**Chapter 115**

**Fifth Task**

**11 March 1995, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

As angry as he was, Graham knew he couldn’t shout at the monster.

Yeah, sure, the Judges had forbidden them to kill each other. Or to cripple each other. Or to do something really nasty to any of the other Champions. It didn’t mean that insulting the new Lady Protector would be painless or free of consequences.

“Potter,” the Slytherin Champion tried hard not to growl. “Could you please remove your not-funny joke from the Scoreboard? The public is going to arrive in a matter of minutes.”

“My joke?” The Ravenclaw raised an eyebrow, and her expression hinted she didn’t know what he was speaking about. Unfortunately, given how powerful her self-control was in all circumstances, it didn’t mean much.

“The ‘not dead yet’ joke.” It took a lot of energy not to snarl or hiss in fury.

“Oh,” Potter blinked before shaking her head. “I’m kind of flattered you think it was me, Montague, but I didn’t do it. I will freely admit I had a good laugh like everyone else, but I have far more important things to do before hacking the Scoreboard’s Arithmantic matrix. With the lack of free time I’ve had in the last ten days, being busy dealing with politics and all, pranks are something that can wait, where I am concerned.”

All of this was uttered in a flat, bored voice.

“But,” in a few seconds, Graham managed to recover. “But if you didn’t do it, who-“

His head turned fast enough to watch two red-haired *threats* snicker and make signs of self-congratulation.

“The Weasley Twins,” the scion of House Montague gritted his teeth.

“Yes,” Alexandra Potter snorted. “Why am I not surprised? Fred! George!”

“Your Dark and Tenebrous Majesty?” the evil tricksters answered in one voice.

“Remove your prank,” the Lady Protector of the Isles flatly ordered. “It has stopped being funny, and as Montague said, we’re going to have tens of thousands of spectators at the gates in a few minutes. And Montague is a Hogwarts Champion. Knowledge of your pranks is already well-known enough as it is.”

“But we will need so much time to do it,” one of the two pranksters said dramatically, using a tone so fake no one would mistake it for a lie.

“Last chance,” the Ravenclaw monster sighed. “The next person to ask will do it far more politely than I.”

“You mean, far less politely than I,” the Twin who had to be George corrected with a big grin.

Potter snorted again.

“I know what I said, Fred.”

There was a sensation of...humidity, like it was about to rain.

And without warning, another Champion appeared behind the Twins, and the two Gryffindors jumped from their chairs.

That was what happened when someone pulled your ears, and Montague truthfully admitted he smiled vengefully when the ears became very red, as crimson as their hair, in fact.

“Boys,” Lucrezia Sforza purred. It was a sound which happened to make his legs very shaky, no matter how much Graham tried to hide it. “Remove it, or we will have to speak of *punishment*.”

The last word conjured a magical vision of the Twins being bound to an altar and about to be sacrificed like vulgar pigs.

It lasted but a couple of heartbeats, but the Slytherin Champion was sure it hadn’t been his imagination in control.

Not when the Weasley Twins ran to the Scoreboard, their motivation to undo their prank evident to the entire audience.

“Well,” the green-eyed monster next to him mused, “I’ve never seen them *that* obedient in the last few months. The problem is solved. Now, breakfast! I have to fill my stomach, it wouldn’t do to begin the Fifth Task in a semi-starving condition...”

Graham hid a grimace. Oh yeah, now that this humiliating prank was about to be over...there was nothing to prevent him from thinking about the Coliseum and the madness to come.

The Fifth Task was in a few hours...and he had no idea how to beat the other Champions in a broom race.

“What was I thinking when I decided to participate in this crazy competition?” the representative of the House of Salazar Slytherin moaned.

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“I’m saying you could have been nicer to Montague, that’s all.”

Morag chuckled, because far from being impressed by Hannah’s speech, Alexandra continued to enjoy her cereals, along with several large glasses of fruit juice.

“And?” Alex reacted once she had finished swallowing what she had in her mouth.

“You’re incorrigible,” the Hufflepuff complained. “You’re really lucky Susan is interested in making you a far nicer person than you currently are.”

“On that point, we both agree,” the Ravenclaw Champion bared her teeth...before focusing on the pastries and the strawberry jam.

“You’re wasting your time, Hannah,” Morag snickered. “Her full attention is on satisfying her hunger right now. You could tell her you intend to lead an insurrection against her tyrannical rule of Britain, and she would still wait for the end of breakfast to act.”

“You may very well be right,” the brown-haired witch chuckled. “The quantity of food she eats at any given meal certainly has to be seen to be believed. Is it like this for all Animagi?”

“No,” the MacDougal Heiress shook her head. “It is definitely not, otherwise no one would ever have successfully hidden his or her Animagus nature in the last centuries. Only the magical Animagi have that kind of issue once they merge with their inner animal.”

“Really?”

“You didn’t see how Longbottom was eating recently?” A discreet glance, and sure enough, the ‘Man-Boy-Who-Lived’ was busy devouring a small pile of pancakes along with eggs and-

Okay, Longbottom was eating a lot, and it was better to leave it at that.

“And how does the animal...err...influence you?”

“I have a great deal of control over it,” Morag snorted very loudly at that, earning a glare from Alexandra. “I’m serious, Morag! If I listened only to my inner animal, there would be fish at breakfast and at every other meal. And if you haven’t noticed, that isn’t the case!”

“That’s kind of true,” the red-haired Ravenclaw acknowledged. “Now speak.”

Her friend huffed.

“You will have to be a bit more explicit, Morag.”

“The Fifth Task. I know you have a plan to win it.”

“I have two or three plans, yes,” Alex yawned, and the reaction was completely genuine for once. “I did invest quite a few hours in it, I will admit, but not as much as the previous Tasks. Is it horrible of me to say that with my life no longer the line, I am not as motivated as I was?”

“No, it’s...very human?” Hermione tried as she arrived and immediately took possession of an empty chair. “Plus, of course, Viktor is going to win this Task.”

This time, there was a reaction, all right.

The green eyes changed to become reptilian, and a hiss of defiance crossed her lips. The poor Italian pastry was viciously devoured, that was all Morag was going to say about it.

“Krum,” the Champion of Death said with no small amount of ferocity, “is not invincible.”

Hannah laughed.

“So his cheerleaders have annoyed you too?”

The loud groan which followed confirmed that the Hufflepuff’s aim was flawless.

“They are everywhere, from the library to the Champion’s villas,” Alexandra Potter mourned. “I blame Hermione for the former, by the way.”

“Hey!”

“And as if that wasn’t enough,” the Ravenclaw Champion continued in the same tragic tone, ignoring the bookworm, “now the phenomenon is *contagious*. They are *recruiting* among the non-magical population and making new converts here!”

“Yes, I heard that too,” Hannah gave them an unrepentant smile before frowning. “Though I’m not sure I’m pleased with how everyone here is criticising the rules of the game.”

“Quidditch changed a lot in the last millennium, and so did other sports,” Alexandra shrugged in a far calmer tone. It was very suspiciously calm, in fact.

“You,” Morag accused her, “are going to unleash one of your crazy plans. Again. Am I wrong?”

“Oh, great,” Susan Bones of course chose this moment to arrive and place her hands on her girlfriends’ shoulders. “I love when she mischievously cheats.”

“Is it cheating when there are no rules against it?”

“Yes!” Everyone around the table answered.

“You’re no fun at all...” Alex grumbled.

**11 March 1995, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

There were a lot of people present this morning.

Yes, this was a lame remark, but Alexandra didn’t think she was the only Champion to think that way.

The Coliseum had never had an empty seat during the first three Tasks, of course.

But this time, the organisers of the Tournament had increased the capacity.

There had to be one hundred thousand spectators now.

You didn’t need Hydra eyes to acknowledge that – which was good, for there were now armbands blocking her Animagus abilities. It was...weird. It was a minor irritation, like your limbs were unable to properly move to their full ability.

Alexandra did her best to ignore it.

Fortunately, there were plenty of things to focus upon.

Like the brooms.

The good news was that unlike the worst-case scenario Eleonora and she had imagined, the brooms hadn’t been disassembled. No sadistic Judge had had the unpleasant idea of removing several parts and hiding them everywhere in the Coliseum.

That was where the good news ended.

First of all, the brooms were green-painted and displayed the sigil of the Alta Verda Company, with the coat of arms and ‘AT-A10’ letters and numbers painted on each handle in red letters.

This was no broom of competition; it was at best what could be best described as a ‘leisure broom’, something that would manage to reach a speed of forty kilometres per hour only after long minutes and with wind at the back of the rider.

They were going to have to boost their broom’s speed, using their magic creatively. This was the immediate conclusion she arrived at, and next to her, judging by their expressions, Cedric Diggory and Angelina Johnson had done the same reasoning.

Of course, since the Judges were still sadistic bastards, it wasn’t as simple as picking a broom and flying away.

The brooms were anchored to the ground....literally.

Each of the sixteen brooms assembled in the Coliseum had been chained to anchors. For each broom, there were five anchors, and the Runes shining on the metallic objects commonly used for ships told you bluntly that as long as one remained, you weren’t going to begin the race.

Predictably, it was the Transylvanian vampire who advanced.

Alexandra said predictably, because while at the moment she didn’t remember his name, she had not forgotten he was a retired Quidditch Player, and a Beater at that.

“WELCOME, CHAMPIONS! WELCOME, ESTEEMED GUESTS, TO THE FIFTH TASK OF THE EUROPEAN MAGICAL TOURNAMENT!”

The clamour which erupted from the stands was incredible.

The advertisements on the enchanted mirrors vanished at once, and one by one, the ‘screens’ began to show...images of other landscapes. Landscapes which had nothing to do with the Coliseum. There was what had to be a glacier. There was a lagoon and a volcano. There was-

The floor rumbled, as the machinery of the Coliseum entered in action.

The arena began to change dramatically.

Before, it was only sand, the typical gladiatorial thing everyone thought of when ‘arena’ was uttered.

But now there was a large trench cutting the arena in two, and from the pit just created, two enormous circles of stone rose.

They were enormous, these stones. If not for the Runes carved in them, moving them in the first place would have been a colossal chore.

But they were magical, and now they levitated three metres above the changing arena floor.

The first ‘stone circle’ was right in front of them. The second was right in front of the Headmaster’s seats.

An incantation was shouted by several dozen mages, and the large amount of empty space into the ‘stone circle’ was illuminated and began to show...a landscape beyond it.

There were a lot of rocks, and what had to be something-

Damn. It wasn’t just a ‘stone circle’; it was a magical Gate. It was almost something based on Portkey and old magics.

Yeah, that explained why there was nothing at all besides that in the Coliseum.

More magic erupted on the arena floor, with hundreds of magical mirrors being conjured by the handlers of the Task. Yes, the spectators were really going to miss nothing of the Tournament.

Unlike the Champions.

It would be too much to hope, Alexandra knew, that the first ‘Gate’ that they had been allowed to watch led directly back to the one next to the Headmasters’ stand.

“The rules of this Task are eminently simple,” the vampiric Judge grinned with a fanged smile which convinced the Lady Protector this being had to be pranked by Fred and George even if it was the last command she ever gave. “You have to choose a broom, and go through this Gate. You will be near-instantaneously transported to a stage of the broom race, where you will have to find the next Gate. There are eight Gates in total; going through the eighth Gate will bring you back here, and the end of the race will be in sight for you. Whoever passes the finish line first, wins the Fifth Task.”

“Is that all?” Martin Bayard, one of the two new Champions of Beauxbatons asked in a tone that was certainly sarcastic...and for good reason.

“There is another little matter, yes.” The black-haired Judge smiled thinly. “Unlike in previous Tasks, the points are not given by the Judges, but by the position you will get through each Gate.”

Wait a minute. Did he mean-

“The first Champion to go through the first Gate will be rewarded with ten points,” the vampire confirmed what she had guessed. “The second Champion will earn nine points. And so on to the tenth Champion, who will receive one point.”

“But there are sixteen of us!” Giovanni Ruspoli exclaimed.

“Congratulations,” the Judge’s smile became larger. “You have indeed noticed the problem. For each of the first seven Gates, there will be only ten Champions to earn points. Those who go through between the eleventh and the sixteenth rank will be authorised to continue the race, but will receive no point reward for doing so.”

Yeah, it was sadism at its finest point. Besides-

“Naturally, I want to insist that no killing and no direct magical attacks are authorised,” the Transylvanian admonished them. “We want to avoid a bloodbath, after all.”

If the vampire could die from enough glaring from sixteen Champions, he would be busy agonising right now.

“And the last Gate?” Lyudmila Romanov asked, flamboyant majesty in her dark purple robes. “You only spoke of the first seven.”

“Ah yes, the last Gate. The Last Gate will give thirty points to the first Champion who successfully passes through it. There will be twenty-five points for the Champion in second place, and twenty to the third. Fifteen points are earmarked for the fourth, ten for the fifth, and then nine to the sixth. From that point, the decrease is indeed of one point until the fourteenth Champion to get through, who will be the last to win points...in his or her case, a single point.”

Montague was really going to have to screw up a lot here to not win his first points...but it was Montague, so who knew what he was capable of to stay at zero?

“So we can technically win the Broom Race but have other Champions overwhelming us for the points?” Johann Wolffhart of Durmstrang summed-up.

“It is not an impossible scenario, yes,” the Judge was...okay, very unhelpful. “Any other questions?”

Of all people, Cedric Diggory was the one who raised his hand.

Alexandra wasn’t surprised that the Champion of Hufflepuff, of all people, was going to be the one to voice what many Champions had on their hearts.

“Excuse me, Lord Judge, but...the other rules?”

“The other rules?” the vampire grinned in a tone which betrayed how much fun he was having. “There are no other rules. You have to use one of the brooms here, and arrive to the finish line by going through all the Gates we have prepared for you. We don’t really care how many foci or Potions you use in the process, as long as there aren’t internationally prohibited competition substances like Felix Felicis.”

The face of Cedric was very red...apparently, the poor Hufflepuff had not thought of cheating...sometimes, it was easy to recognise why Cho had chosen him.

Anyway.

“The Broom Race is now going to begin in one minute!”

Since the pretense of ‘no, you aren’t supposed to cheat’ was over, Alexandra didn’t bother waiting.

She grabbed the golden whistle waiting in her pocket, and placed it on her lips.

The trill was magically powerful, but in terms of non-magical noise, almost inaudible...assuming there wasn’t a crowd around them. Which there was.

“Your whistle...doesn’t work, Potter.” Montague commented a second later.

“I assure you, it works.”

Five seconds later, there was a small roar, and suddenly the spectators of the Coliseum began to look upwards...and their excitement levels skyrocketed.

Alexandra didn’t blame them.

After all, while they had been told to expect several things from today, a dragon plunging into the Coliseum had not been part of the Task program.

“Champion Fingolfin reporting for duty, Champion Potter!” her beautiful Britannian Gold dragon saluted after managing a rather good landing.

“Your timing is impeccable, Champion Fingolfin,” for this Task, she had managed to convince him it would be rather good not to call her ‘Mum’ in public. Morag would never let her hear the end of it in that dreadful scenario. “Follow me, we have a broom to free from its shackles so that the race can begin...”

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A good part of the Ravenclaw and Slytherin spectators were nearly dying of laughter.

Neville didn’t feel any urge to share their hilarity.

Dragon.

Dragon.

Potter had a bloody dragon!

Potter had a bloody *talking* dragon!

What the hell?

What by Merlin’s socks and staff was happening?

By his side, the snickering of the Twins managed to bring him back to reality.

“Okay,” Fred chuckled loudly, a sound which was almost drowned in the torrent of cheers of the crowd. “I admit her prank is far better than ours.”

“Look at the other Champions!” George snorted. “They look like they received a few slaps in the face!”

Neville, for one, wasn’t going to blame them.

The Broom Race was supposed to be, all things really considered, rather fair for everyone.

But when one bloody dragon was there to support a Champion, it became bloody unfair. Dragons breathed fire, and brooms were rather vulnerable to fire, last time he checked!

“It’s still not an assurance she will have a head-start before the rest of the Champions,” Katie Bell affirmed hesitantly. “The brooms are chained, and while dragonfire can melt them, it is still going to-“

The argument died as Potter unsheathed a one-handed blade from the bag her dragon had transported to the arena.

Neville shivered, for when the sword was raised, the sun illuminated it, and it became an iridescent rainbow. Orichalcum. This was Orichalcum, and this meant someone had reforged the Conqueror’s sword for the Black Witch-

The Champion of Death struck.

There was a blinding flash, and the first chain broke.

All in all, it took a mere four blows to release the flying broom from a sum of protections that could have resisted the efforts of a dozen wizards.

“UP!” the top scorer of the Tournament shouted, and the broom’s handle was in her hand a second later.

“THE TASK...BEGINS!”

Potter shot into the air, her clothes changing somehow into her Ravenclaw Quidditch robes, and as she soared, her golden dragon was on her tail, no pun intended.

But she didn’t immediately go through the Gate.

Instead, the Archmage Slayer passed over Eleonora da Riva and threw her the Orichalcum sword.

“We proceed according to the plan. Once you’ve grabbed your broom, give the sword to Johnson,” the voices inside the arena were enchanted to resonate and be heard by everyone, so all the spectators heard it.

“Hey, Potter!” Oh great, Montague...was kneeling? By Morgana, what was happening? “Please help me! I will owe you three favours for the Tournament!”

“Five,” the green-eyed witch coldly corrected, watching the Slytherin Champion like a hawk from her aerial nest, “and your first one will begin immediately. You will be the rear-guard, and you will delay Krum for as long as you can.”

“Yes! Yes! I will do it!”

Potter nodded, and turned towards the Champion of Innocence.

“Johnson, then Montague. No one else. Let’s go, Fingolfin!”

“Yes, Champion Potter!”

Dragon and Champion plunged together into the swirling magics of the Gate, and suddenly, Neville Longbottom was far less certain of Krum’s victory than he had been several minutes ago...

**11 March 1995, the Canyon, First Stage of the Broom Race**

So far, so good.

The fact they had been wrong about the brooms being disassembled was in a way better than the original plan Alexandra had agreed upon with Eleonora.

No need to cast a powerful ritual with the Scuola Regina student.

Now for the current problem.

The Gate had ejected Fingolfin and she into what was clearly a wizard-made canyon.

Granted, it was a small one, with enough space for only three or four brooms to fly side by side without colliding.

But it was a very linear ‘trench’, with absolutely no obstacle or nothing to cover. There were no trees, and nothing to hide behind, just rocks on the sides, and a spell-polished canyon which looked like it had been freshly dug.

And in this miniature ‘canyon’, Alexandra’s broom was slow.

Painfully slow.

Fingolfin was forced to slow down, given how lamentable her broom performance was.

“We are going to have to use the first combination.”

“Already? I mean, yes!”

“Talons on my shoulders, and be careful, I can’t use my Hydra’s scales.”

“Yes, I will be careful!”

Nonetheless, Alexandra was very happy she had considerably reinforced the protections on her shoulders yesterday. Fingolfin had grown a lot, and his claws were definitely not a joke anymore.

Still, the training paid off.

“I see Harpies on the flanks.” One more proof she had been right to bring him as ‘elite help’; without her Hydra’s eyes, Fingolfin was a perfect sentinel. “I think they intend to ambush us.”

“Then they best prepare to be disappointed.” Alexandra breathed out. “LUIS. MUIN. OR. Release the tempest of leaves, follow me into the storm, for the love of gold. LUMUR!”

Instantly, both their magics reacted, and the golden wings of magic violently manifested.

They were shrouded in a cloud of gold...and their speed increased.

The mediocre acceleration of the Spanish-made broom was suddenly not so mediocre anymore.

They were easily past a speed of one hundred kilometres per hour.

And the Harpies could do nothing but shriek in impotence as they passed them too fast to be intercepted.

Maybe, the Champion of Death thought for the first time of the day, we are going to win this one, after all.

**11 March 1995, the Coliseum, Starting Line of the Broom Race**

“What do you think you’re doing with my broom, Krum?”

For all that he had expected it, the Bulgarian Seeker almost took a step back when the Dark Queen began glaring at him.

“I’m changing the parts of this broom, obviously,” Viktor Krum replied. “It is a calculated risk, I will admit, but it will pay off.”

“Alexandra is going to have finished this race by the time you will have done your changes!”

Oh, it was, *Alexandra*, now? Not Potter. How...interesting.

“She won’t,” Viktor answered more confidently. “The AT-A10 is only capable of reaching forty-five kilometres per hour in ideal circumstances, and Potter will be able only to get to one hundred and twenty kilometres per hour for short amounts of time, even with draconic help. As long as this race lasts for more than one hour, we are going to catch up with her.”

The young witch was good, Viktor Krum wasn’t going to underestimate her. But the new parts he had brought to change this broom were going to give him a neat advantage.

“We, on the other hand, will have a cruising speed of one hundred and forty kilometres per hour, without accounting for magic-enhancing performance.”

The pieces snapped back in place. A few additional spells, and what was in effect a complete new broom was slowly reassembled.

“We have lost a lot of time,” Lyudmila Romanov scowled, but for the first time her growl was less dangerous and more thoughtful. Good.

“Yes. It can’t be helped.”

Viktor had known he wouldn’t be the first on the starting line the moment he saw the anchors, but the scenario of Potter summoning a dragon...to be honest, he hadn’t seen *that* coming.

And it was impossible to use the Orichalcum sword that Potter had loaned to other Champions. Once Montague had used it, the weapon had been delivered into the custody of the Judges.

Fortunately, Viktor had made an alliance with the Dark Queen of Durmstrang. Unfortunately, replacing so many parts meant that the majority of Champions had had the time to find a way to break the chains themselves. Bayard had conjured an enormous quantity of magical keys which slowly ‘unlocked’ everything, the Powers only knew how, since there weren’t any keyholes in the first place. Delacour had melted the chains with an absurd quantity of fire. As for Lucrezia Sforza, she had outright *ensorcelled* the protections preventing the brooms from flying.

“We have lost nearly all the points of the first Gate,” he continued with a wince, as Malatesti of all Champions went through it, taking the two points which went with it. “And I honestly think that given the Canyon waiting for us, there’s no use wondering if we’re going to catch up before the second Gate. But it is going to be an entirely different story after that.”

Three more seconds, and the new AT-A10 brooms, which had almost nothing in common with the originals, were at last ready.

“Okay. Try not to do too many stupid things with them. I increased the potency of the Enchantments and the materials, but the ‘core’ of the broom is still the same. For normal use, I would say it is going to hold for three or four days before breaking.”

“Wolffhart? Fuchs?”

“We heard, Dark Queen of Chaos,” Johann grunted for both of them.

“Then let’s go. We have a long race ahead of us, and it’s time to teach our prey that no matter how many clever tricks they have, we remain the predators.”

Krum jumped on his broom and in a heartbeat, all his doubts disappeared.

He was in the sky again.

He was in his realm.

And Quidditch or not, he was going to win.

**11 March 1995, the Venetian Lagoon, Second Stage of the Broom Race**

The first stage of the Broom Race had been rather simple, all told.

The moment she emerged from the second Gate, Alexandra knew it wasn’t going to be as easy any longer.

The good news was that the Ravenclaw witch knew exactly where she was.

In the distance, the volcano was impossible to miss, and even if it wasn’t, Fire and Water magics were a caress she could have recognised blind and deaf.

The Judges had sent the Champions over the lagoon of Venice.

Alexandra released her Galdr, and her speed abruptly decreased. Fingolfin went to fly by her side.

The Canyon – or the very long and large trench, depending on your view of it – had been so simple an idiot could have figured the principle of it. You used it, you evaded the Harpies’ attacks, and you went through the second Gate at the end.

It was so simple a two-year-old child could understand the principle.

But for this part of the race, clearly, it wasn’t going to be that easy.

Broom Navigation hadn’t been a concern for the first stage; it was very much one now.

There was an enormous expanse of water, and several islands.

But of the Third Gate she had to go through, there was no sign.

“I can see something to the east!” Fingolfin announced after several minutes. “It looks like a big red circle of water levitating...it’s similar to the first big stone circles!”

“Excellent job!” Alexandra complimented her dragon. “These must be one of the chokepoints for the stage. I’m going to cast detection Charms when we pass this one. It will lead us quicker to the others.”

In the next minutes, the AT-A10 proved how fair its reputation for non-competitive races was. They had the wind against them, and at some point Alexandra lost patience; she Charmed the harness and Fingolfin went on to tow her broom and she above it.

It was going to exhaust her poor Britannian Gold far faster, but the other alternatives were worse. The infusion of magic she had made into the Canyon had visibly damaged the broom she was currently riding. Doing it again and again would likely cause more problems, and there was no replacement transportation waiting somewhere.

It was this broom or nothing.

Worse, the Ogham Galdr had consumed a lot of magic. She could do something similar five or six times, but after that it would be mild magical exhaustion, and if another Champion managed to catch them in the open...

“I see the Innocence Champion getting out of the Gate,” Fingolfin interrupted her while she considered the tactical implications. “The Gryffindor girl is following, and the no-longer-zero-points-Slytherin is after her. Do we show them the direction?”

“Yes,” Alexandra said as they got through the first ring of water, and instantly a magically-conjured arrow indicated them the next direction, which was full north. “As long as they’re between us and the other Champions, we’re going to grab the maximum of available points and deny it to the opposition.”

Optimistically, they were going to win the Fifth Task. But if they didn’t, then at least Alexandra would settle for a victory by points. The green-eyed Hydra Animagus was first in the rankings when it came to the individual competition; the more points she won, the more difficult it would be for Lucrezia and Lyudmila to catch up with her.

Fingolfin breathed lightning, and in a matter of seconds, it caused plenty of steam in the water they left behind them.

“Good. We have a good advance, now.” Eleonora was second for now, and there had to be five to six minutes of gap between them. “We’re going to reach the Third Gate in first place. I wonder what kind of landscape is waiting for us there?”

**11 March 1995, the Jungle, Third Stage of the Broom Race**

Montague hated that tropical forest.

He hated the lianas, and especially that big snake that had almost swallowed him whole!

Of course those bastards of Judges hadn’t told them that the fauna had the right to eat them!

Damn them!

Damn this Tournament!

The Slytherin Champion tried to calm himself, just as more trees in front of him appeared. Graham Montague lurched.

And then as he finally reached a clearing, all his relief disappeared in mere seconds, because suddenly, the vegetation behind him *burned*.

“No, that’s just completely unfair...”

But it wasn’t a nightmare born in his head.

Fleur Delacour was already here, her arms almost missing from his view as they were shrouded in red-gold inferno.

Despite himself, Graham couldn’t help but acknowledge it as a Gryffindor theme and instantly hate it.

At least it was just Delacour.

This was bad, the Veela was way more powerful than him, but he could maybe delay it. There were plenty of liana and things that could be used as distraction-

The next time he turned his head, several brooms had emerged from the green mass that was this stage of the Broom Race.

“You’ve got to kidding me...Morgana and Merlin, how in the name of all the Darkness did they manage to catch up so quickly?”

Before answering this, he had to swerve, because Fleur Delacour had thrown a fireball right above the branches he was passing under.

Coincidence? Absolutely not.

They couldn’t kill each other, but it was largely acceptable to organise ‘tragic accidents’ where the landscape would play the role of weapon.

There was a large curve, then another clearing.

And this time, Graham did have a good look of who all the brooms so close to him belonged to.

“Delacour, Bayard, Sforza, De Courtois, Malatesti, and of course the four psychopaths of Durmstrang...and it looks like they all extensively modified their brooms.”

Okay, perhaps ‘modify’ was the wrong thing to say for Delacour’s broom.

It was simply on fire, and the Veela chick was riding it like it was no big deal.

But the others-

No, he had to focus.

The Fourth Gate had to be close. He only had to delay them a few more minutes. This stage had already lasted fifteen minutes, surely the Gate wasn’t far away, right?

Yes, he could do it.

Graham knew he wasn’t going to win the Tournament, but for the first three Gates, he had gotten through in fourth place. If he managed to do the same for the fourth Gate, that would be seven more points added to his score.

The honour of House Slytherin...no, his honour would be safe.

He just had to find a way to delay them.

Fortunately, he knew a spell which could be very useful.

And since the Veela wanted to play with ‘let’s have a tragic accident in fire’, it was only fair he counter-attacked.

Pointing his wand at the massive branches above him which almost hid the sunlight, Graham focused.

“SERPENSORTIA MAXIMA!”

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It wasn’t a nice thing to do, but Viktor laughed when Martin Bayard made a large detour to avoid the next giant snake the Hogwarts Champions used over and over as his distractions.

“Who would have thought someone who enjoys so many dangerous activities has a fear of *snakes*?” the Dark Queen said with a very satisfied tone.

“There are many species of snakes which can kill you,” the Bulgarian Seeker warned her. “And with Potter transforming into a Hydra, I would argue a fear of snakes can be best described as ‘common sense’.” That and Hermione had showed him the images of the Basilisks’ corpses. If you weren’t afraid of *that*, you weren’t afraid of anything!

“True,” Lyudmila Romanov conceded with a nod. “But it seems I’m going to have to intervene. Delacour and Bayard aren’t able to remove the moving obstacle Alexandra left to keep us busy. If we delay things too much, we are never going to catch up with her. As it is, these last minutes have made sure there’s a general regrouping of all the Champions.”

Krum almost sighed in exasperation.

It was not ‘all the Champions’, and the Dark Queen knew that perfectly. Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and the Scuola Regina all had one Champion missing; whether they had finally managed to break their broom’s anchors and begin this race remained to be seen. And it went without saying that Potter and her two accomplices were ahead, racing to victory while the creator of the summoned snakes delayed them.

“I think,” the grin was positively reeking of madness, “that it is time to teach some Champions how you eliminate the *obstacles*.”

“Don’t-“

About three to four hundred metres ahead of them, hundreds of white objects materialised from thin air.

They were-

“You conjured *pillows*?”

“Watch and learn, Krum. Watch and learn.”

Obviously, there were so many of the white fluffy things that no one could possibly evade them all given so little warning, and the Hogwarts Champion fatally slammed into one.

Viktor didn’t know what he had expected...but it was certainly not the fact that the pillow became literally stuck to the Champion!

“GET IT OFF ME! GET IT OFF ME! IT...IT IS TICKLING ME!”

Krum gave a glare to the blonde-haired witch racing by his side.

“What? I’m respecting the rules...it’s not my fault if the pillows have some glue-like properties.”

And she conjured plenty of other pillows in the next seconds.

Not being completely insane, the other Champions took small detours, allowing Krum and the other Champions of Durmstrang to finally catch up with Delacour and Bayard.

But the Hogwarts Champion, Montague?

He couldn’t avoid them, and in a single minute, he got over half a dozen pillows stuck to his body.

And fatally, what was bound to arrive came to pass.

A pillow stuck to his face, mere seconds before the forested track demanded a hard turn to the right.

The snake-creating wizard didn’t even slow down, and rammed a tree at high speed.

“Ouch,” Viktor voiced in sympathy.

“Now that’s how you deal with an obstacle,” the Dark Queen spoke in a very smug tone. “The way is open, you can accelerate, Krum. Catch up with the three leaders, I think I have a few debts to settle with Delacour and Sforza...”

**11 March 1995, the Coliseum,** **Starting Line of the Broom Race**

Filius grimaced when the Healers placed Graham Montague on a stretcher and Apparated away to the next hospital. He couldn’t say the Slytherin boy had been among his favourite students, that would be a gross exaggeration, but the way he had been taken down...it was ruthless and vicious.

“It looks like my poor student won’t be able to immediately celebrate his first points at the end of the race,” the acting-Headmaster of Hogwarts said with a non-feigned touch of regret. “His opponents proved too much for him.”

“Your Champion is useless!” Igor Karkaroff intervened. Filius had had plenty of differences with Albus over the last decade – otherwise he wouldn’t be here today – but on the subject of the High Master of Durmstrang, he perfectly agreed with the Defeater of Grindelwald.

The rightful place of Igor Karkaroff should be in prison, not overseeing a prestigious magical school...or any school at all.

“If he hadn’t begged your most powerful Champion to save him, he wouldn’t have reached the starting line yet!” Ah yes, more insults, in case the first one hadn’t been deliberate enough.

“His strategy worked,” Filius commented with a shrug.

To be perfectly honest, Filius Flitwick had been a bit bemused that Mister Graham Montague had been willing to cast aside his pride and ask the Champion of House Ravenclaw to solve the problem in his stead, while Mister Cedric Diggory had been unwilling to.

As a result, the Champion of Slytherin had earned plenty of points before being removed forcefully from the race while the Champion of Hufflepuff had one last anchor to deal with before truly mounting his broom.

“It worked indeed,” the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina purred. “Some students, including those of my own school, could learn a lot from this.”

Flitwick nodded in agreement. While Eugenie Millet of Beauxbatons and Cedric Diggory were busy sawing the chains as fast as they could, Giovanni Ruspoli of the Scuola Regina had abandoned the task after twenty minutes and forfeited.

Evidently, the librarian-looking student had been copiously booed by the entire Coliseum.

“Mine could too,” Headmistress Maxime acknowledged. “I will have to tell Champion Delacour that proper strategies are not to gamble everything on an enchanted fire devouring your broom in exchange for speed.”

The winces and unpleased expressions of certain Judges nearby were duly noted by Filius and plenty of other spectators.

If there was a penalty for damaging your broom, the female Champion of Beauxbatons was going to receive it for sure.

“But this time,” Angelica Sforza mused, “I think the strategy of the Durmstrang students is by far the best of those we had the opportunity to watch. Assuredly, they sacrificed the possibility of earning plenty of Gate-points in the first part of the race, but now the risk appears to be paying off.”

The Coliseum cheered as Alexandra Potter got through the Fourth Gate in first place, followed by Angelina Johnson and Eleonora da Riva two minutes later.

It should have brought a smile on Filius’ lips...but it really did not, for thirty seconds after the tail of Champion da Riva’s broom disappeared from the ‘Jungle Stage’, Viktor Krum imitated them, with Champion Martin Bayard trying desperately to benefit from the effect of suction.

And the only reason more didn’t immediately come after that was because Champion Lyudmila Romanov was battling more or less all the other contestants on her own.

“Yes,” Karkaroff gloated. “The strategy employed by Viktor and Lyudmila is flawless.”

“I don’t think I am ready to go that far,” Olympe Maxime waved her enormous hand. “What we can observe via mirror-cast of the soon-to-come stages indicate they are very different beasts than the starting stages. And as my colleague pointed out, they lost a lot of points at the beginning.”

And yet, Filius thought, Headmistress Sforza was certainly right: the strategy of Viktor Krum was likely the correct one if you wanted to win the Fifth Task.

Yes, replacing several key broom parts had cost Viktor Krum and the other Champions of Durmstrang several precious minutes.

But now they were rushing ahead at a speed that was near-unbelievable for the outdated AT-A10 brooms.

Compared to them, the two Champions of Hogwarts and the Champion of the Scuola Regina were tortoises about to be overcome by a hare.

Even if the Champion of his House was doing her best to accelerate, be it by wind incantations, dragon-towing, and more ingenious methods.

Still, Filius couldn’t help but think that this time, Alexandra Potter had made a huge mistake. Of course, in many ways, it wasn’t really one: Lily’s daughter needed plenty of points to secure her first place in the Tournament rankings. And after four Gates, the Champion of House Ravenclaw had done exactly that: forty points out of forty possible.

Krum by comparison was at...ten points, according to the Task Scoreboard.

But the Task was not over.

“The next stage is the Glacier one,” Karkaroff continued to gloat. “You will see. Your Champions are going to learn the taste of snow being-“

The bluster abruptly ceased when in the Jungle, one of the first snakes conjured by Graham Montague, and now ‘enhanced’ by the Dark Curses of Lyudmila Romanov, attacked by surprise Champion Ulrich Fuchs.

Filius Flitwick knew he sometimes had a terrible sense of humour, but like thousands of spectators, he grimaced when the enormous black-purple mutated anaconda swallowed the Durmstrang student whole.

“Oh,” a Judge reacted after swearing many colourful insults that public decency frowned upon in most civilised cultures. “The handlers are going to have *fun* saving this one...”

**11 March 1995, the Glacier, Fourth Stage of the Broom Race**

Cold.

Horribly cold.

After the warm climate and the humidity of the tropical forest, the arrival onto the next stage felt like Hell had frozen over.

Alexandra changed in a hurry back into her winter Quidditch robes.

Seconds later, and for the first time in what felt like forever, the Champion of Death ordered her Changelina to give her the Quidditch glasses she had kept in memory of too rainy training sessions.

The sun was really blinding, and she had to give glasses to Fingolfin too.

It was-

Past the first breaths, the Basilisk Slayer of course got used to it.

It was just cold, after all.

Okay, it was cold and altitude.

They were somewhere high in the mountains, and the spectacle was incredible.

There were mountains and snow everywhere her sight went, and there were so few clouds that the valleys nearby and the peaks on the left were feeling like realistic postcards for her pleasure.

“It’s too cold!”

It went without saying that adult dragons didn’t enjoy the cold at all. And her Britannian Gold wasn’t a really cold-resistant adult dragon to begin with.

Alexandra wordlessly cast a Warming Charm, and then went to invert the roles: this time it was her turn to tow Fingolfin.

“Point me Fifth Gate,” the Ravenclaw girl incanted, coughing after the air began to burn her lungs. Urgh! Truly having your Animagus skills neutralised sucked.

Meagre consolation, it worked. The emerald arrow she used as a magical Gate-compass pointed straight in front of her, in the direction of a moderate snow ridge blocking her vision. And the vividness of the spell colour indicated it wasn’t far.

“I see the two other Champions getting out of the Gate,” Fingolfin announced several seconds later.

“Well, it is going to be a race on the glacier we will all remember!” Alexandra replied, trying to find a cheerful side to all of it.

“And there’s someone else coming out of the Gate!”

The Lady Protector of the Isles brusquely turned her head, and even with the distance, alas, the flying was eminently recognisable.

“Krum,” the Champion of the Morrigan grunted, “it’s always Krum. How the hell did he catch up so fast with us?”

No. There was no time to lose in useless questions. Krum was here. And he wasn’t alone; several other Champions were clearly storming out of the Gate as she watched.

“Do we fight them?” Fingolfin asked.

In past Tasks, the answer would not have required two seconds of brainstorming. But here...

“We won’t, no.” Alexandra shook her head. “There’s no way to spring a good ambush here; the terrain on top of these mountains is awfully flat, except the ridge, and they will expect us to attack here.”

In addition to that, there was a dreadful possibility that any of the peaks overhanging this section of the race could unleash an avalanche if they cast too much magic and shook the race stage.

“We are going to proceed to the next stage of the race,” she told Fingolfin. “We will deal with them there.”

It was, of course, easier said than done.

First Krum easily caught up with Eleonora and Angelina, and then he left them in the dust...or more accurately here, levitating over the snow.

How the hell could he increase his broom speed that much without any overt Runic booster or other clever magical solution?

“He’s going to catch up with us before the Gate,” Fingolfin really had a gift to say the obvious, alas.

“I know. But there are still two stages left, and while based on the images shown in the Coliseum one is near a volcano, I don’t have any idea what awaits us after. Besides, that’s still two stages, if I push my broom too hard here, we might end up exhausted before the end of the race.”

It was a slow torture to see Krum catch up, but it had to be endured.

The ridge was flown over, and the green-eyed Champion prepared for the final sprint to the-

Wait a minute!

“Where the hell is the Gate?”

**11 March 1995,** **the Coliseum,** **Starting Line of the Broom Race**

The last chain snapped, the last anchor was projected several metres away, and Cedric didn’t really care if the one hundred thousand spectators of the Coliseum heard his sigh of relief.

It had taken a lot out of him to break all these chains. One might think it would be easy after the first, but no, of course it couldn’t be that simple. Each chain had a different elemental resistance, was forged differently, and reacted to Curses in different ways.

It had been easily one of the most difficult challenges of his life, and the worst part was that all around him, there were Champions who had made it look like it was *easy*.

It was not.

Cedric was ready to swear an Unbreakable Vow that it wasn’t.

Not for him, at any rate!

And now, he had to admit he had lost all his chances to fare well in the Fifth Task.

With more than thirty minutes of handicap against the top of the race, and plenty of Gates having already been ‘emptied’ of points, earning thirty or forty points for himself was just the next best thing to impossible.

The minor consolation was that he wouldn’t end up last. Ruspoli had already forfeited, and the female Beauxbatons Champion was still working on the release of her broom.

The humiliation was that he was going to end up behind Montague, even if the Slytherin had found a way to get kicked out by freaking *pillows* of all damn things!

But Cedric knew he had only himself to blame. As Cho had told him, sometimes it was better to swallow his stubbornness when he had no easy solution to get himself out of the hole. He hadn’t done it. Instead, he had swam in a sea of bitterness, and for what?

The Champion of Hufflepuff had wanted to play it fair-play and not ask for Potter’s help. He had listened to his father.

He shouldn’t have. No, he wasn’t the best Champion of the Tournament, and without help, his lack of specialisation could easily plunge him into the depths of the rankings.

“Something to figure out after the end of this Task,” the young adult wizard mumbled to himself as he kicked the ground and finally began to soar.

But slowly. Very slowly.

Damn. Cedric had never heard of the AT-A10 before today, but it sure as hell wasn’t a Nimbus 2000.

A few test moves to see how the broom reacted to his commands, and the Hufflepuff Champion felt ready to at last begin the race.

He threw a glance to the massive mirrors and-

“Wait. Did both Krum and Potter miss the Snow Gate?”

**11 March 1995, the Glacier, Fourth Stage of the Broom Race**

By the time Eleonora and Angelina arrived, Alexandra was feeling really stupid hovering over a large wasteland of snow and ice.

“Where is the Gate?” the Gryffindor Chaser asked.

“I don’t know,” the Ravenclaw admitted. “I’m trying to locate it with Point-Me and all the other methods of navigation I learned for this Task, but most are abruptly sending errors or giving me wrong signs.”

“Once again, the Judges have decided to be sadists,” Eleonora declared.

“Yeah,” Alexandra grimaced as Krum circled around them, watching them like a hawk. “And it couldn’t arrive at a worse moment. Our advance was already melting very fast, but now we’re more or less losing everything and getting nothing in return.”

Martin Bayard would be here in the next ten seconds, and if he was, there was no reason for the others to be far behind him.

“Maybe it is above us?”

The green-eyed girl slowly shook her head at the idea.

Still, better to ask the specialist...

“Fingolfin?”

“I can’t see anything!”

“In that case, it’s better to forget it,” Alexandra commented darkly. “The brooms we have are no Firebolts, they won’t lead us that high.”

And the less said about what would happen if their brooms happened to fail during the ascension, the better.

“If the Gate is not above us,” Eleonora da Riva watched the landscape of winter they were surrounded by, “reason dictates it is somehow hidden into the landscape, and-or it is below us.”

“Below?” There were many things difficult to stomach since she had learned of the existence of magic, but this one-

“Oh, come on!” Martin Bayard, recently arrived, answered back, almost rolling eyes while doing so. “I know the Judges have good Ward-Masters and Enchanters, but placing the Gate under thousands and thousands of pounds of ice? Come on, this is-“

“This is exactly what happened,” a familiar voice rudely interrupted him.

Alexandra breathed out.

“Hello, Chaos. So nice of you to join us.”

“Pleasure is all mine,” the Dark Queen replied.

The courtesies were expedited, they could be back to the main problem, right as Lucrezia Sforza arrived, rapidly followed by Delacour and another Durmstrang Champion.

“Assuming you’re right, I don’t think anyone has the power here to dig his or her way into the mountain to find the Gate.” Alexandra began to look around. “There must be tunnels somewhere to be accessed. Snow must have covered them, it isn’t like we searched very hard. I suppose-“

“Yes, yes,” the Champion of Loki yawned. “But that’s the boring way.”

“And what,” the Succubus called out with worry in her voice, “is the non-boring way?”

There was a flash, and suddenly all her senses went into alert, for ozone was dominating her nose and dancing upon her tongue.

Lyudmila didn’t have a wand in her hand anymore.

No, she had a short-handled hammer, sparkling with lightning and enormous magical power.

No, not a hammer.

*The* hammer.

“You used the last weeks to recover *Mjölnir*?” Alexandra was sure she would be forgiven by the entire world if she gaped.

“You are a bit too dangerous with your lightning, dear,” the Champion of Loki grinned, “and I think it is a very good thing I did it. Now get out of my way...”

Alexandra and Fingolfin didn’t need more than that to obey unconsciously.

“FOR CHAOS COMES!”

The explosion was colossal.

An entire world of ice and snow engulfed them.

The world shook.

The mountains trembled.

One by one, the peaks began to release vast avalanches.

But for all the confusion, it wasn’t enough to miss that the Dark Queen of Durmstrang had opened a massive hole into the entrails of the mountain, and now a vast cavern was revealed.

“FINGOLFIN!”

“YES! THE GATE IS THERE!”

“GLACIA TRIA MAXIMA!” Alexandra launched her attack in Krum’s vague direction and plunged into the cavern, before Fingolfin placed himself on her shoulders, and they accelerated magically to go through the Fifth Gate.

Lyudmila passed it first, of course. Somehow, though, it didn’t seem that important anymore. Not when the Champion of *Loki* had in her possession the legendary hammer of *Thor*!

**11 March 1995, the Volcano, Fifth Stage of the Broom Race**

Fleur laughed.

At last.

At last, it was her time.

Everything was **Fire**.

The air was burning.

The very earth was breaking under the sheer power of the magma.

Nothing could resist **Fire**.

And now it was time to make sure some debts were paid in the most brutal manner possible.

The first to feel her wrath was Malatesti.

The former Champion of War had irritated her for too long, and he was trying to stalk her from the very beginning of the Broom Race, hoping she wouldn’t notice.

Well, it ended now.

Fleur asked for the Power of **Fire**.

And **Fire** answered.

There was no precise target, no focused inferno, and no torrent of magma.

The rules forbid them, and for now, the Champion of Beauxbatons would abide by it.

For now.

But she could cloak herself in fire and increase her speed by five times and demolish Malatesti by her mere presence.

His broom broke.

Of course, the Stymphalian Bird Animagus removed his anti-Animagus binders well before he collided with the magma.

But seconds later, a Portkey instantly removed him from the race.

His part in it was over.

“**Now, now**,” the Champion of Life and Fire laughed. “**Who am I going to eject from the Fifth Task**?”

“Wow, you really are a bitch, aren’t you?”

Praise Prometheus. The girl she wanted so much to strangle with her bare hands was now in front of her.

“Potter. If you don’t want to be roasted,” Fleur conjured a fireball in each hand, “you will beg me for mercy.”

“You are really high on your power, aren’t you?” the younger girl snarked.

“Your insults aren’t going to save you!” Like Malatesti, she didn’t think throwing her into a river of lava was going to be Potter’s end, a Hydra born of Death was far too strong for that. But she would have to remove the tools preventing her from turning into her Animagus form, and that was grounds for disqualification.

“Did you know,” the calm tone gave her pause, “that while lightning can’t be used to overwhelm fire, if it is used and dispersed by a very specific Runic array, it can break the resistance of most brooms?”

“You aren’t-“

Potter was alone. Potter was alone in front of her, *so where was her bloody dragon*?

“Fingolfin. Attack. Thurisaz activation. Fulmen Imperator!”

Once again, Fleur screamed as the very air became lightning.

But it wasn’t like last time.

This time, she was stronger. This time, she was of Fire.

It hurt; she wasn’t going to deny it.

It hurt, but she took the entire attack and resisted.

This apocalyptic air battle was in the Realm of Fire, and she, Fleur Delacour, was **Fire**!

The Phoenix Animagus endured the double attack, and kept coming.

Fleur smiled in satisfaction as she saw how this arrogant child of Death had miscalculated and-

Her broom abruptly stopped moving.

It wasn’t a Charm or an Air-Stasis Curse, it was a complete, devastating halt which almost threw her over the handle.

It was-

By the useless Light, what was a damn *anchor* doing chained to her broom?

“Loki sends its regards,” a voice that at that moment, Fleur hated far more than Potter. “Bitch.”

There was a massive cracking sound.

And then her broom broke in half, beginning her fall into the magma-filled caldera below.

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Alexandra didn’t bother hiding her satisfaction as Delacour was precipitated in the magma.

The Champion of Life had started the fight here, she could hardly complain she didn’t know what she was doing this time.

Of course, it wasn’t like it was going to hurt her seriously.

A few seconds later, something huge and flamboyant emerged from the magma, and its brilliance hurt her eyes.

*Phoenix*.

Alexandra turned away and once again cast a Feather-light Charm on Fingolfin so he could perch on the rear of her broom – the AT-A10 had been previously protected to prevent more damage from occurring.

“What, not even a thanks?” a dark purple shape was suddenly on her right.

“We both know you didn’t do it for me, Lyudmila.” The Champion of Death gritted her teeth. “But yes, thanks.”

“Much appreciated,” the Champion of Loki bared her teeth, “you underestimated her badly.”

“I underestimated how much Prometheus is capable of bolstering her near a volcano,” the Ravenclaw corrected darkly. “And I thought her broom would be far more damaged than it currently was...you know, courtesy of it being on fire.”

“And I was accused of arrogance?”

Alexandra sighed and tried to push her broom faster...only for the Durmstrang Champion to imitate her.

“Fine, when there is so much Fire magic around, she is stronger than me. And being on a broom outrageously favours her. Satisfied?”

“Yes.” And to her credit, the Fenrir Animagus changed the subject. “Krum has exploited the fire rampage of the Veela to rush ahead and claim the first place.”

“I can’t say that I am surprised.”

The Star-Seeker of Durmstrang hadn’t been among the target list of Delacour, so using the distraction to move ahead while everyone tried to survive was a sound strategy if there ever was one.

Some hundreds of metres on her left, Eleonora and Angelina had their faces covered in ashes and cinders, and Alexandra had no doubt she had the same ‘smoked’ appearance. On her right, there was Martin Bayard. Trailing behind him was Lucrezia Sforza. If the Ravenclaw Champion included the Dark Queen and she, this meant that out of the ten Champions who had entered the Volcano stage more or less at the same time, six were present here. Yeah, Krum had done the smart thing.

“I can’t say that I am surprised,” Alexandra repeated while shaking her head. “It looks like victory is going to be his, then. There’s only one stage left, and whatever he did to his broom, it’s clear that it confers him an enormous speed advantage over mine. There’s no way I can catch up to him now. But you aren’t in the same boat as I.”

“On the contrary, Alexandra,” the blonde-haired witch replied with a thin smile, “on the contrary.”

And as the distance between the two brooms narrowed, Alexandra could see Lyudmila’s broom looked like cracked ashes shaped into a solid form. With every second, there was a small rain of cinders falling under her, and it wasn’t the volcano or the ambient air which was responsible for that.

“Delacour got a lucky shot, I see.”

“Yes,” the Dark Queen acknowledged. “In the jungle, I laughed when a snake ate Fuchs, and she sent me a fireball.”

The young Champion of Death couldn’t help it, she laughed.

“And you were tutoring me about arrogance a few seconds ago?”

The growl she received in answer was a loud warning to not push her luck.

“All right. I suppose you’re going to continue at a slow pace in order to finish the race?”

“Yes. Catch up with Krum and win.”

“I don’t lack the motivation,” the Lady Protector of the Isles retorted ironically, “but I’m a bit too slow to overtake him.”

“Ah. So you aren’t aware of what the last stage is.”

“And you do? Glacier. Volcano. Tropical Forest. Lagoon. Canyon. I remember seeing all of that in the mirrors, and we just happened to cross every one of them.”

“Oh yes, I do. What await us beyond the next Gate is-“

**11 March 1995, the Maze of Avarice, Sixth and Final Stage of the Broom Race**

“A maze,” Viktor grumbled. “Why did it have to be a bloody maze?”

The Fifth Task was supposed to be a race, damn it!

There was nowhere mentioned that they were supposed to tear their minds apart trying to find the way out of a maze.

The moment he got out of this headache-consuming location, Viktor promised himself he would give a tongue-lashing to a few of the organisers.

For the sake of all the Quidditch Cups he had won, what was the point of this masquerade?

This wasn’t flying, this was a bad joke!

No, he had to calm and tackle the problem with a clear head.

Viktor breathed out, and his annoyance receded.

Fine.

This new stage of the Broom Race was...a sort of copy of the Coliseum. But without spectators, obviously, and instead of the spectators’ stands, there were thousands upon thousands of tunnels opening up onto nothingness.

And clearly, each of the tunnels led you to some part of the maze behind.

How big was the maze?

Viktor didn’t know, and this was one of the reasons he was in trouble.

The maze was no conventional labyrinth, but a creation built underground, so that all attempts to use stars or some outside point of reference to navigate it were doomed to fail.

And as if that wasn’t insulting enough, where the arena of the Coliseum should have been, there was no sand.

Instead, there was gold and precious metals. Thousands of beautiful and priceless cups, plates, and jewelled chests were there to tempt him every time he returned from another failed attempt to explore the maze.

It was obvious all those golden and silvery things were cursed, and heavily so.

Viktor was no professional Curse-Breaker, but many of the torrents of coins and the tableware looked like they had been subjected multiple times to the Geminio Charm.

And where there was one trap, there were certainly other Curses. Would the goblets and the weapons begin to multiply until they filled everything and the maze openings and exits became dangerous to access? The Bulgarian Seeker didn’t know, and he had no intention to find out the hard way.

“Come on, come on...” the Champion expert in broom-riding watched the entire stage for a sign, any sign, that would indicate how to access the final Gate. “There has to be a clue somewhere...”

The Gate which had thrown him here flared out, and another Champion arrived.

Viktor Krum murmured a curse between his teeth.

All his advance from the previous stage was gone, just like that.

And-

Ah hell, it was Johann Wolffhart.

“Ha! And to think the great Viktor Krum hasn’t finished the race. Your *adoring fans* are going to be so disappointed.”

He wasn’t training to be a diplomat or a politician. But he could recognise the not-so-subtle threatening tone.

“Wolffhart. This isn’t the time to settle our quarrel. Sforza and Potter, if they survived Delacour, are certainly on their way,” and those two were certainly going to be able to find and exploit the clues he hadn’t been able to find so far.

“On the contrary, Krum,” the German Champion spat, “I think it is exactly the time for you and I to settle our differences once for all. PUGILLAX DEMOLITOR!”

The air shrieked, and in mere seconds, the other Durmstrang Champion had conjured thirteen Bludgers.

And not the standard balls that were used in official Quidditch plays.

No, these ones were twice as big, and had large spikes brimming with what had to be unpleasant curses.

Viktor swallowed.

“Let’s give your giggling cheerleaders a spectacle they will never forget!” The smile was cruel, and the Bulgarian Seeker didn’t wait for the wand to move before he plunged immediately back into one of the tunnels leading to the maze.

This broom race was beginning to take a very unpleasant turn, and Viktor couldn’t wait to cross the finish line...

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By the time Alexandra was able to get through the Gate, the sixth stage had already turned into a war zone.

The good news was that it was a nice distraction for not thinking any more about how close Delacour had been to frying her, or that she had gone through the Gate in sixth place behind Martin Bayard.

The bad news was that it was a war zone, and a couple of seconds after her arrival, a Bludger almost decapitated her.

“For the Shire!” Fingolfin exclaimed and breathed lightning.

Alexandra’s eyes opened in horror.

“DEPULSO!” She screamed and just in time, for instead of being pulverised, the Bludger absorbed the lightning and kept coming!

“What was-“

“Later!” the Ravenclaw Champion shouted, feeling far more panicky than several seconds ago. Because while she had thrown the Bludger fifty metres away, there were several others coming right for her dragon and she. “In the tunnels! In the tunnels or we’re doomed!”

There was a brief moment of darkness, and then Alexandra suddenly realised why the Judges had chosen a broom as slow as the AT-A10.

There was a maze in this stage, and with modern brooms built for broom-racing, it would have been impossible to manoeuvre.

“Err...the Bludgers are following us.”

“Yes,” there were loud sounds of the metallic balls colliding with the grey walls of the maze.

“How are we going to navigate here?” Fingolfin smartly asked. “I don’t smell any Gate.”

“First things first,” the Morrigan’s Chosen breathed out as numerous explosions resonated elsewhere, “we have to take down the Bludgers and whoever thought it was a good idea to conjure them.”

And Alexandra rather doubted it was Krum. Sure, the Bulgarian Star-Seeker certainly knew the incantation to create these nasty Quidditch instruments of localised destruction, but it was not his style.

“I see light ahead. Maybe it’s the exit?”

It was and it was not. When they emerged out of the maze again, they were back in the Coliseum...and a cackling Durmstrang Champion was busy conjuring more Bludgers!

“Oh, no, you don’t, Johann Wolffhart.” There were already enough of these bloody things, enough was enough. “By the power of the murmurs of the blizzards, the frozen peaks of the mountains, the wrath of winter, Izaz before, Izaz behind, Izaz to my right, Izaz to my left, Izaz below, Izaz above, Izaz at the core, I usher a new era of cold, drown this world into a new ice age! JOTUNHEIM!”

The ice magic struck well above the tunnels, above the tallest structure of this massive and silent Coliseum. For a moment, the Durmstrang wizard laughed at her, believing she had missed him by several metres.

Then he realised that the ice spikes were exactly falling on top of him.

And the first attack which hit not only pulverised a Bludger, it also severed the handle of his AT-A10 from the rest of the broom.

Johann Wolffhart was sent spiralling out of control while the German Champion shrieked like a little girl.

This was, Alexandra had to admit, extremely satisfying. So was the impact several metres below, for that matter.

And it brought another piece of good news: instantly, the spiked Bludgers began to vanish, one by one, though the Ravenclaw Seeker had to cast several more Depulso before it was over.

The disappearance of the murderous Bludgers sadly arrived too late for Ambre de Courtois; the Beauxbatons girl had been severely injured and there was a flash of Portkey when she was sent away to the nearest Healing Wing.

“Nice job,” Krum said in his usual accented English – which had become far better since the beginning of the school year, courtesy of Hermione, “I wanted to deal with him myself, but he never let me have the time for a long-range attack.”

“He’s lucky we’re forbidden to use truly lethal options,” Alexandra said with a grim expression. And she wasn’t joking: in the previous four Tasks, the Champion of Death would have roasted the bastard for something that bad. “I suppose, based on the fact you’re still here, that this maze is complicated to navigate.”

“Yes,” the Star-Seeker of the last Quidditch World Cup replied. “My localisation and navigation spells aren’t working inside, and I must have used...sixteen...eighteen different tunnels? All ended up with me returning here.”

Alexandra looked around.

Now that there weren’t any Bludgers trying to murder her, the magnitude of the challenge was truly slammed – metaphorically – in her face. There had to be easily over three hundred tunnels dug into the grey stone. Evidently, half of them served as exits for the corresponding entrances, but-

“There is no way we can find the correct one without pure luck,” there were no marking signs – save the one Viktor Krum had used with fluorescent paint to note which ones he had already tried. “And the treasures below?

“They are all heavily cursed,” the older student of Durmstrang grunted. “I stayed away from the gold and silver plates, I’m not eager to suffer boils and other things from these Geminio-made copies.”

This was a rather sane approach and-

Alexandra frowned.

No, this didn’t make any sense. Why would the Judges waste their time bringing such a fantastic amount of stuff, even if most of it had been magically replicated from the original artworks and silverware?

This was a broom race.

Unless the Champions fell right on top of this mountain of treasures, there was zero way they could be hit by the curses which had been applied to these objects.

The gold could have provided some temptation at first sight, but the curses were not exactly subtle; an elephant trumpeting its presence might have been as discreet as them.

No, by the rules of this broom race, it didn’t make any sense.

Unless the Judges expected them to have no choice but to lose altitude and try to search through this mountain of treasure. Unless-

“Krum. What if the Clue which will allow us to locate the Gate is somewhere in this pile of artworks?”

The Durmstrang wizard gasped...and then grimaced.

“Of course,” some curses may have been uttered under his breath, “of course, we would have to-“

There was a flash of scarlet, and Alexandra blinked as a Champion soared, evading a fast-multiplying sea of coins.

“Sforza seems to have found out that the stuff is really cursed,” Krum noted with amusement...an amusement Alexandra didn’t share.

“FINGOLFIN! STOP HER!”

For the Succubus had not failed at all.

Under one of her arms, the Champion of Desire held the *Third Egg of Cleopatra*!

Professor Flitwick had been right...and wrong. The luxury artwork was indeed a reward, but not after the end of the Task! It was-

**Water** whispered in triumph.

The gold-and-red replica of a huge egg was raised and a corona of magic shone over the last stage of the Fifth Task.

Stones collapsed and levitated, and the Eighth Gate happened.

Fingolfin tried his best, but Alexandra knew that she had reacted too late.

Instinctively, she rushed ahead, asking every bit of acceleration the AT-A10 had in its wood and enchantments.

But Lucrezia had too much of a head-start. She went through the Gate first.

**11 March 1995, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, the True Final Stage of the Broom Race**

Lucrezia was still laughing as she emerged from the Gate.

Oh yes, her approach had been the correct one.

She had not tried to give herself a super-broom or take minutes of advance so that everyone considered her the Champion to beat.

**Desire** could be impatient, but not this time.

No, today, she had carefully analysed what was needed, and now victory was-

Her laughter abruptly died.

She wasn’t in the Coliseum.

The sound of the crowd could be heard, but it was a distant thunderous sound...close, but there remained a good distance between her ears and the spectators.

This-

The Gate had not led her back to the Coliseum! It had led her to the other end of the valley! The Judges had moved the second Gate while everyone was busy competing in the race!

For all her self-restraint, the Heiress of House Sforza shouted immediately a torrent of insults, and in many languages, including Etruscan and Latin!

She had to-

The race was not over.

At the other end of the valley, beyond the river and the villas, the Coliseum was opening, and a grand golden gate was burning with a thousand lights.

The race was not over, and she had lost the effect of surprise!

And then something hard collided with her broom.

The dragon. Alexandra’s dragon.

Of course the dragon had followed her.

“Let me go!” the Champion of Water ordered...just as the other Champions emerged from the Gate.

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Alexandra had to admit that this time, the situation was rather simple.

Somehow, the sadism of the Judges had given her another chance.

As such, there was really no need to hesitate.

“Fingolfin!” the Champion of Death shouted. “Keep slowing her down!”

The Britannian Gold would do his utmost, and his claws had already grabbed the broom of Lucrezia, so that was one problem removed.

That left Krum, who had preceded her at the Gate.

His broom was faster than her. Over the river, in a straight race, it couldn’t be anything else but a humiliation. It couldn’t be-

Damn it.

This was going to be painful...but she wanted to win this Task and the Tournament.

“FULGURIS MERCURY! ARCANA THURISAZ! SAGITTA ULTIMA!”

Her broom became lightning itself.

In a second, Alexandra had poured so much elemental lightning magic in the broom that the wood was saturated with it.

It was going to destroy the AT-A10 broom.

But for a few seconds, Alexandra was able to accelerate forwards like a non-magical missile.

It hurt.

It hurt incredibly bad, both her arms and her legs...and then the rest of her body.

But it was her last chance to win this Task, and she wasn’t going to miss it!

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Neville gasped like plenty of others when the dragon slammed into Lucrezia Sforza’s broom, ending her attempt to reach the finish line.

But then the thousands of gasps ended, and the excitement returned. Krum was here, and so was Potter.

The final sprint was about to-

The whole end of the valley appeared to disappear in a cascade of lightning, and suddenly on the mirrors, Potter’s broom became an arrow of lightning. It was as if she was riding an arrow of lightning itself!

“Krum! Krum is catching up!”

Neville thought suddenly Ron had become completely crazy, but after a second, yes, he realised his friend had said the truth.

Krum had plunged down to be metres above the river, and then had created something like an enormous cascade of steam to increase his speed by several times.

It was completely impossible. Potter had mastered lightning itself, nothing could catch up with her!

*Nothing but the best Seeker in the world*, a little voice whispered in his head.

Impossibly, one heartbeat after another, the Durmstrang Champion was accelerating, doing what no other flyer could have done.

There was now only a long line to the stadium.

The roar of the crowd became everything in his head and ears.

Krum shifted to the left, he was nearly to the side-

“They are going to crash against the walls of the Coliseum!” They were just arriving too fast, this was-

“KRUM! KRUM HAS-“

Lightning devoured everything, and suddenly there was a crash against the magical barriers the organisers had raised just in time.

Debris fell in a cloud of dust...but that wasn’t Krum, Krum had somehow managed to evade a collision with the public and the walls, and was standing out in mid-air, out of breath.

“Who? Who won the race?”

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It was a good thing, that she had been prepared to throw the anti-Animagus armbands the moment she passed the Gate.

Because, yes, even with the regeneration of a Lernaean Hydra, crashing at high speed *hurt*.

Alexandra really, really didn’t recommend doing it again.

Her back hurt.

Her arms were feeling like hell.

It was like her legs had been broken several times.

And of course her head was ringing like someone had decided to toll a thousand bells too close to her.

And damn it, despite all the magic she had poured into her broom, despite imbuing her flying support with enough power to reach a subsonic speed, it had just been enough to give Krum the race of his life.

There were many things that could be said about High Master Karkaroff, most of them non-complimentary.

But on one point, he was completely right.

Krum was really a monster when it came to flying.

“Champion Potter? Champion Potter!”

“I am fine,” the green-eyed witch grunted. “Just give me a few minutes to heal myself. And I wouldn’t say no to some fish delicacies. I feel really hungry.”

“Err...yes, of course? But you are-“

“I am well aware I crashed into the magical barriers of the Coliseum, since I only stopped pouring magic as I got through the finish line, yes.”

And there a clamour rose from the stands. Ten of thousands of spectators began to shout their pleasure.

Alexandra sighed.

“Krum won, didn’t he?”

“Ah...yes, I’m afraid he beat you. The Judges needed to ask for the photo-finish, if it’s any consolation.”

“KRUM! KRUM! KRUM!”

“I really did my best,” the Hydra Animagus closed her eyes. “I have no regrets.”

**11 March 1995, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice, Finish Line of the Broom Race**

“When the Judges told us they were moving the final Gate somewhere else to make sure we had the privilege to watch an epic end of the race, I didn’t think it would be so true.”

“You love understatements, Hannah,” the future Lady Bones replied.

Her best friend giggled.

“I suppose I do.” The giggle continued, of course. “And damn, your girlfriend is competitive. I know for sure I would have abandoned the idea of trying to win against Krum several Gates before the finish line.”

“Ravenclaws are competitive.”

“Yeah, they are...academically. Not like that.” Hannah shook her head. “How in the name of everything sacred did she manage to change her broom into lightning and ride it for so long? No, that’s just the beginning of the questions I have. How did she find a talking dragon? And one of a species I don’t recognise?”

“I would be more surprised if you recognised it. It’s a Britannian Gold, and Fingolfin is the only living member right now.”

Her best friend gave her a mocking glare.

“Are you telling me you were aware of something as fantastic as a talking dragon, and you didn’t tell me?”

Ah, Ossuary damn it. Well, better to blame her girlfriend...it was her fault anyway.

“Yes, I was aware of the dragon’s existence. And Alexandra made me promise to not say anything to anyone.” Susan hesitated, before continuing with the honest admissions. “She didn’t tell me she was going to bring Fingolfin with her today, though. Mainly because I have a feeling she wasn’t so sure herself. Fingolfin’s flying skills tend to degrade fast once exhaustion claims him.”

“He certainly went on to grab a lot of brooms to use them as support,” Hannah nodded as Eleonora da Riva finished several metres before Angelina Johnson. “Do you think it would have been better for her to use the huge bat which helped her with the Basilisk-slaying?”

“It would have been,” Susan answered thoughtfully, “if Alexandra was sure she could control her for non-lethal tasks. And this is not the case.”

“Really?”

“Really. I have been to Zabini Manor, Hannah. Tisiphone the carnivorous bat is answering her orders far better than the Ceryneian Hind, but ‘Ciri’ does her best to not obey at all, so it doesn’t mean much. And I’ve seen the size of her talons. Since the Judges told everyone they would inflict massive penalties if there was some killing, Tisiphone was out.”

And Atalanta the snowy owl was out. The determined bird was strong, but she couldn’t breathe lightning, and she certainly wouldn’t have been able to catch up with flying brooms for most of the race’s stages.

“Yeah, no killing...there were plenty of instances where it was really violent.”

“Some of the Champions really don’t like each other.” Susan sighed.

“You mean, surely, ‘my girlfriend hates the guts of Delacour’.”

The red-haired Hufflepuff had to admit it was a crude and blunt comment. It also was completely true.

“Yes, I don’t think those two will ever be able to do more than tolerate each other’s presence.” Susan paused for a second. “And I have to admit, there’s good reasons for that. Alex is far from perfect, but Delacour rubs thousands of people the wrong way just when she preens and opens her mouth to speak.”

It was a good reminder that yeah, the Powers often chose the best candidate from *their* perspective...but there was nothing which told you that *you* were going to think the new Champion was *good*.

“The Fifth Task?”

“I think there’s going to be a big difference between the final ranking of the race and the ‘race for points’. There were too many different strategies, and clearly there are Champions who were after the victory for a Task, and there were Champions more interested in the Tournament rankings.”

Krum clearly belonged to the former category, and Alexandra belonged to the latter.

“Cedric is going to profit from all these forfeits, I think.”

“Yeah.” The Champion of their House had just finished the Glacier Stage. And as there was only the French girl behind him, he may be able to get a few points for the last two Gates. “But this time, I think we can agree he screwed up?”

“I agree, yes.” Hannah gave her a sheepish expression. “We’re supposed to be the House of Unity, and we really didn’t do a good job of it. I mean, Montague did more for unity and teamwork today than Hufflepuff! It’s kind of humiliating for our legacy...”

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Alexandra couldn’t help it, she felt a twinge of jealousy when Lucrezia told her that yes, the Judges had decreed the one to arrive with the Egg of Cleopatra was the one to get it.

“Don’t get so disappointed, Alexandra,” the Succubus purred, “you increased your advance when it came to the Tournament competition.”

“And I’m sure that for the next two Tasks, providing there are indeed that many left, I’m going to be the Champion to beat at all costs,” the Champion of Death replied drily.

“All great witches must have great opponents,” the currently blonde-haired Champion of Desire flashed her a smile with a lot of fangs. “Regrets?”

“You will have to be a bit more specific than that,” Alexandra rolled her eyes as the public cheered again, for Cedric Diggory passed the finish line mere seconds before Eugenie Millet of Beauxbatons, officially ending the Fifth Task. “Regrets about what?”

“If you’d told your dragon to grab Krum’s broom instead of mine,” Lucrezia grinned. “You would have won the Broom Race.”

Alexandra rolled her eyes.

“Do we have to play that game? You, the Champion of Water, didn’t have a way to replicate what I did with your magical repertoire when we were above a river in the first place?”

Lucrezia had the good grace to only flutter her long eyelashes and smile.

“She could have drowned you into the river too,” Eleonora da Riva intervened. “The Gate did throw you out only a few metres above the ground, after all.”

And a certain Succubus tried very hard to look innocent. It didn’t work.

“Congratulations for dealing with Delacour again, though. I began the job, but it is the Dark Queen who finished it.” Alexandra admitted with a grimace, being reminded painfully of the only real moment she had come incredibly close to losing everything in this Task. “And-“

“AND NOW FOR THE RANKING OF THE BROOM RACE!”

The Scoreboard flashed several times, and when the advertisements were over and the whole list was unveiled, there wasn’t any surprise. Viktor Krum had won – something that caused at least two-thirds of the Coliseum to cheer in joy.

She was second. Lucrezia was third. Then there had been Martin Bayard, Eleonora da Riva, Angelina Johnson, Lyudmila Romanov, Cedric Diggory, and Eugenie Millet. These were the nine Champions, including herself, who had finished the race.

When the second magical mirror began to reveal a different list, however, her interest climbed far higher.

**Race by Points – Fifth Task:**

Alexandra Potter – 75 points

Viktor Krum – 56 points

Eleonora da Riva – 55 points

Angelina Johnson – 53 points

Lucrezia Sforza – 52 points

Martin Bayard – 50 points

Lyudmila Romanov – 29 points

Fleur Delacour – 26 points

Graham Montague – 21 points

Romeo Malatesti and Johann Wolffhart – 11 points

Cedric Diggory – 8 points

Ambre de Courtois – 7 points

Eugenie Millet – 6 points

Ulrich Fuchs and Giovanni Ruspoli – 0 point

“Any outstanding reaction we must be made aware of, Death?” the Champion of Innocence asked sarcastically.

“I created a living miracle, Montague won his first points of the Tournament,” the Lady Protector snarked back. “Now what was it I heard about pillows, trees, and a giant snake?”

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The prizes of this Task of the European Magical Tournament were, unsurprisingly, flying brooms, and the kits of maintenance and accessories associated with the sport. Logically, some Champions were more rewarded than others. At the top of the scoring, the young Bulgarian received a first-class broom with everything the wizards dreamed of when thinking of various flying sports: robes, gloves, repair kits, signed autographs, and other collector items.

The further you descended into the rankings, the less prestigious the rewards were. While Alexandra Potter received something called a ‘Firebolt’ for her second place – which was ironic given her performance in the last seconds of the race – some Champions had received a copy of the broom they had raced with, and no accessories whatsoever.

“It was...impressive,” the Prime Minister acknowledged. “I see now why you were so confident this brand of extreme sports was going to seduce both worlds.”

To his credit, the Italian politician didn’t gloat.

“I can’t take credit for everything,” the representative sent by Rome didn’t gloat. “I certainly didn’t expect Mister Krum and Lady Protector Potter to give us such an exhibition of speed, skill, and...creative interpretation of the rules, I think the words are accurate?”

“Perfectly accurate,” the Prime Minister agreed.

Obviously, the rules had been so flexible that the gaps between them left a canyon or two to be found, but he was humble enough to admit that when his aide had recited them, bringing a dragon to the Task had not been among his list of ideas on how to solve a problem.

And a talking dragon, at that.

A talking dragon with a fondness for Italian pastas and pizzas, as long as there was plenty of meat included with the rest of the food.

Six months ago, if someone had told him that, the Prime Minister would have thought the poor man saying it was in dire need of holidays, and would need to spend a few months far away from politics.

“Of course, this broom race has proven that the sport is, as the name implies, rather extreme.”

The Italian chuckled.

“We are not going to sell them to the non-magical citizens tomorrow, that’s for certain. They wouldn’t go far anyway; I was told in confidence that the autonomy of these magical flying brooms is extremely limited when the user is not gifted with magic.”

“It is...somewhat reassuring, yes.”

“One must not forget anyway that these are exceptional students. Or should I say exceptional wizards and witches? Many of the Champions present today have survived the first Tasks and a war in the streets of Venice. Expecting the average man or woman to accomplish the same kind of exploits would not go well, I think.”

“On this point, we are in agreement. But if there is an advantage we have, it is in our numbers...and we have a lot of professionals in our respective countries.”

On that point at least, there had been reassuring news. Magic had successfully been hidden for so long, because the ‘magical world’ was small. The population of the world as they believed they knew it had risen over the one billion threshold many, many decades ago, but the magical side was only a tiny fraction of that number, even today, and this was with mythical beings like Centaurs and Goblins included in the count.

“Yes. I trust you won’t be surprised to learn that Rome has been opening channels with several factions...the channels are all unofficial and deniable, of course.”

“Of course,” the Prime Minister gave the other man a thin smile. “There is a lot of deniability to play around these days.”

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**Champion Rankings of the European Magical Tournament after the Fifth Task:**

**1st: Alexandra Potter – 350 points**

**2nd: Lyudmila Romanov – 298 points**

**3rd: Lucrezia Sforza – 297 points**

**4th: Eleonora da Riva – 232 points**

**5th: Viktor Krum – 205 points**

**6th: Romeo Malatesti – 180 points**

**7th: Ambre de Courtois – 139 points**

**8th: Henri de Condé – 134 points (suspended)**

**9th: Cedric Diggory – 115 points**

**10th: Fleur Delacour – 86 points**

**11th: Giovanni Ruspoli – 65 points**

**12th: Angelina Johnson – 53 points**

**13th ex-aequo: Martin Bayard – 50 points**

**13th ex-aequo: Yegor Poliakov – 50 points (deceased)**

**15th: Neville Longbottom – 40 points (suspended)**

**16th: Geoffrey Hooper – 39 points**

**17th: Frode Falk – 35 points (deceased)**

**18th: Armand Coularé de Lafontaine – 24 points**

**19th: Graham Montague – 21 points**

**20th: Lucas Gauthier – 19 points (deceased)**

**21st ex-aequo: Johann Wolffhart – 11 points**

**21st ex-aequo: Boris Viipuri – 11 points**

**23rd: Eugenie Millet – 6 points**

**24th: Karl Schumacher – 3 points (deceased)**

**25th ex-aequo: Ulrich Fuchs – 0 point**

**25th ex-aequo: Lorenzo de Medici, Cassius Warrington, and Pyotr Karamnov (all deceased) – 0 Point**

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**School Rankings of the European Magical Tournament after the Fifth Task:**

**1st: Scuola Regina – 774 points**

**2nd: Hogwarts – 618 points**

**3rd: Durmstrang – 613 points**

**4th: Beauxbatons – 458 points**

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**Author’s note**: I hope everyone enjoyed the Broom Race! Now in the next chapter, we will see the political consequences of what has been done, because between Alexandra revealing she has a dragon of an extinct species working as her accomplice, and the Dark Queen’s little hammer coming straight out of the legends of Norse mythology, yes, there are going to be consequences...

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