

“One more time.” Hermione was sitting across from him as he ate his breakfast, waiting expectantly for him to repeat the clue that Padma deciphered for, if he was counting correctly, the sixth time since he sat down.

Speaking of Padma, she was sat next to his bushy-haired friend with a sly smile at his current predicament. Taking his time chewing the bite of egg in his mouth, he watched as she raised one eyebrow and waved her hand to spur him along, “Well?”

“If you couldn’t glean anything new from it the first half dozen times, what makes you think it’ll happen the seventh time?”

“Well, in all fairness, seven is a magically powerful number.” Padma provided unhelpfully. Next to her Ginny and Sue both snorted out a laugh.

Harry just stared at her before blithely reminding her that, “So is three.”

“Just tell me.” Hermione wasn’t amused by their little byplay, and he was quite sure that he could hear her foot tapping against the floor.

“Fine. *The task ahead will test both your mettle and your wit. In the ice and snow, you’ll face your foes both known to you and not. For every lock there is a key, though they mightn’t be seen. Remember well these simple things and surely, you’ll succeed.*” Yet again, he watched her brow furrow in concentration as she tried to work out any advantage she might be able to give him.

Only for her to come up with absolutely nothing. Throwing up her hands in defeat, she was clearly exasperated, “What’s the point of a clue if it doesn’t tell you one ruddy thing about what you’re going to be doing!?”

“Once I get to the task, I reckon that it’s going to make a bit more sense.” Or at the very least, that’s what he was hoping. Because other than telling him that he was going to be cold, he wasn’t sure what else to make of the clue.

“Well, you’re going to find out soon enough,” Ginny popped out of her seat as she said it, pulling Sue and Luna up with her as she did, “We really need to go if we want to get a good seat.”

Luna looked at her with a furrowed brow, “But I thought that Gabrielle said that she was going to save one for us... and the others.” The Ravenclaw had offered to go along with her but was graciously told to stay there so she could finish her pudding.

“One pint-sized fifteen-year-old, even one like Gabrielle, isn’t going to be able to hold the best seats for long...” It was wise that she said that somewhere that the young veela couldn’t hear, otherwise she’d be dealing with a rather vehement disagreement.

“Is she not going to sit with Beauxbatons, or her parents?” Harry asked.

“When Fleur’s competing, yes, but she decided she’d like to support her friend first.”

“Anyway,” Padma cut in, “She’s right either way, we really should shift ourselves.” Wiping her face with her napkin, she stood as Hermione followed suit.

“I see how it is, just leaving me here all alone to fend for myself.” His dramatics didn’t sway any of the girls.

Padma leaned across the table and cupped his cheek to console him, “How ever will you manage the trials and tribulations of the Great Hall at lunch all on your own? It’ll be the worst hardship of your life, I’m sure.”

“Truly, the agony...” Sue’s deadpan delivery caused them all to laugh.

“Besides, you don’t want your loudest cheering section to be separated in the stands... our support is what’s going to drive you to victory.” Padma was teasing him as she patted his cheek. She regretted it when he turned to nip at her fingers.

Smiling cheekily, he told her, “I don’t know, I think I might have a bit to do with it, Pads.”

“A bit,” She conceded with a smile, “Now, we’ll see you later. Best of luck.” The other girls shared similar sentiments as they made their way out of the Great Hall. It left Harry alone without any of his ladies, which was a rare enough thing. Fleur was preparing herself for the task, Daphne was spending time with her sister, Susan was doing the same with Hannah, and Orina and Anya were finishing up their shifts at work.

The Great Hall wasn’t particularly busy, and most of the people that remained followed suit and headed for the doors in short order. Checking the time, he could understand why. The task was meant to start in just under a half hour. Getting up from the table, he turned and made for the door when he swore that he could feel eyes on him.

Turning to the source, he found Draco sitting at the Slytherin table. His suspension had ended just a week prior, and so far, his return had been subdued. He’d been quiet, far quieter than he could ever remember. He was keeping to himself both in class and around the castle. While Pansy had abandoned him after the fallout with his father, now he was even without Crabbe and Goyle.

Draco kept watching him even after he was caught. Holding his eye for a moment, he finally gave him a nod before he went back to his lunch. Feeling utterly perplexed by the interaction, Harry made his way to the door without any further interruption.

The first winter thaw was happening in the highlands. The snow outside in the courtyard was wet and slushy and quickly melting thanks to a gentle rain that was coming down. If they were lucky, it would be the last of the poor winter weather and the beginning of March the following week would mean the beginning of spring, something that nearly everyone in the castle would be looking forward to.

Making his way to the locker rooms, he found them empty. Ivar still hadn't arrived, nor had the upper years. They'd learned from the first task that they had a little bit of leeway before they needed to be ready.

He'd already changed by the time the Dane joined him. Their only acknowledgment of one another was a quick nod of the head. Harry had no idea if either of his competitors had even seen the relief that gave him at least some indication of the task at hand.

The lead up to these events had become second nature to them at this point. They were expected to be there at the appointed time, and then they would be collected, right on the minute, by one of the professors.

The minute hand on the clock in the room just clicked over to one o'clock when the door opened. This time, it was Professor Flitwick that had the duty of retrieving them, "Professor, were outside just waiting for the clock to turn?"

The diminutive professor chuckled, "Of course, Mr. Potter. It's important that we be on time for these sorts of things, you know. There's too many important people here to keep them waiting, or at least that's what I'm told. Now come along." Solen was already in the hall. She glanced in his direction only briefly before pointedly looking away.

He found every interaction with her, particularly since their run-in at the Tomes and Scrolls, more amusing than the last. It must've been tiring for her, pretending like she didn't care what was going on around him only to find her watching him or Fleur when she thought he wasn't looking. *You'd think that such a supposedly smart girl would know when to take a hint.* He was hoping that the dueling final would put an end to whatever idiocy the French girl had in her head.

"Follow me please." The three did as Flitwick asked.

They were at the mouth of the tunnel when they heard Ludo's voice, "Welcome our first three champions of the day!" The roar of the crowd was deafening, but he'd grown used to it after the first task and the dueling tournament. That didn't stop him from casting a subtle deafening charm simply to protect his ear drums.

The outer wall of the arena looked the same as he remembered it, "Miss LeClaire, please take your position. You'll be allowed entrance once your competitors are in place. Mr.

Rasmussen to the left, Mr. Potter to the right. When it opens, please make your way to the pillar in front of you.” The Beauxbaton champion’s entrance was nearest to the tunnel, and it was only then that he noticed a difference from the first task. There were no stairs that led up to the top of the wall.

As they walked around the perimeter of the arena, Ludo addressed the crowd, “It’s hard to forget their exploits from the first exhilarating task of the tournament, but today they’re in for a new challenge. While the first task challenged their bodies, today they will face challenges of their mind and fortitude! But as always, it’s their resourcefulness, ingenuity, and most importantly magic that will see them triumph.”

On the last word the wall in front of him parted smoothly. The arena within had been segmented into thirds, one for each of them same as the first time. The ground was covered in snow and ice, and as he stepped within its confines, it was bitter cold with a biting wind. A quick warming charm kept the cold on his skin at bay, but it didn’t stop the air from nearly freezing his lungs with each breath.

There was a path that led to each of their pillars, and the small circle of stone around them. With each step he took, the path disappeared behind him. When he reached the pillar, he examined it. It was made of solid white stone and stood eight feet tall. It was three sided and capped with a fire that eased the biting cold of the air.

Breathing easier, he had a moment to look around at the crowd. In all fairness to the girls, they had gotten the best spot. They were right in the front of the student section and cheering louder than anyone.

“Without further ado, let the task begin!” The flame above the pillar went out and the cold stung his lungs again.

The crowd screamed their approval, and he heard a loud, “Come on, Harry!” That he was sure came from Sirius somewhere in the arena, but then it just died. Unlike the first class, they could hear nothing of what was going on outside the arena, not even any of Ludo’s commentary.

*Wouldn’t do for us to get hints from what the others are doing I suppose.* Even knowing what the clue said, he hadn’t the faintest idea where to begin. Then he saw something etched into one of the faces of the pillar.

*Three to be done... three to find... only then will you leave this task behind.* Harry ran a hand through his hair in frustration, though it was rather more difficult than normal given the chill. *Great more bloody riddles.*

As he looked out around the arena, there was the pillar, there was ice, and there was snow, nothing more. And the bitter cold was making it hard to even think. *Thank Merlin for strong warming charms otherwise this would be bloody insufferable.*

Then, seemingly from nothing he felt something push hard against the back of his legs. He nearly smashed his face against the stone but managed to catch himself with his hands. Turning quickly, he tried to find any assailant but found nothing. Faintly, he thought he could hear the skittering of something, but the whipping wind made it hard to know for sure.

*“Revelio.”* The spell showed him nothing either. It left him to stare at the expanse of white again, no closer to figuring anything out. *There must be something under the snow.*

Facing away from one of the faces of the pillars, he took a step away from the platform. The snow wasn't deep but there was ice beneath. Stepping back, he let fire pour from the tip of his wand in a jet along the ground. The cone of licking heat melted the snow some thirty meters from the pillar. Snow and ice turned to water in an instant. The terrain beneath it all was uneven ground, which no doubt was meant to make the ice even more tricky. However, there was something else. Another ring of stone.

As he let the spell end, the cold around him seemed to deepen and the winds whipped harder. The water snap froze to ice and the snow was whipped in drifts to cover what work he'd done, except for over the top of the newly revealed stone platform.

Fire poured from his wand again, and just like it had the first time, it melted what snow was between him and the other circle. But this time he held it longer, until the water boiled and vaporized and the ground where it'd been was charred black. He hoped that would be enough to clear the path and keep it that way. But a veritable blizzard formed around just his segment of the arena.

An unnatural amount of snow and wet ice deluged from the sky, and the work he did to clear the path was undone almost as quickly as he'd managed it and now the rest of his area was that much harder to traverse *Alright, that just isn't going to work.*

Pointing his wand at his boots, metal spikes popped out of the bottom. He hoped that they'd help dig into the ice beneath the snow. Taking his first step, he felt them get purchase in the ice. The walk from one circle to the next was quick, but about halfway there, he nearly went tumbling into the snow as there was another nudge against his hip.

Spinning round, again he was frustrated to find nothing there. Though for the briefest of moments, he was sure that he could see prints of some kind forming in the snow only to be covered up by the drifting snow.

He reached the other circular platform without any further interruption. The moment his feet hit the stones a plinth raised from its center with an unlit brazier atop it. Written on the side of it was another set of annoyingly circuitous instructions. *Light the first... and then four more... but you must be quick... or find yourself sore.*

He looked around to see if he could find any of the other four, but there was nothing. Without the first it seemed they wouldn't reveal themselves.

*"Incendio."* The spell was performed silently. As the ball of fire hit the brazier it caught light... and promptly started sinking toward the ground. Thinking quickly, he cast another spell, *"Arresto Momentum."* The plinth slowed but continued its descent.

*Four more.* When he turned to find the others, he found the first one was only twenty meters to his left. Sitting on a pillar a foot taller than he was, he was curious how they'd hidden but more interested in getting it lit, *"Incendio."* His aim was true, lighting the brazier, and just as the first, it started descending to the ground.

And then he heard the grinding of stone behind him, and he realized that the first plinth was beginning to fall faster again. *This is going to be a bloody juggling act, isn't it?*

Another, quite severely overpowered, Slowing Charm, brought the first plinth to a complete standstill. The second was tall enough that he was fairly certain he could simply leave it, but thought it was best not to risk it considering he'd yet to find the other three.

He spotted the third on the other side of the starting pillar and closer to the wall of the arena. It was barely taller than the first, and it appeared as though the brazier was surrounded by crystal. You could still see it within, but there was no way for the fire to reach it. As good as he'd gotten, it would take truly prodigious aim to hit the brazier accurately from so far away, and given the cold, there was some shaking in his fingers.

Running across the snow and ice was no small feat. He nearly tripped just before he reached the starting pillar and he was sure it was whatever invisible friend was stalking him around the arena, *"Confringo. Incendio. Arresto Momentum."* The Blasting Curse shattered the protection around the brazier just before the fire hit it and the plinth started its slow descent.

Looking back to the first, Harry wanted to just blast the stone apart when he saw that it was dropping almost as quickly as it had initially again. Whatever they'd done to design the task, no amount of brute force was enough to overcome it.

Which made it that much more important to find the fourth and fifth quickly. While the first two had been easy enough to find, the last two he simply couldn't spot. He scanned the blanket of snow, expecting something to stand out against the stark white but it just wasn't

there. As if to add insult to his frustration, there was a push against his hip. He stumbled off the starting circle before falling into the snow and went sliding along the ice down into a little valley of the arena.

Funnily, while irritated and freezing, as he climbed back to his feet, he spotted the next brazier. It was in a little gulley, very close to the ground, hidden by everything around it. He assumed that he'd fail once they hit the ground, and it would take that one less than a second if he were to guess. *So that one last, but where's the other.*

As he looked around the arena once more, there was a ticking that started and only got faster. The first plinth was getting closer and closer to the ground, and the third wasn't far behind, and from where he was next to the third there was very little chance he'd manage to slow either of them. Still, he managed to remain calm under pressure when it occurred to him that he was forgetting one cardinal rule... always look up.

The final brazier was hanging in the air nearly fifteen meters above the starting pillar. Just as he took aim, he was knocked yet again. The spell went wide before he even had a chance to aim his next spell down at the last of the braziers on the ground. The ticking ceased as the first plinth reached the ground.

The one at his feet glowed a bright red, and then Harry was knocked off his feet again as a spell crashed into his chest hard enough that he was sure he'd bruise. With the wind knocked from him, and now properly pissed, he wiped the snow off himself and climbed back to his feet.

His second attempt was flawless. He lit the first three braziers from the starting circle, having to break the crystal on the third again, before making his way over to the fourth. Expecting his invisible interloper would attempt to throw him off again, Harry created a wall of ice around himself before he took aim at the fourth brazier. It immediately started falling when the fire hit, but he had plenty of time to turn and light the last.

The five braziers glowed before all but the first sank to the ground. The fire within it disappeared and there was a flash of light as something appeared within. Harry made his way over to it only to find part of a crystal key sitting on top of the plinth. As he grabbed it, the side of the starting pillar that faced the circle glowed with a faint blue light. *That's one down.*

Given that the first was directly out from one of the faces of the starting pillar, Harry made an educated guess and walked roughly the same distance away from the face pointing toward the center of the arena before he melted the snow and ice. As he suspected, there was another stone circle, though this time there was no plinth.

Instead, inlaid into the surface were fifteen large stone squares with an empty space in the top left corner. Each of them was painted, though obviously in a nonsensical order. It was a sliding puzzle, but thanks to the empty space, he could see that every side of the block was painted differently. They'd need to be flipped and slid into the right place.

There was an inscription on the ground just below it. *From Preseli Hills they first were hewn...* Harry stared at it incredulously for a second. *Is that really all there is?*

He was interrupted from his own thoughts by a light at the corner of his eye. The current circle he was standing on put him closest to his competitors as it appeared they were working on their own puzzle. And seeing an opportunity, one of them had decided to take their chances.

Harry was surprised to find that it was Ivar that threw a Stunning Spell his way. The red spell was quick, but he was quicker, and it washed against his shield. Harry's returning stunner forced Ivar to dive into the snow and he had a hard time regaining his footing.

Without the constant reminder of their presence thanks to Ludo, Harry had largely forgotten about his competitors. Since it appeared he'd be spending some time standing in one spot, he only thought it would be reasonable to give himself some protection. A dome of ice formed around him that should hopefully stop any unexpected spells and the invisible creature that was roaming around the arena.

It was still cold within his dome, but it was good to be free of the wind. It made it that much easier to think back, wracking his brain for any memory of Preseli Hills. Without Occlumency, he wasn't sure if he would've managed it. But then he remembered a lecture from second year on Stone Henge. It was an old sight, strong in magic even now. And while the muggles didn't know it, magicals were well aware that the stones originated from western Wales from the Preseli Hills.

The inlaid stones of the sliding puzzle were far too big to move by hand. Liberal application of *Depulso*, *Accio*, and *Flipendo* were more than enough to push, pull and flip the blocks though. He started by finding each of the sarsen stones as they were the easiest thing to identify. Once he was sure that he had them all the right way round, he began moving them into place.

As the last square clicked into place, the empty space had gone from the top left corner to the bottom right. There was a blue glow, and a basin sprung up out of the center of the stone with another piece of the crystal key. It was the teeth, which he slid into the rod portion he'd already acquired.



Taking a breath, he dropped the ice dome and was ready to fire off a spell if needed. He took quick stock of where his fellow champions were at in their tasks and found that neither of them were paying him any mind. Ivar seemed to be working on his sliding puzzle, while Solen was working on the braziers. Whether or not they'd finished the third task already, he had no idea.

He was quite sure that he heard a huff before he was shoved in the back. Harry just let it go as he had a sinking suspicion about what his third task was going to entail.

For a third time, he found the stone circle and melted the snow away. A plinth rose out of the ground with writing on it and a small basin atop it. *It knows what you'll do, even before you... tricky to catch and impossible to see, a single hair you'll need.*

Harry never took Care of Magical Creatures, mostly because of a conflicting schedule. And while he knew that Hagrid would help Professor Kettleburn with the class, particularly if they ever studied any of the more dangerous creatures, that wasn't enough to convince him to take it. However, it paid to be friends with Hermione because it often meant that you had random bits of information stored away that you otherwise never would've encountered.

That was why he was certain that his invisible friend was a Demiguise. Hermione once mentioned that Invisibility Cloaks were made from strands of their hair, and that over time they were known to go opaque. *Which is what makes the Potter family cloak so odd.* Not only could the odd creature turn invisible, but it could also tell the future. *And they're also near impossible to see unless you've been trained for it, to say nothing of capturing them.*

However, most Demiguise weren't likely to be enclosed in a small space as the one that he needed to incapacitate, if only briefly. That gave Harry a far better chance.

The Demiguise had been following him since the moment the task started, that much was obvious, and yet he'd only seen a hint of its paw prints once. That meant there was a good chance that the beast was staying behind either him or the pillar, whenever it could, to remain out of sight

Hoping that emptying his mind with occlumency might help thwart the creature's precognition, he stood there looking almost vacant as first one minute and then another ticked by.

Then he heard them, ever so softly creeping toward him. Quick as a flash, without even looking back, he fired off a brilliant, blinding orb of light right behind him straight-toward the pillar. It was there for only a few seconds before he canceled the spell. Spinning round, he was relieved to see footprints as the Demiguise was struggling to walk.

“*Stupefy*.” The red light dissipated against seemingly nothing, but there was a soft thud and a full body imprint in the snow where it fell.

Making his way over, he pinched a strand of hair between his fingers even as he still couldn’t see it, “*Diffindo*.” He was careful that the Severing Charm didn’t harm the Demiguise. With the strand in hand, he returned to the plinth and placed the hair within the basin.

Another glow of blue, and another piece of the key was his reward. Slotting the end onto the crystal key, he was only confused as to where he was meant to put it. But then, that was the final bit of the task. *For every lock there is a key, though they mightn’t be seen*. It was the lock that he couldn’t see, but he couldn’t fathom how to find it.

The only thing left in the arena was the pillar, and given it was glowing now, it seemed the best place to look. Walking around it, for the life of him he couldn’t see anything new. A Revealing Charm didn’t help either and he felt properly stumped. It was only the fifth time walking around the thing that he finally saw it.

On the face that pointed toward the center of the arena, there was a pinpricked size bit of white in the blue glow. It wasn’t a keyhole, but it was a start. As he placed his wand against the spot, a maze appeared along the smooth stone. At the center of it was the outline of a keyhole that he surmised would only open once he completed the maze.

Taking a moment, he charted the path in his own mind. It had plenty of twists and turns, but when he finally moved his wand, it only took him one try to reach the center and finally the keyhole appeared. Rather more forcefully than necessary, he slid it in and turned. The fire above the starting pillar alighted again, the wall to exit the arena opened, and the path out reformed.

Breathing a blessedly warm sigh of relief, he made his way out. With his first step out of the arena, he could finally hear the cheering of the crowd again and Ludo’s commentary, “And he’s done, yet again, ladies and gentlemen! Winner of the second task, Harry Potter!”

He barely paid the comments any mind as he was just happy to be breathing warm air again. Even with the Warming Charm his hands felt as though they were starting to go numb. Glad to be done with it, he was looking forward to a hot shower.