

Chapter 14

“Witches and Wizards, welcome to the Second Task of the Triwizard Tournament!” Ludo announced, his voice magically magnified.

The crowd, seated near the front gate of Hogwarts, cheered. Large banners displaying moving images of different locations surrounding the school hung from the fence on either side of the open gate. Meanwhile, Harry, Fleur, and Viktor stood in a tent erected off to the side, waiting nervously to be called.

“By now, our Champions should have figured out their clues,” he continued with boyish exuberance. “The clue to the third and final task is hidden somewhere amongst the many paths weaving through the Forbidden Forest. To retrieve it, our Champions will need to make their way through Hogsmeade, locate the clue, and return here within one hour. To make matters more difficult, two dozen Aurors and their trainees will be attempting to capture them throughout the challenge.”

“That’s what they meant by Knights of Blue,” Harry said in realization, remembering the dark blue robes all Aurors wore.

“We weel need to avoid zem,” Fleur whispered. “Zere are too many to fight.”

Harry nodded in agreement but wished he could have brought his cloak.

“Straws were drawn to determine the order our Champions will take on this daunting challenge,” Bagman said. “First up will be Harry Potter of Hogwarts!”

Harry swallowed thickly as the crowd cheered. Reaching over, Fleur squeezed his hand and kissed his cheek.

“Bon chance,” she whispered.

“You too,” Harry replied.

She let go of his hand with one last reassuring squeeze as he got to his feet. Viktor lifted his bowed head and gave Harry a respectful nod as he walked past, a gesture Harry returned right before stepping out of the tent. As he walked toward the front gate, he let out a long, slow breath while his heart hammered in his chest. A plan began to form in his mind as he stopped at the edge of the gate.

“Mr. Potter, your one hour begins... now!” Bagman yelled, turning over a large hourglass sitting on the judge's table.

Bringing his wand up, Harry tapped the top of his head while muttering the incantation for the Disillusionment Charm. He felt the slow, syrupy sensation of the magic washing over him and looked down at his body. His body trickled down his torso, arms, and legs, causing them to blend into the background.

The center of his body was practically invisible, but the light around the edges warped slightly, producing a faint outline. It was nearly impossible to see him when he stood still, but the outline became much more pronounced when he moved.

From studying with Hermione, Harry knew there was a way to layer a Silencing Charm over the Disillusionment Charm in a way that didn't cause them to interfere with each other. Unfortunately, it wasn't something he'd tried during his training, and he wasn't about to take the risk now. He'd just have to move quietly and watch where he stepped.

Taking a deep breath to quell his nerves, Harry stepped past the gate and walked down the path to Hogsmeade. The gravel road crunched loudly under his feet, so he moved to the side and walked on the grass. He took long, fast steps, rolling his feet heel to toe so that his steps were as quiet as possible but still allowed him to cover the distance to the village quickly.

From a distance, Harry spotted two young Aurors guarding the main path leading to Hogsmeade. The Aurors talked quietly, only occasionally glancing down the road as if expecting

him to walk right up to them. Skirting around the edge of the forest, he kept low, stayed at a distance, and snuck past. Harry's path took him behind the Hog's Head, where he paused to calm his racing heart and come up with a more thought-out plan. Quickly, he glanced around the side of the building.

From his hiding spot at the very end of the village, he could see two Aurors walking the main road, and he caught a glimpse of another prowling the back alley near Honeydukes. Harry knew there had to be more Aurors watching the village, but he couldn't see roads and alleys between the buildings. He needed a better vantage point.

Ducking back behind the building, he looked around for a better place to survey the village. Unfortunately, all he could see behind him was a small pen that housed a single, scraggly goat and a waist-high stone fence that butted up against the edge of the forest. The goat bleated at Harry, and he glared at it. He contemplated the risk of climbing one of the trees behind the pub when he noticed a stack of Butterbeer barrels stacked against the back of the building.

The barrels didn't reach all the way to the roof, but they were stacked high enough that Harry thought he could reach the balcony on the second floor. Testing one of the barrels and finding it full, he climbed. When he reached the top, he stretched his arm out, grabbed the bottom of the balcony, and pulled himself up. The twisted, wrought iron railing dug painfully into his palms as he hauled himself up, but he made it safely.

Harry took a moment to catch his breath and glanced through the window, hoping the room wasn't occupied. Through a small gap in the dirty, moth-eaten curtains, he could only make out a dark room. There wasn't enough light to see if anyone was asleep inside. Hoping everyone in the village would be at Hogwarts to watch the second task, he stepped up onto the railing and stood, grabbing the gutter for balance.

His heart raced when the gutter rattled loudly. Harry paused for a moment, listening intently for approaching footsteps. When he didn't hear any after several seconds, he jumped up, grabbed the back of the chimney, and heaved himself onto the roof. His stomach hit the gutter he'd loosened with his hand, and one end fell free with a soft clang.

Harry cursed under his breath. If the Aurors found him now, he would be trapped.

Making a split-second decision, he leaned over the edge of the roof, pulled the gutter back into place, and stuck it back together with a quick Sticking Charm. Just as he finished, he heard footsteps approaching. Harry quickly leaned back against the roof and held perfectly still as a familiar head of purple hair walked into view.

Tonks held her wand aloft, light shining from the tip as she gazed around. When her light landed on the goat, it bleated at her and shook its head.

"It's just the bloody goat," she sighed. "Has the task even started yet?"

"It should have," a young woman replied, though Harry couldn't see her. "Come on, let's get back to our patrol."

Nodding, Tonks extinguished her wand and walked back around the side of the Hog's Head. Harry let out a breath and waited for a few seconds before crawling up to the peak of the roof on his stomach and looking out over the alley.

From his new vantage point, Harry could see more than a dozen Aurors patrolling the village. They walked down every road and alley, and four were watching the forest bordering each side. It wouldn't be easy to get through Hogsmeade without being spotted. Taking a wide path around the village through the forest was an option, but it would cost him a lot of time. Enough that he might not make it back within the hour.

No, he'd have to find a way to sneak through Hogsmeade without getting caught.

Crawling backward, Harry climbed down from the room, careful not to hit the gutter again. As his feet hit the ground, he wracked his brain for a way to distract the Aurors. He could use Charms to animate something, but that wouldn't buy him much time. They'd search the entire village for him when they realized what was happening.

The goat behind him bleated again, and as Harry turned to look at it, a new plan formed in his mind.

Walking over to the pen, he used a Gripping Charm to pull the nails free from the top board and let one end fall to the ground. The goat bleated and looked in his direction curiously while he stepped over the bottom board and walked into the pen.

“Go,” Harry whispered, gesturing to the gap in the fence. “You’re free.”

The goat didn’t move.

Moving behind it, he pushed on its rear end, grunting with effort, but it still wouldn’t move. With a sigh, he straightened up, drew his wand, and hit the goat’s hind quarters with a mild Stinging Hex. It let out a scream, kicked him in the shin, and took off like a shot. As Harry hissed and hobbled in pain, the goat jumped out of the pen and ran down the street, bleating loudly. Aurors came running towards the commotion just as the goat kicked the menu board outside of the Hog’s Head and sent it flying onto the cobblestone street with a clatter.

A light came on inside the pub, and the owner, an old man with long grey hair and a big, bushy beard, opened the door.

“You idiots scared my goat!” he shouted. “Get it back in the pen!”

The Aurors standing in front of the building looked at each other. With a collective sigh, they turned and chased after the goat. As it raced away from them, knocking over an advertisement in front of Honeyduke’s, Harry crept around the other side of the Hog’s Head and started making his way through the village.

His path was almost entirely clear. There was only a single Auror still at the edge of the village, and he was too busy laughing at the trainees trying to capture a goat to notice Harry sneak behind him. By the time Tonks lassoed it and pulled it to a stop, he was already past Hogsmeade and creeping alongside the road.

A couple of Aurors were walking the road, but he snuck past them easily. The light of the full moon filtered in through the trees, lighting his path as he looked for the trail that would take him to the Masked Maiden statue. After a long but uneventful walk, he found it.

Two young Aurors, a blonde and a redhead, sat on a bench at the entrance to the trail, gambling silver Sickles over a game involving dice they tossed into a floating tray. As Harry tried to slip by through the foliage, he stepped on a stick, which broke with a loud *crack*. Both Aurors turned in his direction, their wands raised, while Harry froze and held his breath. His only saving grace was a small bush that stood between him and them.

“What was that?” the redhead asked.

“I don’t know,” the blonde replied. “Go check it out.”

“Me?” the redhead asked. “You go. Gibbs put me in charge.”

“Fine,” the blonde sighed.

As he got to his feet, Harry tightened his grip on his wand, wondering if he should try and take them by surprise instead of waiting for them to find him. Nervously, he held his ground, watching the approaching Auror intently for any sign that he’d been spotted. The light from his wand washed over the area, but the bush Harry hid behind blocked it from reaching him.

Grumbling under his breath, the Auror stopped just a couple of feet from his hiding spot and gazed around the area. Harry lifted the tip of his wand slowly, aiming it at the man’s chest, when he suddenly looked back over his shoulder.

“Hey!” he shouted.

The tip of Harry's wand glowed red, ready to unleash a Stunning Hex until he followed the blonde's gaze and paused. The redhead sat frozen, his hand hovering over one of the die.

"You cheating git!" the blonde yelled, turning away from Harry.

"Aw, come on," the redhead replied, pulling his hand back. "I'm just messing around."

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" the blonde asked accusingly.

Letting out a slow, shaky breath, Harry lowered his wand and spilled past the bickering duo. The Masked Maiden statue was less than a dozen yards from where the Aurors were, but there was a slight bend to the trail that left it hidden behind a handful of trees and some bushes. When he was sure he was out of view, he straightened up and looked closely at the statue.

It depicted a young woman in flossing robes, her face covered with a plain, smooth mask with only two holes for the eyes. Her hands were held at her sides. One clutched a wand, the other a scroll, both carved from stone.

Harry gave a start when the statue suddenly turned its head to look at him. His heart hammered in his chest as she lifted her hand and held out the scroll. When the light of the full moon hit it, the scroll turned to parchment. Licking his lips, he smiled and took the scroll from her hand.

As he tucked the scroll safely away in the inner chest pocket of his robe, Harry watched with growing panic as his Disillusionment Charm stopped working. He watched helplessly as the concealing magic rolled off of him, making his torso, arms, and, finally, his legs visible.

"Shit," he whispered.

Raising his wand, he tapped himself on the head while muttering the incantation. The scroll in his pocket burned, and the magic refused to work.

“Hey, who’s that?” one of the Aurors asked.

Harry looked over, and his adrenaline surged when he made eye contact with the redhead. The trees and bushes had been enough to hide him when he was under the Disillusionment Charm, but without it, there was enough of a gap in the foliage for them to see him. The redhead squinted for a better look, and then his eyes widened.

“It’s Potter!” he shouted. “Get him!”

“Stupify!” Harry yelled.

As the Aurors ducked his spell, he turned and crashed through the forest. Two Stunning Hexes whizzed past him as he weaved through the trees and sprinted back toward Hogsmeade. He heard shouts coming from the road on his left, and then two more Aurors joined the chase. Panting, Harry ducked under an Incarcerous Jinx and fired back over his shoulder. It did little to slow the pursuing Aurors chasing him through the forest.

With a spin that caused him to stumble as he ran, he waved his wand in a wide arc. The bushes and tree branches wove themselves together, making it harder for the Aurors to get through. Spinning back around, he sprinted away while they used their wands to cut a path through the blockage.

Harry burst out of the forest and into the village. Without breaking stride, he ran to the closest house and tried the door. Mercifully, it was unlocked, and he slipped inside and closed the door. As he glanced through the window, the Aurors rushed out of the forest and paused, looking in every direction to see which way he went.

“Potter’s here!” the redhead shouted as more Aurors showed up. “Parker, you and Ryan search that house. We’ll search the other one.”

Harry swallowed thickly and panted heavily as the Aurors systematically searched the village. Watching two Aurors approach the house he was hiding in, he looked for another way out, but

there wasn't one. The door he'd come in, the one the Aurors were approaching, was the only way in or out. Pacing the living room anxiously, he looked around for another option. He spotted a shelf loaded with copper pots and pans through the kitchen window of the house next door and raised his wand.

"Accio," he whispered.

The pots and pans fell with a crash, and the Aurors, now just feet from the door, froze.

"He's here!" one of the Aurors next door yelled.

Harry sighed in relief when the Aurors approaching his house suddenly turned and ran across the street. As he watched them blast open the front door and search the house, he knew he'd bought himself only a few minutes at best.

Glancing at the fireplace, he wondered if he'd be disqualified if he used the Floo to escape.

He decided not to chance it. Instead, he walked to the other side of the house and opened the window. Climbing outside, he was met with a Stunning Hex that missed him by inches.

"I got him!" a young woman shouted excitedly. "He's here."

Harry raised a shield and sprinted towards the next house as the Aurors came flooding out of the house they'd been searching. Half a dozen spells slammed against his shield before he reached the front door and rushed inside. Kicking the door closed behind him, he noticed a back door and ran towards it when something next to the door caught his attention.

A broom.

It was an old Comet 240, beaten and weathered, but at that moment, it was the most beautiful broom in the world. Harry skidded to a halt and grabbed it just as he saw a flash of purple hair through the window in the door. Tonks grinned at him as she raised her wand, and he turned to sprint up the stairs. The door was blasted in behind him, followed by thunderous footsteps. At the top of the stairs, he turned a moment before a spell impacted the wall where his shoulder had been.

“Your arse is mine, Potter!” Tonks yelled, running up the stairs.

Mounting the broom, Harry flew straight and fast towards the window at the end of the hall. He raised his arm, covering his face with his robe a moment before he crashed through the window. When he lowered his arm, he was dangerously close to crashing into the neighboring house and pulled up sharply. As he shot into the sky, several spells crashed against the siding, missing him by a split second.

Weaving through the air to avoid the spells being aimed at him by the Aurors on the ground, Harry glanced over his shoulder and smiled at Tonks as she looked out the broken window and shook her head. Turning around, he shot toward Hogwarts as fast as the old broom could go. The crowd roared as he passed the front gate and landed safely on the front lawn.

“And Harry Potter has done it!” Bagman shouted. “What a performance from our youngest Champion!”

“Well done, young man,” Professor Flitwick said excitedly. “Well done. Come along now. Madam Pomfrey needs to check you over.”

Sighing but still smiling, Harry followed him to the medical tent. His night was over, and all he could do now was wait to find out how Fleur did.