**Chapter 90**

**Crocodile Time**

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

"And here I was thinking the First Task was cutthroat." Morag commented while reading the instructions-filled Papyrus.

"It was," Alexandra replied absently.

"Alex, at least for the First Task you were graded on a total of one hundred points!"

"Well..." the Potter Heiress looked like at the information she had copied from the 'Tournament Clue'. "Technically, you can reach a total of one hundred points. You just have to win three duels in a row."

"That's not what I was saying..." the red-haired Ravenclaw groaned.

"I get what you're saying," the black-haired teenage girl answered while rolling her eyes. "But seriously, what did you expect from the Judges? They pushed for those overcomplicated enigmas, did you really think they were going to give us something like thirty points without having to sweat for it? And besides," the Morrigan's Champion added as a new thought came at the forefront of her mind, "they likely don't have a choice."

"How so?"

"If they had to organise duels for the Champions who lost in the first round, imagine the overall number of confrontations they would have to oversee and grade in a single day," the green-eyed Ravenclaw explained. "Really, there are two things we must be constantly remind ourselves. A Task lasts only a single day, and it has to be very entertaining for the spectators. Why should they invite the losers back into the arena when they have proven they weren't able to win a single duel? I'm not saying I approve, just that their 'cutthroat' method of selection makes sense...from their point of view."

"You're right," Hermione agreed, staring at the parchment where an enchanted quill was copying the information for her to read. "It makes sense...from *their* point of view."

Alexandra breathed out.

"Now that it is said, I must admit the system of points delivered is...harsh."

It took a certain amount of self-control not to grimace.

Sixteen Champions were participating. They would fight one-on-one in their Runic Duels.

In theory, a Duel could reward you with twenty-five points maximum. In practise however, it was explicitly said that the victorious Champion would automatically earn ten points – how he or she won would give him or her several bonuses and penalties.

"Harsh," Morag whistled ironically. "There's eight duels in the first round, so we will have eight Champions who will get a grade between zero and fifteen...and I don't know you Alex, but I don't think they will give full points to someone who lost a duel."

"You're right." The Ravenclaw Champion nodded, momentarily pausing in reading the voluminous text deciphering the Clue had entitled them to. "So I'd better not lose the first duel...no, I'd better lose as late as possible, and if I don't lose at all, it would be perfect."

Realistically, two duel victories were the absolute minimum for the Second Task she felt acceptable, since it would mean being graded on a total of...seventy-five points minus ten, sixty-five points.

"And how good do you think are your chances?"

"Better now that I know what I have to face," Alexandra smirked. "Incidentally, we won our first point of the Second Task today."

Solving the cartouche's enigmas had been incredibly challenging, but the Judges had acknowledged it, and according to the rules written on the papyrus, the moment the second enigma was declared valid, the Judges had been informed and Alexandra was automatically given one bonus point.

What was the saying, "Knowledge is power?"

"And I have another advantage. The Champions who were successful in the First Task can't duel each other in the first round."

It wasn't a small relief, given how much it decreased the strength of the potential opposition for the initial stage.

"Perhaps," Roger Davies intervened. "But it's going to present other problems. Like whether you inform the other Hogwarts Champions. Neither Cedric nor Geoffrey has received a Clue. And the rules state clearly Champions of the same school can face each other immediately..."

"True," ironically, a certain amount of cooperation could have been possible between Hogwarts' chosen four before the First Task. For the Second Task? It was definitely an individualistic challenge. Cooperation was far from impossible, if the Champions trusted each other sufficiently to cast the best Runic incantations they knew in order to get maximal grades no matter who won...but it would require trust, and there was little of that between them.

"We will speak of what I will explain to the other Champions later. For now, let's concentrate on the Second Task itself. Hermione?"

"The principle of the Trial isn't complicated at all," the expert of libraries and erudition by book alone began. "The arena for the duels will be essentially a large Egyptian-themed temple surrounded by a lake where hundreds of crocodiles await. The two Champions who 'duel' have to go through a miniature obstacle course and reach the Temple's roof as fast they can."

"Yeah," Morag approved, "you will have only five minutes, which isn't a lot."

"And you have to arrive first, since you get a new Clue as a reward." Roger pointed out.

"One Clue per Runic Duel won..." Alexandra frowned. "Does it say somewhere if the Clues given to each Champion are identical?"

"Yes, in the sixteenth paragraph," Hermione replied, "the Clues given to the Champions are the same for the first round, then they give the same for the second round, and it continues until the finals."

Where the victor of the Second Task – or at least the one who got to the Temple's roof in first place – would get a fourth and unique Tournament Clue.

Eight Clues would be distributed in the first round, four in the second, two in the third, and one in the fourth...this was really a merciless process of elimination for the Third Task. Who was ready to bet that the longer you stayed in the Runic Tournament, the better the 'Clues' were?

"Wonderful," Alexandra sighed. "Let's sum-up what a 'Runic Duel' consists of. First, one has to use a Galdr or any other Runic combination to repair the wooden bridge which will allow the Champion to cross the crocodile infested lake. The more complex the sequence of Runes used is, the fewer obstacles one will have to face when in the Temple. Once inside the Temple, pretty much everything the Egyptian tomb-protectors and grand priests have invented may await us, including, but not limited to, lethal traps. And when I am finally through them – in less than five minutes or it's a fail – I have to seize the Tournament Clue before the other Champion and duel him...using only Runes and a Rune-carving dagger. Have I forgotten anything?"

"Err...yes. Alex, the 'Rune-only' limitation is not just for the duel at the top of the temple, it is for the entire Task. The moment the Judge says go, active magic is limited to Runes and Runic casting plus a lot of other Runic things...and you are supposed to leave your wand behind."

"Of course," the Morrigan's Champion wondered sometimes if it was not going to be simpler challenging the Queen of the Exchequer to a death match. Unfortunately, after a second of reflexion, Morgana La Fay was still an opponent which made this Second Task look like a trivial affair...damn it.

"And that's not taking into account the most problematic part," Hermione winced before going on delivering more bad news. "The basic schematics of the Temple on this papyrus are only valid for the first round. After the first eight duels, the Temple is going to be structurally modified...and the Judges will likely increase the difficulty of the traps and the obstacles."

"That's really fantastic," the Potter Heiress sarcastically declared, "Morag, give me some good news."

"By your orders, your Dark Majesty," her Irish friend drawled out in a tone which was filled with teasing and maybe a lot of disrespect. "First off, you know what's coming, which is a marked advantage over all those poor blind Champions who haven't a Tournament Clue."

"I will give you that. Still, it's not an overwhelming advantage. Past the First Round, everyone will be more or less on equal terms when it comes to the knowledge of the arena and how to reach the 'duelling arena' through the crocodile lake and the Runic traps."

"True," the MacDougal Heiress agreed, "it's why the real advantage of deciphering this Tournament Clue, I think, is to know you are restricted to one magical Rune-carving dagger per duel, but there are no limits on the Runic glyphs you can paint upon your skin. Note that I say paint, but it's also legal to brand the Runes upon-"

"Morag, I am not desperate or fanatical enough as to brand myself for a Task, even if there's a fortune and 'eternal glory' at stake," Alexandra interrupted her immediately. In fact, the mere idea was angering her Hydra senses. "I can't say I am a fan of painting my body, but if it gives an advantage..."

"It will." The mischievous expression was giving her bad vibes... "Evidently, we will know fast if the local Succubus Champion has deciphered the Clue...this time I wouldn't be surprised if she arrives naked in the Coliseum!"

Alexandra groaned.

"You're a terrible substitute, Morag!"

"I know!"

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

It wasn't an easy thing to say, but breakfast at the Scuola Regina was most of the time a far more peaceful affair than at Hogwarts.

The Venetians hadn't four tables dividing the students. Everyone was sitting at the table he or she wanted, meaning that to sit and be part of an eight students-strong assembly, you just had to ask the people already present there if they minded your company or not.

You wouldn't necessarily have a great conversation though. Most of the school spoke languages the future Lord Longbottom hadn't yet begun to learn or taken the Language Potion for, and there were few students interested in having a long conversation in English.

There was seemingly little supervision, but any conversation which grew too loud for no good reason or a debate about to turn violent saw one of the many red-cloaked security personnel approach and politely enquire what the problem was.

And ten times out of ten, it was enough. No wands had been drawn here except for a few improvised celebrations and birthdays, and the spells used were the ones used for fireworks, or birthday-themed Charms and Transfiguration.

Today the hall where they all took their breakfast was a bit louder, but Neville knew it had nothing with good or bad news regarding the Tournament; the atmosphere was different because it was Sunday, and as a result with classes out of the way, hundreds of the Scuola Regina students were making plans for the day, and it had little to do with homework and boring theorems of Transfiguration.

"I think I am going to go shopping today," Angelina Johnson told Tamsin Applebee between two bites of marmalade toast. "The Yule Ball is near, and honestly, the local dressmakers are a generation ahead of the British shops."

"Yes, yes," the Hufflepuff girl replied before countering, "but they must already be pretty busy, no? I've heard the whispers, and pretty much every student of the Scuola Regina is going to participate. They must have hundreds of princesses' gowns and wizardly robes to prepare. Unless you have enough money or prestige to skip the endless queue..."

"Don't try to ruin my perfect day before it begins, Badger," the Gryffindor Chaser gave her a half-severe, half-mocking look.

"I wish it could be a perfect day," Geoffrey said stoically. "But I am not coming with you. I have the Second Task to train for. It is in six days, and I don't have any idea what I'm really going to need."

Neville swallowed the last piece of his pancake nervously.

With the tutoring he was receiving and the few hard classes of the Venetian school, the month of November had disappeared faster than he realised. And for all he wanted not to admit to the Gryffindor Champion, there had been days he had temporarily forgotten the Second Task was coming.

Thus the words shouldn't be that much of a surprise...but they were a cold shower nonetheless.

Six days. That was the amount of time Geoffrey had before fighting for his life again...and if he failed, if he died or didn't leave the arena healthy enough for the Healers' examination, it would be Neville's turn to participate.

"I know it's not exactly a great way to comfort someone," the fourth-year Gryffindor boy replied, "but the majority of the other Champions are completely in the dark too."

After a few days, it was incredibly obvious that whatever the six Champions who had gotten a Tournament Clue were searching for in the library or elsewhere, their unsuccessful challengers were spying upon them...or paying others to know what their day-to-day schedule was.

"Our mighty Ravenclaw Champion is coming this way," Angelina informed them. "Leo, Ron, stop glaring, you look like puff-fishes for no good reason."

"Don't you think it's time to stop ignoring what she is?" the Black Heir grumbled between his teeth. "She is-"

"She is leading the Tournament's rankings right now, yes," the older Gryffindor girl smiled evilly, knowing like everyone at the table that whatever Leo was going to say, it wasn't that. "Champion Potter! What brings you to our incomparable table today?

"Tournament business," it was a minor surprise, but the Ravenclaw Champion seemed quite sleepy this morning. Usually they all saw her doing some jogging or another physical activity long before breakfast hour, and after that, attend her classes like a bolt of lightning magic. This morning, on the other hand...the Leviathan-thrower was one inch or two away from yawning. "Geoffrey, if you had a modicum of interest living longer than another six days, I want you before my villa's door in two hours. I don't know where Cedric is-"

"You missed him by fifteen minutes," Tamsin cooed. "He had...plans for the lovely Miss Chang."

"I'm afraid you will have to run after him and tell him his plans are cancelled, then." The green eyes became bored. "Or he can decide it's of no interest to him. It's his choice, I'm not his magical guardian or his parents. But please inform him."

"Goodbye succulent pastries..." Tamsin saluted mournfully, grabbing one of the croissants before rushing out of the hall.

"Does this mean," a voice filled with bloodlust and promises of war spoke in French, "you have deciphered the Tournament Clue?"

It was the Champion of War. And Neville was not really...err...feeling that courageous having him so close. Krum and a few other Champions had muscles and could look very intimidating. But this Champion of the Scuola Regina was something else. Of course, he was a Dark Champion, and each of the six souls sworn to the Dark Powers could do horrible and bloody things, but...he was really, really shrouded in an aura promising pain.

"Yes, of course," and suddenly the chatter of conversations died down, and the hall, as immense and crowded as it was on a Sunday morning, was silent. "It took me a lot of time, resources, and help, but I was successful. The Honourable Judge present can confirm it, if it is your desire."

A lot of heads immediately turn towards the table where a group of adults had been drinking coffee and other drinks. Mohammed ben Qassim was the only Judge present today, but when facing the attention of several hundreds of eyes, his answer was curt and to the point.

"Indeed. Champion Alexandra Potter has successfully deciphered the Tournament Clue." And that was all he said before turning back and resuming his conversation with a centaur.

"Good," the Champion of War gave a smile which had too much metal for someone human. "Now what is your favourite part?"

"Oh, the crocodile wrestling, of course!"

Whatever Romeo Malatesti, Champion of Ares, had expected to hear, it was quite clearly not *that*.

"The...crocodile...wrestling?"

In an instant, the feeling of terror was gone and now Neville had the urge to laugh as the bluff of the Venetian killer was decidedly not working.

"Yes, what else could I be referring to? In my humble opinion, giving us a knife and a rope makes the task a bit too easy, but the Judges have decreed we must wrestle the saurian, and who I am to go against their wishes?"

"You're lying!" the tall Champion shouted, and it was almost comical how he had to look downwards to watch the Ravenclaw girl. "We are not going to wrestle a crocodile bare-handed!"

"It is not a crocodile," the Champion of Death said in a voice supposed to be in 'conspiracy' mode...but that likely everyone present right now heard. "It is a Hetkoshu crocodile! You know, those black-scaled lizards which can grow to ten metres in length and twenty tons!"

Neville shivered, and he wasn't the only one. He had never seen a Hetkoshu crocodile for real, but he was already convinced he didn't want to be close to one.

"Once it is done, we have to charge up the Temple of Bastet and purify ourselves before grabbing some ibis' feathers and accomplishing the-"

"ENOUGH!" The aura of bloodlust was back, but somehow, most of the fear the boy had when he approached was...hesitant...haphazard. "Enough with those lies! I know the Second Task is not about wrestling with a crocodile or doing some ridiculous thing with ibis' feathers!"

"Yes, I suppose you do..." the smile Alexandra Potter gave Malatesti was not impressive at first sight, but there was some...viciousness hidden there. "After all, according to what you told everyone, *you have deciphered the Tournament Clue*."

If the male Champion of the Scuola Regina's eyes had the power of a Basilisk, they would all be dead given how fiercely he glared at them.

But Romeo Malatesti wasn't a Basilisk. And for someone who had seen one of those abominable snakes and slaughtered them, a few dark looks weren't exactly stomach-turning.

"I would be careful if I were you..." The Champion of War whispered angrily.

"Don't forget, Champion Malatesti. Saturday, crocodile wrestling. Ciao!"

And the Ravenclaw Champion left the breakfast hall to cheers and applause.

**28 November 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Scylla supposed she should have turned her tongue seven times in her mouth before begging to have a greater role in the European Magical Tournament.

When she had thought about Alexandra Potter giving her important orders, painting her body with Runes had not been among the top ten things she had thought about.

And they had a public too.

"Fifteen minutes to paint this series of hieroglyphs," Daphne Greengrass announced, writing something on a levitating parchment. "How long did you say you had between Runic Duels?"

"Fifteen minutes multiplied by seven for the first round...at best," the green-eyed Champion replied while glancing at her watch. "Obviously it's divided by two for the second round, and the same applies for the third round. Depending on the order, it's possible that in a worst-case scenario I would have only a few minutes between the third duel and the fourth...assuming I'm still an active player, of course."

The Basilisk-Slayer shook her head.

"Okay, our pretty guinea pig was fast, but not fast enough to paint another Runic scheme on her skin. And in the Tournament, between the visit to the Healers, exhaustion, and drinking a lot of water, the 'maximum time' will never happen. If I want to paint something upon my body, it will have to be done before the Task begins, which means at dawn or the evening before."

"I bow to your greater experience in matters of life and death," the Greengrass Heiress answered smoothly. "And regarding the Runic glyphs you want to paint?"

"DASHRET!"

The hieroglyphs painted in white on her left arm suddenly began to burn in emerald radiance, and...well, nothing happened.

Five heartbeats later, as Scylla opened her mouth to ask a question, the pull of magic she used in the process increased and at last a large beam of emerald light struck the duelling dummy five metres away.

"Oh, it works." Alexandra said whimsically. "How much of the paint was removed?"

"About half," the Slytherin hiding under a Gryffindor's pelt answered. "Wasn't it a bit...slow?"

"By hieroglyph standards, not that much," the Ravenclaw girl told her. "The Egyptian Runic Arts are not exactly quick things. They take time to draw the magic from the caster or whatever you're using as a power source."

"It's what allowed them to last so long as a civilisation," Daphne added. "The rituals are slow, and have numerous mechanisms which ensure the Runic activation isn't going to blow you up or something equally spectacular."

The Slytherin pureblood inspected her hair to see if she was as perfect in hair style and appearance as when she had entered the classroom. She was, of course. Scylla knew she had most certainly refused being the 'guinea pig' of the painting session.

"Somehow, I doubt the Dark Wizards who founded the Exchequer decided to be that cautious."

"You might be surprised." The young witch blinked in surprise at Alexandra's comment. "Oh, I don't doubt the Dark Wizards they train aren't taught things which decrease the painting and activation time of the average ritual. But the wizards and witches who created this exacting magical system weren't idiots. They had to work with the knowledge Fate was going to screw them over in every manner possible. I don't think it was a coincidence they imparted a 'theory' where one's soul has five parts and a precise word for everything which might exist."

"And you think the Exchequer did it deliberately?

"Look at the Futhark system," the fourth-year Ravenclaw pointed out, "we have the Runic evocations, which can be loosely translated as words and common spells. Then there are the Galdr, which are the Runic sentences, and the evolved grammar and vocabulary of any respectable language. And finally we have the Lokk, which is both evolved Galdr and the creation of new glyphs using the existing vocabulary of evocations and Galdr. That's three steps, and though it would obviously take thousands of hours to have the beginnings of mastery in the subject, this is a system which works. No disasters have been linked to Elder or Lesser Futhark in the last century that wasn't the cause of war and sabotage, and it's an adaptable and reasonable system."

Daphne Greengrass having taken her seat, the most powerful witch of Hogwarts had to summon a new one...and she did it wandlessly.

"Obviously, languages like Futhark came after the Hieroglyphs, but the Sumerian glyphs were around already, and they were already of a redoubtable complexity. Therefore, my reasonable hypothesis is that the Hieroglyphs were not invented for fast attacks and easy Runic-casting. The Exchequer likely sponsored it because they wanted something which was going to give them a means of accumulating vast quantities of power and delivering a blow which couldn't be cancelled with a snap of yourfingers."

"There is a lot of speculation-"

"Mequer-t, Arq, and Ankh Neter are three words which all describe a serpent amulet, Daphne. The only thing that changes is the position of the serpent carved on the amulet. Magicians decided it was a good idea to be *that* thorough when establishing the 'rules' of the Hieroglyphs. I suppose we could get one rule-abiding maniac for one repertoire of words and spells, but the entire language?"

"I apologise," the blonde nodded. "You're certainly right. But whether you are correct or not, it will take you an eternity to know more than the basics of this Runic language."

"Oh yeah, it's going to take decades," the Champion of Ravenclaw shrugged it off like it was nothing. "But the more competencies I acquire on this path, the more I'm sure the number of magical practitioners who can best me on this field approaches zero. Osiris and Ra have millennia of experience and will retain an advantage no matter what I do, but the Ur-Heka casting can destroy plenty of elite wizards who suck at Runes. Yes, Scylla?"

"Err...Ur-Heka?"

"It means 'Words of Great Power'...at least that's the best translation I can think of."

"And they will allow Alexandra to throw some very nasty Ut-t Sau...provided she has the time to prepare."

The future Lady of House Potter snorted.

"It's true I chose Hieroglyphs because the incantations can pack a punch. Speaking of which...can you remove a few more clothes, Ginny? I want to try that old curse Daphne found?"

"Is your girlfriend not going to be jealous?" the de facto Lady Yaxley retorted as she obeyed the suggestion like it was an order from the Powers.

"No," Daphne answered before Alexandra could. "Susan knows you have no chance against her, poor sweet child. If you wanted to be part of the seraglio of the Dark Lady, you should have stayed a redhead..."

"HEY!"

**29 November 1994, Lyudmila's Villa, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

"What a pity...I was almost ready to organise a little lesson for crocodile wrestling."

Astrid's head hit the wooden table. Of course the Dark Queen would find the joke funny.

"Well..." Irina chuckled, "I mean, technically nobody is going to stop you if you jump into the artificial lake and try wrestling one of the Hetkoshu crocodiles. But the Judges aren't going to reward you if you do it."

"And I don't think the other reptiles are going to stay idle while you wrestle one," Roksana inspected her nails as Astrid raised her head again. "I was authorised to see one a few years ago when my parents took me to Egypt. Those are aggressive predators."

"*Big* and aggressive," Katharina declared in a murmur. "And they're incredibly fast in the water. If someone falls from the bridge or the duelling platform, I don't think the arena handlers will be able to do something for the doomed Champion."

Lyudmila clicked her tongue.

"I think you're far too pessimistic. There are many Champions with strong inner animals-"

Roksana Vulchanova coughed loudly.

"Yes, Malatesti has a powerful Animagus form, but even if he does have the time to transform, a Stymphalian Bird in the water is prey, not predator. Unless you think the Hetkoshu crocodiles will refuse to eat him because they dislike the taste of metal?"

"Fine, fine..." Lyudmila shook her head, turning around the table but not keeping her eyes off the papyrus. "Irina did an excellent job solving the two enigmas. Do we have an idea who has reached that point?"

"Besides my cousin?" Astrid asked rhetorically. "Not really. We had the confirmation two days ago Malatesti was a braggart and a fool, of course."

"Of course," Roksana echoed, "any other time I would say we should stay prudent, but evidently, the Lightning Champion gave him the solution of the first enigma and he hadn't the wits to acknowledge it. And given how complicated the second enigma was...I don't think there is much danger about him solving it before the Second Task."

"And the other Champions?"

Katharina used her wand to cast a Charm on her light brown hair before answering.

"The two Champions of the Light are using a lot of Portkeys between the Scuola Regina and Paris, so it's a bit difficult asserting if they have the text of the Runic Tournament or not. As for Lucrezia Sforza, I haven't the faintest idea. She got nowhere near the Hieroglyph Section of the school library."

"I was able to ask a few questions to some Venetian boys and girls," Astrid intervened. "According to them, the Sforza Heiress is really, really good at Runes. She's a novice in Hieroglyphs, that's certain. But she took Runes as a core class when she entered the Scuola Regina. She will be at least an expert in Etruscan, Carthaginian, and Futhark runes, with maybe a few other surprises."

"Malatesti could still prove dangerous," Irina said after a few seconds, prompting a general rise of eyebrows. The Ukrainian witched snorted at their expressions of disbelief. "Don't get me wrong, the brute is very much a Champion of Ares, everything in the muscles and nothing in the head. But he still has a lot of knowledge in Hieroglyphs, and the duels are going to be fought on top of an Egyptian temple filled with Hieroglyph-based traps. And if you think a Champion of War took Hieroglyphs as a class because he wanted some calm and serenity, I think you should stop casting Cheering Charms on yourself..."

That was a good point, admittedly.

"He will be dangerous in a rampaging fashion," Lyudmila said as she finally stopped circling and took her throne-seat. "But his lack of useful knowledge is a huge weakness. Without solving the cartouche enigmas, he doesn't know what is allowed or not. He will come with runic daggers and the like, but he has no idea that tablets and enchanted clothes with woven glyphs are forbidden."

"It's certainly going to make things simpler at the beginning of the Second Task," the brown-haired Vulchanova witch argued. "The Champions who arrive with their skin painted in Runes will undoubtedly have either read the text Irina just gave us, or they were given sufficient information by someone who did."

"You make a good point," the most dangerous Champion of Durmstrang nodded. "Continue spying, a few of them may make some mistakes and reveal what they know before the Second Task. In the meantime, I am going to train myself in the noble art of painting Norse Runes on my skin..."

"No Aztec or Sumerian glyphs?" Katharina asked.

"Sumerian is okay if you don't fancy dying of boredom for thirty minutes," the Dark Queen shrugged. "And the Aztec glyphs need too much blood to be really useful. I mean, the only beings in the arena are the other Champion and the crocodiles. The former I am supposed to defeat, the latter are a bit difficult to bleed given the configuration of the Coliseum. Unless you think the Judges will let me bring a lot of blood with me?"

"Not a chance," Irina immediately answered with iron-clad certainty. "Each Champion has the right to bring one Rune-carving instrument per duel, which all must be registered, and the Runic glyphs must be on the skin, painted, branded, or anything else which allows them to hold...but you don't have the right to bring anything else...and absolutely no blood."

"What a disappointment," Lyudmila said sardonically before throwing a sealed parchment to Irina, which had to be a confirmation of gold transfer from one vault to another. "Katharina, when you see the great High Master of Durmstrang, tell him I will be too busy in the next days to attend the classes or the inter-school events. I have better things to do. Roksana, Astrid, you stay. I want to know if you know some interesting combinations of Runes."

"The lethal kind?"

"We're about to fight in the Second Task of the European Magical Tournament..."

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

"Karl...what in the name of Durmstrang's blizzards, do you think you are doing?"

"I thought that was evident, *Krum*! I'm preparing for the Second Task of the Tournament!"

A year or two ago, Viktor would have regretted breaking the friendship he had with the German Champion for the sake of Quidditch.

Now he knew better. It wasn't that being the Seeker of the Bulgarian Quidditch Team paid enough for him to abandon all his school friends. It was more of the realisation the other Champion had only ever cared for him as a 'friend' as long as Viktor wasn't more famous than he was.

But calling him by his family name? Today marked the final breaking point, and some part of the Seeker's mind regretted it. But it wasn't him who had insisted he would never be an adequate professional player.

"Excuse me, *Champion Schumacher*...you will have to explain to me how reading a book on the *mating habits of hippopotamuses* is going to be useful for the incoming Task?"

"I thought it was evident! We must get through these animals in order to complete the challenge!"

Viktor waited for several seconds to see if Karl was joking. Unfortunately, the moment of laughter and hilarious guffaws didn't come.

"Schumacher...there are no hippopotamuses in this Tournament. The dangerous beasts will be the Hetkoshu crocodiles."

"I won't fall for the British lies!" The German wizard declared stubbornly. "I have seen clearly through her manipulations! The Judges won't bring huge crocodiles from Egypt!"

He was completely wrong. Once the pretty British girl had brought him the information, the Bulgarian Seeker had called an Egyptian fan of his games, and the man had called a friend.

The Egyptian preserve the man was working at had definitely sent between fifty and sixty of the massive black-scaled reptiles to Venice about two months ago.

If everything had proceeded according to the normal transport schedules – and the Champion of Durmstrang saw no reason why things shouldn't, given how professionally this Tournament was organised – the Hetkoshu crocodiles should be in the Coliseum or in a large artificial lake nearby waiting to play their role in the Tournament.

"Why hippopotamuses in the first place?" Viktor asked. He thought it was a really good question, seriously. Oh, the animals in question were incredibly angry with anyone who was forced to swim next to them, and if you didn't have a wand, they could very much kill you.

But if you had the magical power and the skill to do something in an aquatic environment, the hippopotamus was just an enormous and slow target. The species had zero magical resistance; the first serious curse or cutting spell would kill it...and you had to kill it, because otherwise a wounded hippopotamus could show you its hatred the same way an Ice Wyrm did.

"The six Champions who received the Tournament Clue borrowed books on them! They all did! They tried to disguise it afterwards, but I recognised their attempts for what they were!"

Or more likely, the successful Champions had wanted to have a good laugh at the expense of the ones who didn't have anything, and one or the other had decided upon hippopotamuses before the others decided it was pretty funny and to follow his or her example.

"I hope you realise this is nonsense, right?"

"Go back polishing your broom, Krum," Karl Schumacher gave him his usual look of arrogant superiority that most of his 'friends' surely saw nothing wrong with. "Next Saturday, you will watch me crushing the-"

"Who's going to crush what?" A feminine voice they both knew very well purred.

The two male Champions of Durmstrang closed the books in their hands by reflex and took defensive stances.

"Dark Queen," Schumacher said in a voice which had lost most of its confidence and aristocratic condescendence. "What can we do for you today?"

"You can return to your villa and learn some runes," the green-eyed Russian witch smiled, and no one could mistake the expression as a friendly sign. "That way you might avoid embarrassing the High Master more than you did during the First Task."

"I didn't embarrass Durmstrang!"

"It could have fooled me," the Black Witch replied before genuinely frowning as she read the title of the book the German Champion had in his hands. "Hippopotamuses? Seriously? What sort of idiocies have you fallen for, Schumacher?"

"At least I'm not training to wrestle a crocodile!"

"Don't be ridiculous," the Dark Queen smiled. "I don't need any training to wrestle with a XXXX-class magical beast. And I don't wrestle with anyone. When I fight my enemies, I *bleed* them."

For all the falsehoods which had been uttered, Viktor Krum had no doubt the Russian witch of the Imperial House of Romanov had uttered the truth this time.

"You might deny the truth but-"

"**Shut up**."

Karl Schumacher stopped talking. The magical power in her voice was a warning few failed to heed. No, she couldn't kill a fellow Champion...outside the arena.

"You were thrown out of the Runes class by Professor Roseland two years ago, but in the interest of giving you a chance at proving yourself, I am going to give you enough clues to survive. Yes, the Second Task is a Runes-only challenge. No, there aren't any hippopotamuses. Yes, there are Hetkoshu crocodiles, well-fed and brought from the Egyptian preserve. Now go, and pray we don't face each other during the Tournament."

His former friend wasn't completely stupid; the moment Lyudmila said 'now go', Karl Schumacher sprinted out of the library section.

"Hippopotamuses," the Dark Queen shook her head in disbelief. "What have I done to the other Dark Powers to be saddled with an idiot like him?"

"To be fair, it's not exactly as...exotic as trying to use a wooden bridge over a lake of crocodiles."

The annoyance disappeared, and Viktor had an instant to regret his words before the full attention of the monster was directed at him.

"Someone talked."

"I am famous. People want me in their debt." He wasn't exactly proud of it, but why bother denying the truth?

"I see. And if I say we are going to duel on top of an Egyptian temple with the first arrived getting a new Tournament Clue?"

"I would say you need to step up the game, for I was already aware of that," the Bulgarian Seeker replied honestly.

"Step up my game how?"

"Champion Potter and her substitutes are very cautious," Viktor admitted freely. "They told me – truthfully, given your reaction – what awaits us inside the Coliseum. But they have not told me the rules of the Second Task, save that it is a Runes-only challenge."

He didn't exactly blame the British; they wanted him in their favour, but not knowledgeable enough to be a true danger for the Second Task...assuming he could be a real danger to witches capable of terrifying a sea snake alone and slaughter Champions with just one or two spells.

The Dark Queen stayed silent for a few seconds, judging him, and evidently considering her options. Finally, she cast an extremely powerful Charm preventing people from eavesdropping.

"This Task is not just a Runes-only Task, it is a Runes-only *tournament*." The insistence on the last word made him widen his eyes. "We are going to fight each other one-on-one until there's a winner and everyone is eliminated. Is it enough to convince you to bargain your favour?"

"It is." Viktor swallowed, far less confident he could handle whatever the Judges had in store for them. "Tell me more."

**1 December 1994, Paris, France**

There had been many times this year Henri had felt he was spending too much time opening and closing dusty old books, and the results were not proportionate to the time lost.

It looked like today was going to be a noticeable example of it...again.

"Trying to solve the new enigma the Champion of Death threw in our direction?" Eleonora's voice arrived without warning behind him.

"Please warn me when you enter a room," he sighed after a small jump of surprise. "I was almost ready to curse you."

"I seriously doubt any enemies can break through twelve layers of wards without triggering one alarm or two, Henri."

"My limited paranoia is extending more and more in strange directions, and it isn't limited anymore to organisations of Dark Wizards."

This was as far as he was going to go, even in the middle of a library owned by his family.

"I understand, my apologies," the Champion of Innocence bowed before casting a basic Light Charm with her wand. "Searching for old books about old pharaohs?"

"Oh no, I stopped that research hours ago. It's useless."

"Some might disagree," Eleonora da Riva said in a conversational tone but with a smirk on her lips. "You know, knowing what we're expected to do in a given Task is half of the battle."

"Oh, I completely agree." The French pureblood wizard replied. "What I really meant is that I am not going to solve this second enigma unless someone gives me the solution...there's too little time. I have already tried five times. For the three cartouches, that makes fifteen failed attempts. I will place two more names per cartouches tomorrow, but I am not betting on a success."

The Champion of Horus grimaced.

"There were too many Pharaohs who reigned over Lower or Upper Egypt for twenty-one attempts to make an elimination process possible."

"It would have, I think...if the six Champions who completed the First Task allied together."

Henri chuckled.

"Yes, in theory, we would have a lot more attempts available..." clearly everyone must have tried 'Ramses' at least once. "But I don't think that was possible in the first place. Talking to some of our fellow Champions is already very difficult."

Romeo Malatesti loved to spread rumours, but he really talked only when it was in his best interest. And the more he knew the Champion of Ares, the more Henri was convinced the Venetian wanted the Light to die in long and dolorous agony.

It was only a guess, but it may be Romeo Malatesti followed the Exchequer's guidance only because it was the fastest path to war and the utter defeat of the Army of Light and the Trinity. The Heir of the de Condé line wished he could say he was surprised, but he wasn't. In the last centuries, the Light had too often created the monstrous enemies it faced on the battlefield.

"One day the Archmage may realise trying to kill the Champions of the Dark before they're able to speak their first word is just fuelling the fires of hatred." Eleonora sighed loudly. "Of the six Dark Champions, the only one his assassins didn't try to kill during her childhood is the Romanov psychopath."

Yes, at least the Trinity and the Army of Light couldn't be blamed for the sheer danger Lyudmila Romanov represented for the world.

"Yes, what a relief. I'm sure we will be good friends in no time once we wrestle a crocodile together."

Eleonora giggled.

"How do you intend to do that? I don't think your Animagus form is going to be enough..."

"I will have you know," Henri gave his best 'I am a Condé!' expression of aristocratic arrogance, "I am the Champion of Horus, a Condé of the purest blood, and a great Lord of wizardry!" He let a couple of heartbeats pass before speaking again. "As such, I will try to feed the crocodiles with cow meat until they're no longer hungry, and only then I will try to wrestle one."

"What courage! What sense of audacity! What a dutiful son of France you are!"

"I know, I know." He placed back the Pharaoh-themed book where he had taken it and rolled his shoulders. "There's not much else we can do to prepare. I am good at Runic casting, so hopefully the Second Task will allow me to earn some points even if we can't defeat Chaos or Death."

"You're placing the two witches on the same level?"

"The two have solved the 'God' and the 'Pharaoh' enigmas." The Dark Queen of Durmstrang had gleefully informed them of her 'success' this very morning, before affirming she was ready to wrestle some crocodiles. The worst thing was that if it was the truth, the Chaos Champion was most likely able to do it. When you had the strength of Fenrir, a super-saurian was not that much of a challenge...

"Yes, and I have a feeling Her Dark Majesty of the East threw gold and resources at it until it worked."

Henri gave his fellow Champion a thin smile.

"The problem, unfortunately, is that no matter how stupid or costly the strategy, it evidently worked...while we are still in the dark."

And though House de Condé had no idea how many millions the Tsar of Russia had given his daughter as pocket money, Henri was rather sure the Champion of Chaos had more than enough to repeat the same strategy for the next five Tasks without worrying about things like debts and empty vaults.

"We will do our best."

"I would be more reassured if Ra had not assured us of the same thing yesterday where the Styx Vipers are concerned..."

**1 December 1994, the Black Pyramid, Somewhere in Egypt**

The Army of Light and the Trinity had not waited for the implementation of the Statute of Secrecy to destroy and remove every artefact and magical structure they judged dangerous for the continued domination of the Light.

Yet for all the motivation of the curse-breakers and the ward-masters among the two sister-organisations, for all the magic they could channel through wands, staffs, and thousands of other magical foci, their 'quest' was doomed from the start.

The truth, and it was something that unlike wizards, non-magicals recognised from the start, was that unless you were ready to spend millennia digging in the desert, you were never going to discover something your enemies didn't want you to find.

Investigating the Nile's shores alone was a difficult exercise, and one which had grown more and more risky as the Exchequer's power and influence rose by the end of the eighteenth century. The further you travelled away from the majestic river, the more Sisyphean the task was.

Recent events had highlighted the folly of relying on the ignorance of the 'Muggle' population to counter the plans of Osiris and his Knights.

For centuries, the First Seal had waited to be activated, and it was less than ten kilometres away from the location where the true fortress of the Avatar of Darkness stood during Cleopatra VII's reign.

Considering this massive intelligence failure, maybe the ancient Archmage and his troops should have meditated on the point that if they had missed one Seal, the likelihood of more dangerous things waiting under the sands to be summoned was a very real and frightening possibility.

It was entirely possible it wouldn't have changed anything.

Egypt was vast, and the number of known pyramids to the non-magical population was incredibly high. What those citizens didn't know was that the Light had razed hundreds of them, and even Ra hadn't the faintest idea of how many tombs containing magical objects still waited to be discovered. There were forgotten sites, which, should they see the light of day again, would make the discoveries of the Valley of the Kings of Ancient Thebes the equivalent of a minor discovery in comparison.

Ultimately, Ra and the forces currently hunting the Styx Vipers had not meditated a single second upon the subject, and thus the point was moot.

The Styx Viper slithering through the sands didn't care about that.

The young snake was hungry, and only the compulsion integrated in the First Seal had made sure it abandoned the relative protection of the Nile's shores and obeyed the command of the Queen of the Exchequer.

The Styx Viper didn't know it, but she was the sixty-sixth of her species to be 'born'.

The Styx Viper was the true arrow. Its 'siblings' could be given many descriptions, but 'feints' and 'distractions' could be considered fairly accurate.

The greater number of those Spawns of Apophis was of course going to cause a sizeable number of deaths and massive problems to the Statute of Secrecy. Assuming they had been told of the real purpose behind the First Seal, the Dark Wizards and Witches sworn to Osiris would consider the bloodshed a perfectly acceptable price to keep their enemies unaware of their real goals.

The Styx Viper didn't really care about that. It disappeared under the sands, and found the relatively large hole the builders had left for it over five centuries ago.

Three out of four of the Knights who had built the Black Pyramid in seven nights before burying it here were now dead.

It was of no importance to the Exchequer.

The stasis fields, recognising the energetic signature they had awaited for five hundred years, were deactivated, freeing seven Light wizards kept alive for this very moment.

Maybe if they had a wand and mastery of the battlefield inside the pyramids, the seven men would have had a chance against the Styx Viper.

The Death-attuned creature was young, hungry, and tired.

But the Exchequer had stopped playing fair an eternity ago.

The Black Pyramid's inner corridors had no source of light save a few Hieroglyphs shining in weak light. For a Styx Viper, it wasn't a problem. Like the Basilisk and the Lernaean Hydra, perfect night vision was among the magical gifts inbuilt in the reptilian species.

For wizards lacking their primary and secondary magical foci? It was a death sentence.

It didn't take five minutes for the seven deaths to happen, and then it was only because the Styx Viper fed a lot on each body before going after the next 'meal'.

If any current member of the Army of Light had been present to witness the slaughter, he or she would have been extremely worried, for the Styx Viper didn't create more new snakes with each death.

And their fears would have been completely justified.

As the seventh wizard died, the sanctum of the Black Pyramid began to siphon magic from the Ley Line passing underneath it.

It was a small quantity of magic, all told. An average *Fulmen Imperator* cast by a certain Champion of Death would easily consume a thousand times more magical energy.

But the Imperial Thunder was a spell which would not last past a few seconds. The Knights of the Exchequer who had built the Black Pyramid intended for their magical-draining creation to be active for far, far longer than a day.

And Fate had not been able to help the Light discover it, for no member of the Exchequer had personally intervened to begin the ritual.

As for the Styx Viper, it began to grow in size, and spectacularly so.

The Black Pyramid relied on secrecy above all for protection, but why not add a fierce guardian to the defences when you had already invested so much making sure it would come here in the first place?

**2 December 1994, Duelling Wing, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

The duel was a one-sided massacre, and lasted barely forty seconds before the disarming.

"One more victory for the Scuola Regina," Lucrezia commented, "and one more defeat for Hogwarts."

"I suppose their best duellists are Champions or substitutes," from her mother, it wasn't an excuse, but it was very close to it.

"Please, mother," the Champion of Venus snorted, "most of the Champions I have seen won't last long in a duel or some sort of magical fight. So far, Hogwarts has shown a single very dangerous Champion and the others are here to fill up the numbers."

The Succubus student had been warned that the standards of the Scotland-based school had spectacularly fallen, but the disastrous performance of three out of four Champions during the First Task had been something unexpected.

"Don't be too arrogant."

"Yes, mother. But it isn't arrogance to say I managed to isolate the new 'Slytherin Champion' this morning. And I only had to show him my cleavage before he revealed everything he knew...which was practically nothing. Alexandra Potter didn't even speak with him in the last couple of days."

"The Champions of Death are famous for the lengths they can go to when it comes to grudges...and so was her mother," Angelica Sforza, Headmistress of the Scuola Regina, said unsurprised. "And Graham Montague has sworn allegiance to the pathetic Dark Lord who calls himself 'Voldemort'. I would have been more impressed if you successfully seduced the other male Champions."

On the duellist platforms, Durmstrang students went against the Scuola Regina duelling prodigies, and this time the magical clash was far more impressive.

"Unfortunately, the two other Champions are never alone. Cedric Diggory always has his Chinese girlfriend with him, and the other one...well, Dumbledore is never really far from his favourites."

And any talks with the Champion of Death demanded a lot of preparations, be it physical or mental. The redheads around Alexandra Potter were fiercely territorial, and the witch who had annihilated Lorenzo wouldn't hesitate to destroy her if she had the chance.

"And honestly, I have better things to do," the Champion of Desire admitted. "Preparing for the Second Task is my priority, not acquiring information I already have."

"You have solved the two enigmas, then?" her mother asked while applauding when one of the Scuola Regina's students won his duel...only one in four, but that was more than Beauxbatons and Hogwarts had done in this inter-school duelling competition.

"One can say that," the currently black-haired teenage witch smiled. "The answers to the papyrus' problems were in the lodge of the Judges in the Coliseum."

For a single second, Lucrezia saw genuine surprise on her mother's face, before decades of self-control banished it.

The elder Succubus chuckled nonetheless for a few seconds.

"I see. So that was the esteemed Judges' plan. I wondered why they kept the stands opened until six days ago. Was it easy to find?"

"You had to know a first-year unlocking Charm and a 'Finite Incantatem' to break the glamour on the table where the document was presented." She winced as several students were slammed into magical barriers by the Durmstrang duellists' onslaught. "So yes mother, it was that easy to find if you really looked for it. Maybe Romeo should have used his head instead of bragging like he did in front of the school."

"Maybe," the Headmistress agreed, "but Ares always favoured a certain amount of...aggressiveness in his Champions. And in the end, your two most serious female rivals have deciphered the Tournament Clue on their own."

And the Powers only knew how many hundreds of hours of research they had expended this month in order to achieve it.

But as an old saying went, all that mattered was the result. And the result was that Death and Chaos had full knowledge of what was coming for them tomorrow.

It didn't displease Lucrezia. She wasn't going to say no if she could win a Task effortlessly, but there was a certain sense of...rightness having true rivals blocking the way to the Tournament's laurels of victory.

"I know and I am ready for them."

"Be careful...daughter."

"Yes, mother."

The current phase of the inter-school duels ended. Durmstrang was the leader, followed by the Scuola Regina, Beauxbatons, and Hogwarts.

"Changing the subject, what was the outcome of the Quidditch game our school team played against the Hogwarts students this afternoon?"

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

"It was a massacre," Morag moaned, "except our red-haired Twin Terrors in their roles of Beaters, everyone performed abysmally."

"Are you sure you're not a bit too dramatic, Morag?" The Ravenclaw Champion smirked as Susan tied her black hair into a ponytail.

"We lost by four hundred points, Alex!"

"Ouch," the Potter Heiress rolled her eyes.

"You don't care much about it, don't you?"

"Morag, the moment we made sure most of our good Quidditch players were Champions or substitutes for the main events of the European Magical Tournament, there was a high likelihood we were going to be humiliated. For Ravenclaw we removed Roger, Cho, and myself. For Hufflepuff, except Susan, all were active players. Gryffindor lost Angelina Johnson and Neville Longbottom. Slytherin, despite renewing its team, lost a lot of veterans with the departure of Warrington and his Junior Death Eaters. And I'm not counting the star-players who graduated last year. Wood was the Captain and the Keeper of Gryffindor. Replacing him would be hard under any circumstances. Now? It's a very difficult challenge."

Perhaps if Dumbledore had organised a summer Quidditch camp to train the team instead of doing everything at the last minute...but no, by September, the team selections weren't over.

Against semi-professional Quidditch forces like the ones a school like Durmstrang and the Scuola Regina had prepared, it was an unforgivable mistake.

"Well, maybe we will do better next time..."

"Alexandra, the next game is against Durmstrang!"

"Let's see the positive side...they won't play against Krum."

The Irish Heiress found the strength to giggle.

"I can give you that. Imagine if we sent Malfoy against Krum."

"I prefer not to imagine it too much, if that's all right with you." Krum had nearly beaten the Irish team alone at the Quidditch World Cup; what he would do to Malfoy, who was far from the best Seeker ever attending Hogwarts, would make the word 'massacre' sound fairly tame. "Susan, you're ready?"

"I am ready. The paint is only awaiting your magic."

Normally, it shouldn't be really necessary for painting Runic glyphs upon one's skin, but the Ravenclaws had discovered it the hard way after the first 'paint-tests' that being a Hydra Animagus, her magical aura cracked a paint not pulsing with her magical signature within a few hours.

It took only a few seconds, and when it was done, the paint had taken a vibrant emerald shade.

"Fitting," her girlfriend teased her. "It will nicely compliment your eyes."

"Come on," Alexandra grunted. "It's a series of Runic duels, not a fashion contest."

"You should tell the Succubi we met in the corridors that," Morag giggled.

The green-eyed Champion didn't answer that. There were battles you knew you couldn't win.

"Where do you want us to begin?"

"The arms," she answered immediately. "That is the simpler part, and unlike the Hieroglyphs on my back, I will be able to easily notice if there's an imperfection."

"All must be perfect for the Second Task, eh?"

"I could fight the Dark Queen on the second round, for all I know," Alexandra breathed out. "So yes, each glyph needs to be perfectly painted."

And if it meant staying immobile for countless hours as night had long fallen over the Coliseum's valley, so be it.

"Do you think someone will be wrestling crocodiles tomorrow?"

"Morag, don't try to distract my painter!”

**Author's note**: It took more chapters than I planned for, but the *Second Task* can begin. Let's go wrestling some Hetkoshu crocodiles...

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