion, whether he or she was sworn to a Power or not.

Now she did...and the Champion of the Morrigan even got a prime seat to his last moments before that imbecile of Slytherin got himself sent across the Veil.

"What kind of imbecile thinks fighting a Cockatrice two-on-one is a good idea?" the Potter Heiress asked whimsically, before realising the three other Champions of course had listened to her words.

"Problems?" Lyudmila Romanov bared her teeth, her new black swimsuit visible allowing the incredible feat of making her more dangerous in appearance than when she wore plate armour.

"My Headmaster definitely has one," the Champion of Ravenclaw snarked, "Hogwarts is one Champion short. Warrington committed suicide by Cockatrice."

"You're expecting us to believe you have grown so powerful as to..." Alexandra ignored the useless prattle of the sword of Athena and Champion of Unity, Lorenzo de Medici.

A second wave of power echoed not far, and the black-haired witch had a prime view upon a second demise.

"And Pyotr Karamnov got himself petrified before the Cockatrice smashed his stone head with its tail," the Champion of Death added. "All my condolences to the Durmstrang Institute for this tragic loss."

"Ha!" the Dark Queen exclaimed, before adopting a regretful expression which was absolutely fake. "Condolences accepted." Her tone became absolutely vicious after these two words. "He fancied himself a Master of the Dark Arts, did you know it? In the weeks before we left school, he even told his friend he was going to 'put me in my place'."

"Don't worry, there won't be any need for a Karamnov to deal with you," the male Champion of Unity claimed in a blunt manner. "Your life of crimes and heresy ends today, damned soul of Chaos."

This just had the effect of making Lyudmila Romanov howl in laughter.

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Before they arrived in Venetian territory, Cedric had not thought very much about the possibility of being seriously wounded or killed. He had confidence in his abilities, and staying modest, he believed himself to be the second best Champion of the four students who were able to enter the European Magical Tournament. As long as he was conveniently prepared, took things seriously, and didn't charge ahead like a moron, the Heir of House Diggory had believed his chances of success were quite good. While he wasn't a master of Transfiguration or Charms, he was the best student in his year, and had gotten excellent OWL results in anything that wasn't History and Arithmancy.

Now he was on an infirmary bed, and while his body was not in pain or wounded after the Healers had rapidly given him a series of Potions, Cedric knew he had come quite close to death.

When the last tornado had struck him, the Hufflepuff Champion had lost his wand, and if there hadn't been wizards below ready to arrest his fall, there was a high likelihood he would have died.

The British wizard tried very much not to think about the scene his father and the other people he loved must have endured when he had fallen. Merlin, the minutes of torment they must have spent worrying and supporting him as he went against a Griffin.

A Griffin. How high was the level of difficulty of this Tournament? First, a Chimaera, then a Griffin...

There was a ruckus in a nearby alley of the infirmary, and Cedric had just the time to turn his head, allowing him to glance at one of the Champions of Beauxbatons walking through, several Healers helping her along and already providing medical assistance before she fell upon a bed.

"What happened to her?" A Griffin's talons would have inflicted quite a nasty scar if not worse, but the entire arm of the French witch seemed...destroyed.

"A Cockatrice," the Healer monitoring his health and staying mere feet away shook his head. "The girl had a good head on her shoulders, but she didn't manage to avoid one of the 'jumps' fast enough. My colleagues will be able to save her arm without using Rituals or more sensitive magics. She's quite lucky all things considered."

Lucky? The Healer called that lucky? Cedric had seen significant wounds on her other arm and the armour the Champion wore had been torn apart. Most likely she had several ribs broken and-

A horrible thought engulfed Cedric's thoughts.

He had seen the near-naked Venetian Champion pass on her way to her medical exam completely uninjured a few minutes ago...but there was no trace of either Cassius Warrington or the Durmstrang Champion. At first he had believed it was because they were still battling in the arena, but the thirty minutes had to be nearly over, and it was a Cockatrice they were fighting...

Cedric suddenly felt sick and knew he had been quite lucky today. His lack of talent and his overconfidence had not ended with him crippled or dead...

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Albus Dumbledore had known from the moment the Tournament was confirmed to take place at the Scuola Regina there was a high risk some of his students would be in danger of death. There were too many tasks, and for all the security measures the Headmistress had insisted upon, the ugly reality was that about something like seventy out of a hundred 'guarantees' were wards and magical protections to protect the *spectators*, not the Champions.

Fair was fair, the public was safe. The walls separating the competition from the wizards and witches who had come to watch the First Task were so warded and protected Albus doubted even three or four Lord-level wizards would be able to take them down in less than one hour...assuming no one reinforced them. They were impressive near-invisible shields to go along with the magnifying mirrors, there were entire sections carved with millions of Rune glyphs. Whatever happened in the arena would stay in the arena.

Alas.

But for all the risks, the Defeater of Grindelwald acknowledged now he hadn't been ready to see one of his students die in such a horrific fashion.

The sight of the lifeless body of Cassius Warrington being discarded by a maleficent Cockatrice was one of those things the Headmaster of Hogwarts was rather sure he wasn't going to forget until his death bed. The former Chief Warlock had not liked the Slytherin boy. He was arrogant, already lost in the clutches of Tom Riddle, and too fond of using violence against everyone. If this hadn't been the Tournament, most of the spells he cast would have seen him sentenced to several years in Azkaban.

"My condolences, Headmasters, for such tragic losses," Dumbledore barely managed a thank you while he struggled to contain his fury internally. What had the Succubus been thinking? And for all her pretenses that the Judges were in charge of this, it was just that, a pretense. She, or one of her friends from their evil organisation, had decided a Cockatrice was the perfect opponent for the Champions. And she had the gall to make a demonstration with her Succubus spawn to prove the 'fair Trial' wasn't a death sentence!

Karkaroff's reaction was the complete opposite.

"Yes, yes," the High Master of Durmstrang grumbled. "Obviously, Karamnov vastly miscalculated. He evidently didn't study the abilities of a Cockatrice. Trying to challenge it without banishing the petrifying smoke aside, honestly..."

The former Death Eater huffed before returning to one of his normal expressions.

"All in all, this is the third poor showing of my House today, and for this I deeply apologise. I will have...serious words...with the surviving Champions once there has been time to properly evaluate the performance of each one. Durmstrang can't tolerate these abysmal failures."

That was...cold and merciless, even by Karkaroff standards. By the putrid breath of the Cockatrice, Albus thought even *Gellert* had not been so merciless with his troops!

The scores proclaimed by the ten Judges were a welcome diversion to ignore how disturbing the approach of the other Headmaster was.

Welcome...no it was not welcome. After Cassius Warrington's final and disastrous 'performance', the Judges weren't in a congratulatory mood.

**Lucrezia Sforza: 90 points**

**Ambre de Courtois: 28 points**

**Pyotr Karamnov: 0 point**

**Cassius Warrington: 0 point**

By OWLs standards, this was a 'T', a Troll, for the two deceased. By any non-academic standard, it was dreadful. Durmstrang and Hogwarts were completely outclassed by Beauxbatons and the less said about the Scuola Regina...

The host school had to be cheating. It was impossible otherwise to explain it! Even their bloody Light Champion had to be in the confidence!

"I think," Headmistress Maxime was very thoughtful, "Ambre would have held her own far better against the Chimaera or the Griffin. She is a good broom-racer and has a gift with Abraxans and Hippogriffs."

"So would have Viktor against the Cockatrice," Karkaroff intervened. Albus noted it was 'Viktor' for Champion Krum, but 'Karamnov' and not 'Pyotr'. "I remain confident however he will perform better in the Second Task."

"That's quite a statement," the French Headmistress replied. "Not having a clue is going to be a major drawback."

"I have utmost confidence in him." Karkaroff smiled. "He will find a way...like I am certain the losing streak of my school ends here. Our Champion in the Water Trial is without contest the most powerful witch Durmstrang had seen grace its halls since Grindelwald."

The name was a barb directed at him, of course. And Albus had to feign not being offended.

"I will hold you to your word, High Master," the Succubus seemed to be very amused by something. "Ah, the preparations for the naumachia are about to begin."

The Cockatrice had been finally and forcefully removed by one hundred wizards and witches, and as the animal handlers withdrew from the arena, four gigantic cascades materialised without warning. The equivalent of several rivers of water flowed into the Coliseum, and Albus suddenly realised it wasn't just for gondola scenery the gigantic stadium had been built where it was.

"You are going to drown the stands' foundations at this rate."

"No," the Dark Succubus – if one of those words wasn't redundant, "the stadium has been specifically enchanted and prepared for such an event."

"Wait a minute..." for the first time Igor Karkaroff was genuinely surprised, not antagonistic. "Where are the chests containing the Tournament Clues going to be placed?"

"You already see them, at the centre of the arena," the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina informed him.

"But they are-"

"Yes, they're going to be several metres under the water. No need to worry, the judges have assured me they are going to take this into account when it is time to grade the effort of every Champion..."

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"I don't like that, Susan."

"Hannah, after the Cockatrice, there isn't anything much to like."

All the members of House Hufflepuff present today had been extremely disappointed by Cedric's elimination by the Griffin, but at least their House's Champion had received a few points...and more importantly, he was walking on his own when he went to the infirmary.

Really, after the Wind Trial, Susan had heard a few voices in the crowd around wondering if the organisers didn't make things a bit too easy for the Champions, given how fast the beast-handlers and the other arena wizards were intervening when there was an injury.

The Cockatrice had brutally reminded them this Tournament was the real deal. No, nothing was faked, there was no second chance, and the XXXXX-class beasts could kill you if you attacked stupidly or you were simply too slow.

Cassius Warrington was both. And now the Slytherin Champion was dead, massacred by the beak of a monstrous Cockatrice. Given the sum of information her girlfriend had given her, the Bones Heiress wasn't going to shed a tear for the Death Eater.

But this was a firm remainder that all substitutes had to do their best for the Champions of Hogwarts. If the winners of the preliminaries failed, if their wounds were too crippling or took their lives, it could be Susan's turn to be the Champion in a later Task...and if it was as dangerous as today, the risks were high enough to kill.

"Our school's reputation has taken a sharp dive, I think," her longest friend told her. "I know points aren't exactly what matters given the...given what happened to Warrington, but not a single one of our Champions has managed to open his chest. Cedric was the closest, and he failed."

"We are not last," Durmstrang had achieved the 'exploit' of being worse than Hogwarts after three Trials. "But yeah, it's not good for our school. Still, if a certain Ravenclaw Champion gets full marks, we might be able to match Beauxbatons. The Scuola Regina has too many points for someone to catch up."

This was only the First Task, and she didn't know if Hogwarts could really afford to pull a win in the school contest...not that it was better for the individual rankings. One could only hope the six remaining Trials would permit Cedric and the Gryffindor and Slytherin Champions to earn more points...it was impossible to do worse for the latter.

"You think your girlfriend can win this?" Hannah tried very hard to not sound dubious. "I mean, I know she's good at slaying monsters, you don't kill two Basilisks just by being lucky...but she never did it in front of Judges and everything. And there's a lot of water."

"Alex is a good swimmer," in fact thanks to her Animagus form, she was more than that. It was fortunate too, because this Coliseum was transforming into something far more dangerous than a simple swimming pool.

The cascades feeding the growing lake were provoking monstrous currents, and just as she was thinking this, Roman triremes were launched through the 'normal' gates about to be submerged.

Four triremes, four colours, four Champions.

"I think these are going to be the only places where Champions will be able to walk after they jump into the water," Hannah commented. "How are they going to enter it, though? They aren't going to be able to use the exits the other Champions used..."

Seconds later, several wizards answered Hannah's judicious question by installing immense diving boards – they had to be custom-built, no swimming pool would ever use one of those. Next to each point of contact of these objects with the Coliseum's walls, large ladders were also prepared.

It didn't take a genius to know what the Champions were expected to do.

"It looks like it is going to be more dangerous than with the Cockatrice," Hannah swallowed with difficulty. Yes, the ladder was large and easy to climb...but you still had to be in physical shape to do so. Many Champions hadn't exactly walked on their own after fighting the dangerous magical creatures. "And if they have taken-"

An enormous shape plunged from the cascade. Thousands in the crowd immediately went to cheer and applause.

Susan didn't. She had expected to see a sea monster, but that...that thing was enormous. The shadow it made as it swam through the currents was absolutely terrifying. At a guess, it was much, much bigger than the dead Basilisk Alexandra had slain upon the Black Lake's shore...and Salazar's monstrous pet was not sea-born.

It was only when the gigantic maw and the green scales revealed themselves Susan knew what the Champions were going to have to face.

"They kept the best for the last Trial, didn't they...sea snake...they found a damn sea snake for the Tournament."

"Err...we learned the XXXXX-class list by heart, and the sea snake wasn't on it, Susan."

"No, it isn't. It's a six 'X', not a five 'X'. I suppose this one should be in-between...in theory...because it's a young one..."

"Six X? But that's-"

"The beasts no wizard...or witch...can really do anything against, individually or collectively. A single beast requires the mustering of armies...or in this case, fleets, to be put down or captured. The sea snake, once adult, is perfectly capable of that."

No wonder why they had desired a Coliseum so big. When you had a one hundred-foot long sea snake to exhibit...

"Yeah, but your girlfriend has slain a big snake before."

"Hannah," Susan grimaced, "the Basilisk had no hydrokinesis powers, and even if it had, the sea snake regenerates faster than you can blink when in contact with water. And it can move with tremendous speed. It is incredibly agile, and one of its blows can pulverise a trireme like the ones the organisers have thrown into the arena. This beast is far, far more dangerous than the Cockatrice...at least with the overgrown rooster, it was possible to run away..."

"What are the...bad Judges thinking, using that sort of monster?"

Susan looked at the list of names which had just materialised near the Headmasters' sections. The one listing the identities of the Champions who had yet to fight.

"They were thinking they needed something more dangerous than the competition...and they found it."

Alexandra had made a joke about a kraken, but the Norse monster wasn't going to regenerate and was painfully slow anyway.

"Hail Leviathan," the Bones Heiress murmured, "Ave Caesar. Those who are about to swim salute you."

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"I would have preferred a kraken..." Alexandra whispered as she was allowed to see for the first time what the Exchequer had decided would be the perfect opponent for four Champions of the Light and Dark Powers.

Sea Snake. They had drowned the arena of the Coliseum with a lake's worth of water, and placed a sea snake inside it.

For the record, the Champion of the Morrigan hated their choice. In the water, she had about as much chance of significantly damaging this kind of opponent as she had at seriously hurting Nidhögg, maybe less. There was a reason why the name of Leviathan had survived the enforcement of the Statute of Secrecy in both worlds.

The positive side, in this affair, was that Fleur Delacour had stopped her arrogant 'I know better than you' attitude. Perhaps the Veela was finally realising that victory wasn't going to be handed to her on a silver platter...stranger things had happened in the last two millennia.

"They aren't serious, they can't believe we can defeat this thing..." the French witch spoke loud enough that her Hydra senses caught every word.

Defeat? No, they couldn't. Theoretically, Alexandra supposed several hundreds of mages working together could drag this monster outside the water and then bombard it with battle-magic long enough to slay it, but...oh, this was giving her a good idea.

"Well," the Champion of House Ravenclaw said conversationally to the Champion of Loki waiting on her right, "when I said months ago it would be difficult to find something bigger and more dangerous than the Basilisks, I didn't think our hosts would hear it and take it as a challenge."

"Can you kill it?" The Dark Queen asked.

"I can kill everything that lives," the Champion of Death lied blatantly. "But I would need more than thirty minutes...and I don't think the Judges would like me going against their rules."

They weren't supposed to kill the beasts or injure them severely...though after the Cockatrice, that rule had to be far from popular.

The time to watch was over, and they were brought to the richly decorated section where the Judges had a perfect view, magically-enhanced it went without saying, of everything that was happening, both above and below the water. Alexandra noted that the wizards of Venetia were busy installing mirrors which seemed to give a perfect view of the underwater battlefield to the tens of thousands of spectators.

Good for them. The Potter Heiress was more focused on the massive diving boards which were evidently the only way to enter the arena, since the other entrances were below the water's surface. And the Leviathan. Never forget the sea snake, it was just big enough to smack a Basilisk around without effort...

The Roman-style triremes, the Basilisk-Slayer discarded immediately. Their aquatic opponent ignored them for now because there was nothing living on them, but the moment someone tried to use them, it was going to be...err...agitated. Sea Snakes were famous for sending whole fleets to the bottom of the seas and oceans for a reason.

"...and I hope that facing such a mighty opponent, you will remember that unity and coordination can be your biggest advantages, giving you a surplus of skill which will outmanoeuvre even the mighty animal you are about to face..."

Alexandra was tempted to shout shut up to the Judge, but that would be rude. So she finished listening to his speech, and tried not to yawn. In the water, her biggest advantage was being a Hydra Animagus, not relying on the other Champions who would joyously kill her if they were given the chance.

A good minute later, they were all at the edge of their diving boards, and of course standing still like this was attracting the attention of the young monster – adult sea snakes were bigger than that.

"BEGIN!"

Alexandra stretched for a few seconds...and then plunged as the Leviathan moved in the direction of Delacour.

The contact with the water was a shock which delighted her Hydra senses, and the Hogwarts Champion didn't waste any time. The sea snake wasn't a guardian animal, and anyway this was a Tournament, not a place to show-off. With a speed that was beyond human, she changed enough of her body to gain superior swimming speed while still retaining a human appearance. There were chests to find and a Trial to win.

Of course arriving at the location where the four chests were waiting, the green-eyed witch noticed there was an obstacle. Namely the enchanted chains which were keeping the objects tied to the drowned floor of the arena.

Alexandra considered the situation for a brief moment. There was the violent way and the non-violent way. The former would likely attract the creature which was staying on the surface, no doubt fighting against the three other Champions.

The non-violent way it was.

"You who guard the Yew, bound to the earth, the guardian of flames, bastion of darkness for the shadowy roots, joy of the returning traveller, unbind, untie, and reveal your secret, EIHWAZ!"

The chains tied to the chest pulsating with an echo of her magic brutally snapped, and the Hydra Animagus opened it with her right hand, her left being busy drawing her wand, for the immense shadow on the surface had changed direction. Damn it, why? She had been careful...no, there was no use wondering why the sea snake now thought she was the most interesting prey.

Alexandra seized the golden cup which was her promised artefact, and propelled herself through the water.

If she hadn't been an Animagus girl who could swim better than an Olympic champion, she would have died here and now, for the immense jaws snapped closed a second later where she had cast her Rune evocation.

There was no time to ponder about the imbecility of choosing something so dangerous for mere mortals. Alexandra returned above the water faster than one could likely say it, the sea snake no doubt not far behind her...only to see a wall of ice coming in her direction.

There was no time to think, just react.

"CREMARE HORRENDUS!"

The green flames hit the ice spell and stopped it in its tracks...barely. Alexandra remained in the water, and everywhere the Legion's Ashes had stopped the magical assault the 'natural' state of the arena there was still water...but otherwise there was now a deep crust of ice everywhere and-

CRRRAASSHHHH!

Correction, there had been a major ice crust, the Leviathan's head had created a new hole.

Alexandra swam then jumped. On the ice, she would see better where the ladder was-

A powerful Light spell missing her by several inches forced her to amend her plans.

"Die, abomination!"

"GLACIARUM DIABOLIS!" Since there was ice, it was better to use it...she could worry about the consequences with Dumbledore and the other light fools later. This time she managed to conjure ten massive ice snakes and sent them to strike Delacour, thought they were blasted away, as her golden shield protected her at the last instant.

And then the sea snake charged her again.

"It's a joke I'm not enjoying at all..."

Another incantation was shouted behind her, and Alexandra had to deflect it. Oh, this time it was the other Light Champion, Lorenzo de Medici.

"Don't like the taste of your own medicine, Death? I am going to-" Pivoting, the hypocrite was on her left, the Leviathan was arriving from behind...good, now for a crazy idea.

"WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!"

Alexandra had trained herself to levitate several German Dreadnoughts. It was magically and mentally exhausting, but it was doable.

The sea snake was lighter to her magical senses than the pride of the High Seas Fleet...and foot after foot, the immense Leviathan was revealed to the spectators and anyone who wasn't blind, the sea snake struggling to escape her magical grasp – and failing – while she pushed it upwards.

"When you see your ancestors, Knight of the Army of Light, tell them for me you were a disappointment. DEPULSO!"

She put a lot of her power behind the spell, and the effect was cataclysmic. The Leviathan was propelled with tremendous strength against the zone where the Champion of Light awaited, and the impact saw splinters of ice...and blood spread everywhere.

A heartbeat later, Alexandra felt a soul departing. A flicker of Light decreasing.

Something activated, below her feet. Something distant and yet close. Something powerful. Damn it, this had been the plan of the Exchequer all along...

Before she could worry further about the consequences, Fleur Delacour was thrown into the air like a rag doll a second time, before falling, luckily for her, in one of the numerous big holes existing across the shattered ice.

Alexandra had no doubt who was responsible for that.

"That was an interesting method to get rid of that imbecile, Death." The blonde-haired Champion of Loki was bare-footed, but she glided upon the ice blocks that she had created like she was wearing skates.

"Thank you," Alexandra answered. "Now if you can get out of the way, I have a Trial to win."

Her right hand still had the golden cup in her grasp, and one Light Champion dead was sufficient for today.

"Where would be the fun in that?" Lyudmila Romanov smiled. "I have waited for this more than a year, now we're going to duel."

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The being who had been born under the name of Ra felt a combination of rage, sorrow, and utter astonishment as the sea snake was violently hurled at Lorenzo de Medici, killing the Champion of Light instantly.

Damn the Dark! Damn this damned child who had sworn herself to the Morrigan!

What was it going to take to kill her?

The Archmage of Light's thoughts changed from utter loathing to horror the instant after, for he felt a new power blossom. The pyramid of power under the Coliseum was activated.

"A Seal of Death, bathed in the blood of the Light..." Ra grimaced as he rapidly calculated the Arithmantic principles. For the activation to be perfect, the dead wizard or the witch had to be the one who attacked first the one who killed...

Damn his brother. Damn his cursed organisation and their stupid sense of irony. By supporting the elimination of the Morrigan's Champion, he had-

No, this was the Exchequer's fault. They had killed a promising Champion who held so much potential to insult and weaken his cause. They were to blame for this death, like they were for forcing his hand with millions of others.

"Alert our agents across the world," the Archmage turned to the Knight sitting next to him. "A Seal has been broken. I want to know where, how bad the damage is, and how we can exploit this no-doubt monumental breach of the Statute of Secrecy to expose the existence of the Dark Lords and Ladies Osiris has hidden for so long."

The immortal being smiled as the two Dark Champions faced each other.

"And remind me to update our plans for the elimination of the Morrigan's spawn, if she manages to survive Loki's monster..."

**5 November 1994, somewhere on the shores of the Nile, Egypt**

The name of the man wouldn't be remembered. Son of an artisan, he had been at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The wrong place was an ancient temple where in ancient times a small priesthood had worshipped Death. Of course today, there was little to remind anyone of that, merely some old stones, and the nation that had inherited the Pharaohs' legacy had plenty of those.

But the old stones had remained. The enforcers of the Statute of Secrecy, for all their ruthlessness, had been dedicated to erasing all obvious traces of a magical civilisation, and since they had been in a hurry, they had completely missed the secret basement where dangerous combinations of Hieroglyphs and Sumerian symbols concealed even more terrible things for the hour of their activation.

The hour was now.

The man had been quite unlucky, everything considered. If he had walked in this nearly-abandoned area a minute before or after, he would have survived none the wiser.

Instead his fate was to be bitten by a species even most magical people considered a myth: the Styx Viper.

Meagre consolation, while the death was hardly what one would call painless, it was extremely fast.

The Viper's poison was the equal of the Hydra and the Basilisk. In less than one minute, the man was dead.

What came after was the very reason the Styx Vipers had been hunted to extinction by the Light hunters from the Army of Light and the Trinity.

The corpse of the man began to change and shrink, before tearing itself apart and at last crumbling into a black dust of sickening Dark magic.

And from these ashes, two new Styx Vipers were born.

By this point, only a prompt intervention of the Archmage of Light or the Champion of Death could have stopped the plan of the Exchequer from being successful.

One had extensive experience exterminating the legendary snake, while the latter could order around the Dark Creatures as the voice of said Power.

Both, unfortunately, were currently inside the Venetian Coliseum.

The First Seal returned to dormancy. It had done exactly what it was expected to...and the first blow against the foundations of the Statute of Secrecy had been struck.

**5 November 1994, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

"I have waited for this more than a year, now we're going to duel."

Even if Alexandra had not been taught a lot by Professor Flitwick for the last three years, there was no way the Ravenclaw would have wanted to fight the Fenrir Animagus according to the standard rules of the ICW – or any other formal duelling rules for that matter.

Lyudmila Romanov was years of magical education and training ahead of her, including in the 'class' of murder. And given the ice crust she had summoned, frontal attacks were going to work about as well as they likely had for Warrington against the Cockatrice.

She had to change the rules of the game, or she was going to be the fourth dead Champion of this Tournament.

And she did.

"BOMBARDA MAXIMA!" the Potter Heiress shouted, the explosive incantation unleashed against the ice where Romanov was standing.

Of course, Loki's Champion used the opportunity to cast a purple-coloured spell at her, but the Hydra's scales held out...it may leave some scarring, but she would survive.

The Durmstrang witch lost her footing and fell into the water.

This was going to give her the seconds she needed.

"I have seen the Throne of Light and endured its fury, I live in the shadows of this world and survive their wrath, I will walk from the sky to the deepest abysses, I am the beginning and the end, wheels of Perthro, Haglaz, Eihwaz and Thurisaz, muster the storms, Sowilo extinguishes the sun, Raido unleashes your fury! FULMEN IMPERATOR MAXIMUS!"

Her opponent rose from the water again and opened her mouth...and received her strongest lightning attack straight-on.

Lyudmila Romanov wasn't the only one to be struck, of course.

The final and most powerful elemental attack of the Imperial Thunder, this battle-spell was an army-killer. This wasn't why Alexandra had decided to never use it before today. It was magically exhausting. That wasn't a problem for her anymore. No, the big problem was its indiscriminate nature. For several seconds, black clouds coalesced over the Coliseum...and then the end of the world, lightning-style, arrived.

Alexandra heard Delacour shriek in agony behind her as the Light Champion had tried once more – and failed – to sneak up behind her. She received the fury of elemental lightning in retaliation.

The Leviathan plunged deep into the lake-arena, understanding instinctively this wasn't a fight it wanted to be involved in.

Lyudmila Romanov literally burned, suffering attacks which made electric accidents look like gentle love taps, and got herself roasted before the shock sent her to the depths of the Coliseum.

The Roman triremes burned. Her whole world perished in lightning. The majority of the ice perished.

Alexandra held ten seconds and then released her hold on the spell. Not that she had a choice, the Ravenclaw Champion was feeling drained for the first time since Samhain.

And besides, there was nothing living anymore on the surface save the Leviathan, which promptly got the message and returned underwater. Yet she had not felt the death of the other two Champions.

Alexandra blinked. Could she go after them and finish them? Possible for Delacour, the Veela had to be near-death now...but it would mean a huge risk of Romanov regenerating at the worst moment.

She looked under her breasts where her swimsuit-sport suit had an enormous laceration, and the black scales of her Animagus form had a purple gash visible. One attack, not even the time to overpower it, and Loki's Champion could have killed her.

No, this was enough for today. Best to get out while victorious.

Alexandra looked around, located the ladder she was supposed to use, and then jumped again for what was hopefully her last session of swimming for the day.

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Pain. Agony. Suffering. Torture.

These words had previously meant nothing for her emotionally. It was what she did to others, not what others did to her.

Until now.

**You wanted some competition, I believe?**

"Oh shut up..."

Water entered her ruined lungs. Blood followed her in a torrent of red towards the darkness.

**So defiant, even when you are weak. You don't know when to stop, do you?**

"You...chose...me...because...you...liked...that..."

**True.**

"I...will...be...triumphant."

**I certainly hope so. The Morrigan is going to be insufferable after today. I think I am going to have to endure this Trial's retelling for several centuries.**

The damage of the lightning began to fade. Her strength, once almost reduced to shadows, returned, an inferno which burned, folly and madness bolstering her body just as it fuelled the sentiment of humiliation.

**Now do what you do best. Spread Chaos in my name.**

"By your will, Loki," Lyudmila Romanov howled and stopped her lifeless descent.

\*\*\*\*

The spectators had awaited the Water Trial as the epic conclusion of today's activities.

So far, Albus had to admit, the participants of this sheer horror did their best to satisfy the hopes of the average wizard and witch.

First, James Potter's daughter had decided a second wasted was far too long and made a sunken dive which had led her to the chests' area faster than you could say 'Quidditch' while the other Champions were still trying to figure out a strategy.

Second, the same Hogwarts Champion had used a sort of runic evocation which had to be NEWT-level when done in normal circumstances...under several feet of water.

Third, the Durmstrang Champion had decided water was decidedly not her thing and literally froze the arena, creating a surreal spectacle of snow and ice plains for a few seconds.

Fourth, the gigantic sea snake and the Ravenclaw Champion had stopped hiding under the water and exploded onto the ice before it could truly solidify everywhere.

Fifth, the Champions had started to fight each other, and for a second it appeared the Light had cornered the Dark spawn of James Potter.

Sixth, said Dark Lady – one could give her the title after today's exploits – had decided the logical means to counter-attack was to levitate a thirteenth times-cursed *Leviathan*!

Seventh, Potter had banished the aforementioned Leviathan on Lorenzo de Medici, killing him instantly.

Eighth, the Champions of Chaos and Death had stared at each other.

Ninth, the younger witch of the two had decided, continuing with her logic of annihilation of everything that was holy, that blasting the entire arena with a ridiculously apocalyptic lightning spell was the simplest way to get rid of all the participating Champions.

Tenth, Alexandra Potter, Champion of Hogwarts, had without a doubt single-handily trampled the previous record of Lucrezia Sforza, climbing up the ladder leading her outside of the fighting zone in five minutes and one second, a lapse of time so ridiculously short it was properly unbelievable.

The crowd stayed silent for several seconds...and then went absolutely, insanely mad. The folly didn't spare the Hogwarts seats, for in mere seconds, a large banner with all sorts of avian creatures for decoration was unfurled, and massive blue-bronze fireworks brightly illuminated the sky...a sky which fortunately no longer had thunder clouds anymore.

Tens of thousands of spectators went crazily wild, and the ruckus was prompt to wake up the dead...not that the Defeater of Grindelwald would have judged it impossible after what happened.

A glance of his fellow Headmaster and Headmistresses informed him that yes, they were all in a state of shock...and to his satisfaction, the Succubus was gaping, her mouth trying to close and yet remaining open nonetheless.

"*Mon Dieu*..." The next words of Headmistress Maxime were best censored for the sake of younger ears. "Mon Dieu..."

"The security team is extracting your Champion," Igor Karkaroff commented in a state of shock, "she is still alive...I think."

Albus tried to maintain his calm, as he saw only for a few seconds the crippled body of the Veela Champion before the medical personnel threw enough spells to hide her from view. But it was...it was horrible, as to be expected with Lightning spells. As a Champion of Light, Delacour had an impressive level of magical resistance, but this assault had been elemental in nature, not purely Dark, and honestly, he didn't know if Gellert would have been able to throw such a powerful attack at the height of his power. Granted his once-lover had not had a lightning affinity, but...

"I think our teams are going to need to move the sea snake away before recovering your Champion, High Master." The Headmistress of the Scuola Regina managed at last to recover...at least outwardly. "I think this Task is-"

The howl stopped everything.

It was an animal scream of hatred, defiance, pain...and challenge.

There was no warning before the sea snake was thrown into the air *for the second time today*! And by its maw and its curious attitude, the XXXXXX-class creature wasn't expecting it either!

A gigantic silver net ensnared the aquatic beast, and as it fell down, it was trapped inside it and thrown against the walls of the arena. Thankfully the protections held, but there was a sizeable flash of magic where the monster hit. Against all reason, the crowd cheered louder...they had a splendid view of the defeated Leviathan.

Three seconds later, the infernal Champion of Durmstrang came out of the waters like she was surfing on a block of wood...in fact, she was, the blonde-haired psychopath was using a remnant of the trireme his school's killer had sunk minutes ago.

And as if this day couldn't get any worse, the Champion of Chaos held in one hand her own Tournament Clue.

"You are right, Headmistress," for the first time in hours, Igor Karkaroff really smiled...a disturbing spectacle in more ways than Albus could properly count. "This First Task is nearly over."

And as the figures running down next to the hourglass informed him, the time of the Durmstrang Champion was still rather remarkable...enough to claim the second or third place in the rankings for the First Trial.

Albus should have felt proud Hogwarts was likely going to salvage something after the death of Warrington, but the Light...

The Light had lost today.

Whatever happened in the next Tasks, whatever scheme they would find to restore the Age of Order, it was impossible to deny that today, the Light had lost.

And the Headmaster of Hogwarts didn't know if he was powerful enough to stand against the new generation of the Dark.

\*\*\*\*

"What the hell?"

Leo's imprecation was a good sum-up of those...only twelve minutes? That couldn't be right; it had felt like an eternity...

"What the hell indeed." The Boy-Who-Lived managed to articulate as the spectacle of utter ruin was revealed now that the sea snake had been evacuated and the water level was going down.

There was blood, debris, destroyed elements of decorations, extinguished fireworks of Fred and George's creation that the Ravenclaws had fired by the dozens...and certainly somewhere, dispersed so much they were impossible to distinguish from everything that floated, the mortal remains of Lorenzo de Medici, *former* Champion of Athena and Unity.

"I don't understand," Ron began, still in shock, "we saw Potter destroy the Durmstrang Champion. We saw the lightning burn her! How is she not dead? Fleur Delacour didn't receive half of her wounds, and the Healers had to levitate her out of the Coliseum. How is she not dead?"

"Animagus form, the blessings of the Dark Powers, Dark Rituals..." Neville counted. "This...Romanov is a monster."

Now that his brain was functioning somewhat correctly, the Gryffindor boy acknowledged the Russian...thing...had recovered from her wounds in two minutes. Wounds which, as the Battle of the Chamber of Secrets had proved, were more than enough to kill you in a couple of seconds. Those were injuries that would require months of high-level healing to recover from.

"We just have to pray Geoffrey will be able to hold his own until the end of the Tournament," it was hardly the most courageous declaration a Longbottom had ever made, but at this moment, Neville didn't care. What they had just watched was the final confirmation that most of the Hogwarts Champions and substitutes weren't playing in the same league as the potential winners of the Tournament.

Diggory had finished overall second of their preliminaries and dominated the Hufflepuff selections; here the Seeker of the Badgers had failed to complete the task assigned to the Champions, and if he was honest, Neville thought the Griffin was the easiest Trial of the four.

Correction, Geoffrey Hooper and Cedric Diggory had gotten the easiest Trials. Luck was definitely on their side...though the Judges had likely put Potter with the rest of the monsters to give her something challenging. If the Champion of Chaos or the one of Death had been sent against the Cockatrice or the other beasts, the number of deaths would have been higher, in all likelihood...

"What are we going to do, Neville?" The sheer distress in Ron's voice was so sad Neville felt more and more like an imposter.

"I don't know," maybe Professor Dumbledore would have an idea, but personally, he had none. "I don't know."

"The Judges are going to announce the scores..."

\*\*\*\*

Alexandra knew she should already be in the infirmary wing, the Healers were rather...insistent about that.

Still, after all the waiting she had done before the Task, the green-eyed Champion thought it was rather fair to let some people wait for her for once...

That said, this was not just in the spirit of contradiction and petty revenge. She preferred to see her scores first and then go to the infirmary. Viewing her time, the Ravenclaw Champion knew she had done very well, but having only the basic scores of the other Champions, she didn't know how well.

The men and women twenty metres away gave their grades just as she thought that.

**Alexandra Potter: 96 points**

**Lyudmila Romanov: 92 points**

**Fleur Delacour: 10 points**

**Lorenzo de Medici: 0 point**

Loud cheers immediately came from the Hogwarts Section...and who had the idea of a three-eyed raven painted in pink anyway? It was ridiculous...

"You win this Task," a voice which was beginning to become familiar whispered close to her. Sure enough, when she turned her head, Lyudmila Romanov was there, a new swimsuit conjured to replace the one she had lost in her lightning storm. "Congratulations. But don't think I am going to let you take the six others. I will take the leadership at the Second Task. Don't say I haven't warned you."

"Perish the thought," Alexandra replied. "I will be there to oppose you, don't worry...Dark Queen."

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**European Magical Tournament Individual Rankings after the First Task**

1st: Alexandra Potter – 96 points

2nd: Lyudmila Romanov – 92 points

3rd: Lucrezia Sforza – 90 points

4th: Henri de Condé – 84 points

5th: Eleonora da Riva – 79 points

6th: Romeo Malatesti – 70 points

7th: Cedric Diggory – 37 points

8th: Viktor Krum – 31 points

9th: Geoffrey Hooper – 29 points

10th: Ambre de Courtois – 28 points

11th: Fleur Delacour – 10 points

12th: Lucas Gauthier – 8 points

13th: Karl Schumacher – 3 points

14th ex-aequo: Lorenzo de Medici, Cassius Warrington, and Pyotr Karamnov (all deceased) – 0 point

\*\*\*\*

**European Magical Tournament School Rankings after the First Task**

1st: Scuola Regina – 239 points

2nd: Hogwarts – 162 points

3rd: Beauxbatons – 130 points

4th: Durmstrang – 126 points

**Author's note**: And so ends the First Task. I hope you all enjoyed the wild ride.

For those who have forgotten, yes, it was the first of the seven Tasks. The Tournament has just begun...

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