

Unknown Prophecy

Chapter 71

The day of the Death Race came, and the air was clear and cold. The sun rose over the jagged Pyrenees peaks, highlighting their snow-capped tops. Harry stood at the bottom of the mountains, and he was almost trembling with excitement. The wind tore through the valley and shook all the tents that had gone up overnight. Hundreds of witches and wizards were already there, giving the place a very lively atmosphere. The air smelled of roasted meat and woodsmoke from the huge blazing firepits. A small contingent of goblins had set up a bookie's table, and bets were already being taken on who would win, who would die, and who would end up in the hospital tent before the halfway point. It looked like a Quidditch World Cup was about to take place. Banners flapped from every tent as nervous racers stumbled around in their kits.

Harry walked toward the big registration tent, and Fleur walked right beside him with her hair in a thick braid. Her blue eyes were bright with excitement. Apolline came just behind them, looking worried. She thought Harry was crazy for wanting to join this ridiculous race. She wore a snow-white, skin-tight bodysuit that was charmed to keep her nice and warm. Every man they passed stared at her curvy body, and Harry couldn't blame them. She looked incredible.

The tent was packed, and Harry squeezed in between a big wizard with brightly-colored dreadlocks and two goblins in flight leathers. The goblins stared at his Firebolt with envy. The wizard at the front was yelling at the registration witch, and she looked ready to hex him.

Harry's turn came, and he handed over his registration parchment. The witch snatched the parchment from his hand and scanned it for less than a second before her eyebrows arched so high they nearly disappeared into her hairline. Her eyes moved up to his scar. She flushed bright pink, and her lips pulled into a smile. "Well, well, Mr. Potter. We were not expecting the Boy Who Lived at our humble little event."

Harry offered a lopsided grin. "I couldn't resist the challenge."

Fleur snorted softly behind him. The registration witch recovered her composure and read through the rest of his paperwork. "Everything appears to be in order. You've filled out the liability waiver, signed off on the medical release, and indicated next-of-kin." She gave a pointed glance at Fleur and Apolline, who were now peering over Harry's shoulder.

The witch stamped his registration with a flourish and pointed to a wooden kiosk at the edge of the tent. "No wands will be allowed in the race itself. You'll need to proceed to Security for screening. They'll tag your personal wand so you can retrieve it post-race. Please queue there, Mr. Potter."

Harry thanked her, and as he turned away, he heard the witch let out a breathy, "He really is quite handsome," to her colleague.

Outside the tent, Fleur was practically vibrating with energy. She took his arm, leaned close, and said, "You are already a celebrity, and now you will be a legend. Unless you die, of course."

"That's the spirit," Harry deadpanned, but he felt grateful for her confidence.

Apolline brushed a bit of snow from his heavy robe, and she said in a hushed voice, "Be careful, mon cher. The mountains ... they 'ave an appetite." Her lips touched his cheek and lingered at the corner of his mouth. Fleur, on the other hand, wasn't so subtle. She pulled Harry down by his collar and kissed him so hard he nearly dropped his broom. Her mouth was hot and assertive, and her tongue was teasing.

"Be careful, 'Arry," she said in a husky voice. "I will reward you if you win," she naughtily whispered in his ear. Harry groaned as his cock hardened. It wouldn't do to fly the race with a boner. 'Too much wind resistance,' as Fred used to say back in his old life.

Harry smiled and kissed her forehead, making her giggle. Harry then pulled Apolline in by her hips and kissed her deeply, not caring who saw. Apolline melted into the kiss, and when he let her go, she huffed and fixed her hair. She had a pleased smile on her gorgeous face nonetheless. Harry handed her his wand for safekeeping. He caught sight of the wand check queue and shuffled over with the rest of the racers. His Firebolt was slung casually across his shoulder. The security wizard in charge had arms like tree trunks and an auror's wary stare. He scanned Harry with some strange metal device that detected wands. When he found none, he then patted him down with surprising gentleness. Once he was satisfied there were no hidden wands, he handed Harry a numbered badge and waved him through. As Fleur and Apolline wouldn't be able to follow any further, he waved at them and went to the starting area. He didn't need to worry about them getting good seats. Harry had paid for them to have VIP seating, which meant that they would continuously get portkeyed to pre-planned viewing sections scattered throughout the race. They would get to see all the exciting bits.

The racers were herded into a holding pen at the base of the mountain, where dozens of competitors stretched, compared brooms, and trash-talked in at least twelve languages. Harry caught the tail end of a back-and-forth bickering match between a pair of Lithuanian witches in matching green flight suits. Harry chuckled as a burst of flame from a Spanish wizard's experimental broom nearly set the registration tent ablaze. Harry stuck the badge to the front of his heavy robe and moved further into the pen and away from the malfunctioning, fire-breathing broom.

He found himself next to a tall, severe-looking woman with her dark hair pulled back in one long braid. Her broom was a custom job, with twin stabilizers and a handle wrapped in what looked like snake skin.

"First time?" she asked, nodding at him.

"Yep, first time. I read about it in the newspaper, and I just had to give it a go," he replied, and she grinned and chuckled.

"This is my third attempt. I've got two crashes under my belt. Try not to die out there. The air gets thin up in the mountains and most wizards panic."

"I'll keep it in mind," Harry said, but he glanced at the mountains and realized she might not be joking.

A horn sounded, and the crowd surged toward the starting line, which was marked by two enormous stone pillars and a shivering, half-frozen referee in blue robes. The referee cast a sonorous charm on his throat, and his voice boomed over the crowd.

"Welcome to the Death Race! All racers to the starting line! Brooms at the ready! Remember ... The only rules are no wands and no shortcuts!"

A jostling mass of bodies formed as each racer found their place. Harry stood in the third row, shouldered in by the woman he had just met on his right and a smug blonde wizard with the look of a Quidditch washout on his left. The cold air bit at his cheeks as Harry checked that his magically hardened leather armor pieces were secured tightly to his limbs. Above them, the course soared up the steep rock face, zigzagged through a series of treacherously narrow canyons, and vanished into a cloudbank that looked thick enough to walk on.

On the sidelines, Fleur and Apolline watched with matching expressions of hope and dread. Fleur blew him a kiss as the referee counted down from ten. Each number sent a burst of adrenaline through him. He felt alive in a way only flying ever gave him.

"ONE ..." A burst of light rocketed up from the referee's wand. It flew high into the sky and burst with a thundering boom. The starting line exploded in a rush of color and sound. Brooms streaked upward into the howling wind as racers jockeyed for position in the narrowing mountain pass. Harry hunched low over the Firebolt, felt its familiar surge of acceleration, and grinned as the world blurred around him.

They had just flown into a narrow canyon when a boot hit Harry in the thigh so hard his knee jerked up, and he nearly fell off his broomstick. The shift in momentum had him flying straight toward a massive jagged boulder, but he clamped his thighs around the Firebolt and forced himself to the right, barely missing the huge slab of rock by inches. Harry gritted his teeth as he scanned for the source. The culprit was ahead of him. He was a squat, burly wizard with a shaved head and a patchy brown leather coat, and he was already baring his teeth in a sneer as he twisted around to glare at Harry. A bright, fresh scar ran along his jawline. His eyes glinted beneath his heavy brows, and Harry immediately recognized the intent. This was no friendly bump or honest mistake. The man was already lining up his next attack and angling his broom so the tail would whip directly into Harry's path and block him.

The air up here was already crowded as hundreds of brooms zoomed through the first set of switchbacks, and each rider jostled for position. The wind howled in Harry's ears, and shards of ice screamed past him as the fierce wind ripped them from the mountainside. The course snaked through narrow crevices and along vertical cliffs, and wherever the path widened enough to allow side-by-side racing, it instantly turned into a melee.

Harry was barely able to duck as the next boot came for his head, and he felt the heavy tread graze his scalp. He flattened against his broom, shot forward, and tucked his elbows in tight as he threaded between a cluster of screaming racers. Their brooms were locked in a three-way dogfight. A burst of blue sparks fanned out in front of Harry. No doubt it was from an illegal broom upgrade, and he twisted the Firebolt in a wild dive to avoid getting a faceful of whatever the Lithuanians were packing in their tailpipes.

A moment later he was back on the burly wizard's tail. The man kept glancing back, and his eyes were wild and furious. Now and then he would look ahead just long enough to avoid crashing into the next curve. Harry recognized the type immediately. It was one of those sociopaths who got their kicks from knocking other players off their brooms and hurting the opposition rather than winning the prize. It made Harry's blood boil. He had grown up playing against Slytherins with precisely this approach, but nothing in Quidditch had ever come close to the pure personal violence of this race.

The mountain shuddered as a distant avalanche thundered down the far slope and sent up a plume of snow and threw off everyone's flight pattern. Harry hardly noticed. His eyes were locked on the burly wizard's boots. The guy had welded iron toe-caps onto each boot tip and turned them into lethal weapons. He was already winding up and shifting his hips to swing another kick into Harry's face.

Harry surged forward and matched the man's speed, and when the boot lashed out again, Harry caught it with his palm and absorbed the impact. Before the man could wrench it free, Harry yanked his leg down and used the momentum to haul himself up and over the rival's broom so both men were now parallel and flying close enough to touch knuckles. The man roared and threw a punch at Harry's ribs, but Harry twisted and slammed his own fist onto the man's arm, knocking the blow aside.

They shoved and elbowed each other while avoiding falling rocks from the mountainside. Their brooms nearly locked together as they weaved in and out of the slipstream while the rest of the race thundered past. A Spanish witch in red and gold barreled by and cackled as she doused them both in a cloud of fine stinging pepper. Harry's eyes watered, but he didn't dare rub them. He was too busy grabbing the man's broom tail with one hand and using the other to punch the wizard just above the kidney. The man howled and twisted to retaliate, and for a moment they were both completely out of control and spiraling together in a death roll.

Ahead, the course dropped off in a sheer vertical plunge, and the wind's whistle was so high-pitched that Harry's eardrums ached. The crowd below was screaming for blood, and their

shouts echoed up the cliff. Harry felt the exhilaration rise in him like a blazing fire. He shoved the man away, kicked off his broom, and broke free just as the other wizard tried to recover. He grinned, snapped into a barrel roll, and dodged the debris from a shattered broomstick that ricocheted off a nearby rock.

The man wasn't done with Harry just yet. A second later, he slammed hard into Harry from behind. The impact left them both tumbling, and they were locked neck and neck as they rocketed through the thin air. Harry heard the man's curses right in his ear, and he barely managed to get an elbow into the man's chest to break free. Their broomsticks clacked together and then separated. Harry's Firebolt recovered instantly, but the other man's battered broom began to list and falter. Harry wanted to end this now before it got really violent. He closed his fist, summoned a burst of raw magic, and slammed the man with a Banishing Charm so powerful it catapulted him backward with all the subtlety of a cannon blast.

The wizard careened off his broom, tumbled end over end, and vanished below the cliff's edge where his shrieks were swallowed by the wind. Harry watched just long enough to see the man's body pinwheel through the air and then disappear into the clouds far below. He half hoped the guy had remembered to charm his gear to make the fall slower and more survivable.

The entire exchange had taken only a few minutes, but Harry's heart was pounding as if he had run a marathon. He finally got to rub his stinging eyes as he shot forward, determined not to lose momentum. There were still many dozens of racers ahead and behind him, and Harry's little scuffle had not even made a dent in the chaos of the overall contest.

The next mile brought obstacles even worse than homicidal competitors, and the course narrowed dramatically and forced brooms into a single-file line through a stone arch so tight Harry's shoulders brushed the sides. The arch led into a cave that was pitch-black except for phosphorescent fungus illuminating the walls in sickly green pulses. Harry plunged into the darkness, relying on instinct and his reflexes alone. Screams and yells echoed as racers collided in the dark, and their brooms splintered with grisly crunches. Harry barely dodged a pair of witches locked in a heated battle. Harry heard a familiar cackle up ahead, and suddenly, he and everyone around him started coughing as their eyes watered. He instantly knew it was that damn Spanish witch again. The coughing, choking, and watering eyes caused several brutal crashes, and a very sharp shard of splintered broom handle caught Harry right in his right cheek. He yowled in pain, grabbed the shard, and pulled it from his face. He felt his cheek and neck suddenly become wet with blood. Harry held a hand to his face and wandlessly healed the wound.

They banked hard around a corner, and Harry was relieved to see the end of the cave. Harry squinted through the bright light as he rocketed out the ass end of the cave.

The tunnel spat Harry out into a screaming wind, and he saw the bitch in red and gold right away. The Spanish witch was already thirty meters ahead, throwing pepper bombs and laughing every time someone wobbled or crashed. She didn't notice or care that Harry had survived her

last two attacks, and she threw more powder at two wizards who tried to pass her. One was a skinny man with a bushy mustache, and he coughed so hard he lost control of his broom, clipped a rock, and fell straight into the chasm below. The crowd roared at that, hungry for blood and violence.

He had always known Quidditch was a rough sport, but this was war. He hugged the side of the mountain and kept his eyes on the witch as her laughter cackled through the cold air. The need for revenge was so strong that he let instinct take over. At the top of the next turn, where the mountain edge sat close to the course, Harry held out his hand and wandlessly summoned a handful of sharp stones and grit as he followed the witch.

She was a great flyer. He had to give her that. She cut every corner tight and used her weight to swing around each curve. She was too busy teasing her next target to notice that Harry had closed the gap. For a second, she looked over her shoulder, saw him chasing her, and smiled cheekily.

Harry waited for the right moment. They turned into a blind curve, and he kicked the Firebolt into high gear and came up next to her. Her hand was already reaching for another pepper bomb, but Harry was quicker. He opened his palm and banished the rocks and dirt into her face from close range without his wand. The rocks and dust hit her like a Bludger. She yelled in pain, and her hands flew up to her eyes. Harry took the opportunity to kick her broom as hard as he could, which swerved right into a boulder. The impact was so violent that the broom snapped in two, and she flew forward and tumbled like a rag doll. The scream that came after was terrified and long, and it felt good to hear. She spun through the air, bounced off a jagged rock, and then vanished into the mist below. Harry didn't bother looking back.

The next part of the course was a nightmare. They flew straight through a gaping, icy cavern. Giant icicles hung from above like blades, and racers without quick reflexes got stabbed or knocked off their brooms as the icicles fell. Harry bobbed and weaved and stayed so close to the wall that his leather armor actually scraped in some places. He passed two French blokes who were taking turns ramming each other in an attempt to knock each other off their brooms. They were so focused on their fight that neither noticed Harry slip by on the outside.

The Firebolt handled like it was wired to his brain. Every tilt and adjustment answered his thoughts before he even finished them. He counted at least fifty racers ahead of him, and most were bunched in small groups.

He kept his head down and passed them one by one. Every time he overtook someone, they tried to knock him off course. He didn't blame them one bit. Out here, it was every man for themselves. But he was faster, smarter, and more patient. When a broom jabbed at his knees, he kicked it aside. When an elbow came for his ribs, he slightly slowed, let them move ahead, and ripped a handful of their broomtail twigs out as they passed. He couldn't help but smile as their broom suddenly became shaky and hard to handle. After that, it was easy to pass them by again.

Without warning, the cavern wall cracked open into a huge echoing chamber. The rock walls arched up like the ribs of a giant beast, and through each rib came torrents of water that were dark, loud, and more violent than anything Harry had seen. One moment the air was full of brooms and bodies, and the next, the racers were scattered by a sudden flood. Their shouts were lost in the roar of the water. The lead pack broke apart. Some ducked under the waterfalls, and some tried to surf the spray. Some were knocked out of the air and vanished into the foam below. Harry saw a big Italian racer grab his broom just as a wall of water hit him sideways and sent him spinning out of sight. Another racer just ahead was hit head-on by a blast, and he disappeared so fast it looked like a giant hand swatted him away.

Through it all, Harry crouched low on his broom with his arms locked and his chin almost on the handle. His eyes stung from the icy wind and the freezing spray. It was then that he almost wished he had chosen to wear goggles, but he knew the restriction in his view was far more dangerous than a bit of discomfort. He felt the next wave coming, and he heard the cracking stone and the deep roar of water as the wall gave way. The wall ahead bowed, and then a seam ripped open. A thick waterfall full of mud and rock dropped right across his path.

He barely had time to curse. The racer in front was the same woman he had met before the race started, and she tried to dodge, but the edge of the waterfall caught her and tumbled her over and over. Her broom vanished, and Harry saw her body hit the wall, bounce, and then slide down toward the endless chasm below. With some quick thinking, Harry wandlessly summoned her to him. She hit his side hard, and Harry turned her robe into a portkey before pushing her off his broom. She screamed loudly right before she vanished into thin air. She would arrive back at the starting line, scared but alive.

As she disappeared, a bubble of magic snapped around him less than a second before he hit the raging waterfall. Everything suddenly went dark. The pressure hammered his ears and almost knocked him off the broom, but the bubble held. He shot through like a bullet, but then another wave hit him. Sharp rocks, branches, and chunks of ice battered his magical shield. Something big and heavy hit the side, and Harry clenched his legs tighter as the impact nearly dethroned him.

He flew blind for several seconds, trusting the Firebolt to carry him through this mess. The roar was so loud he thought he might go deaf. At last the tunnel of water ended and he punched through a thin curtain of spray and out into the open air.

The sudden silence was the biggest relief. Harry glanced around for any obstacles while steadying his path. His hands tingled from gripping the broom handle so hard. He quickly looked himself over. His Firebolt was still in perfect condition, and he hadn't lost any gear. The bubble shimmered away, leaving him completely dry.

He glanced behind where the rest of the pack was coming out of the chaos. At least a dozen brooms were lost in the mess and a handful of racers hung from rocks or limped along with heavily damaged brooms.

The race was fiercer now, and the survivors were just starting to realize what they signed up for. Harry's heart was pounding, but he felt more alive than ever. Every sense was sharpened to a new height.

They finally broke free of the cavern, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief when sunlight hit his face. A loud roar made his eyes widen. The first roar was followed by another ... then another. Harry looked over his shoulder and immediately wished he hadn't. Three massive dragons were cresting the mountain, coming straight for the racers. They had entered the dragon reserve. Harry steeled his nerves and pushed the broom harder than he ever had.