

Chapter 42

A month into Summer, and Harry, Hermione, Tonks, and Fleur had finally finished going through Dumbledore's memories. It was a long, tedious process that led to a couple of shocking discoveries. Dumbledore was not only friends with Grindelwald, but they had also been lovers until the duel that killed Ariana. He hadn't found the memory of the duel itself, if it existed, but there was enough context in other memories to put together most of what happened.

Unfortunately, while interesting, nothing they found gave them any more insight into Voldemort or the potential locations of his Horcruxes. It was another dead end.

On the bright side, however, the Order had grown significantly. Dozens of Aurors had left the Ministry to join in the fight. The last time he and Tonks had gone to a meeting, Sirius had to enlarge the kitchen to fit everyone in. It was a big morale boost to see so many people willing to fight back after all the setbacks they'd suffered.

Despite that small victory, Harry couldn't help but feel dejected at their lack of progress. They didn't even know where to start looking for the other Horcruxes besides the one Dung possibly stole from Grimmauld Place, and they'd yet to hear anything from Kreacher. Sirius hadn't seen him since the night of the Order meeting.

Late on a Monday evening, after spending another day accomplishing nothing and lounging around the pool, Harry tucked himself in a quiet corner of the library and sat with a book in his lap. He wasn't actually reading it. In fact, he hadn't even looked at the title when he picked it up. He was only using it as cover so the girls didn't think he was brooding.

Thoughts ran through his mind aimlessly, and his shoulders hunched subconsciously, as if their weight was physical. He lost track of how long he'd been sitting there when the sound of wings fluttering softly through the air broke his thoughts. Iffy floated around the corner and beamed when she spotted him. Quickly, she darted back out of sight. Harry furrowed his brow, wondering what that had been about, when she returned a moment later with Amelia in tow.

"There you are," she said, turning to Iffy. "Thank you, dear."

Iffy smiled proudly and fluttered back out of sight, and presumably out of the library. Harry closed the book he hadn't been reading and sat up in his seat with a grimace, only just now noticing how uncomfortable the wooden chair was.

"Did you need something?" he asked.

"Dumbledore's will reading was today, and I need to talk to you about it," Amelia said. "Can you come to the kitchen?"

Harry nodded, set his book aside, and climbed to his feet, wondering what Dumbledore could have left him. Was it something to help in the Horcrux hunt? Maybe a clue for what they should do next?

It didn't seem likely, but he felt a spark of hope growing in his chest as he followed her to the kitchen. Molly, Arthur, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, her parents, Tonks, and Fleur were already there waiting for him.

"Where were you?" Hermione asked as soon as he took the seat between her and Fleur. "We looked all over."

"I was looking up defensive spells in the library," he lied.

Hermione nodded, mollified, and they turned their attention back to Amelia, who stood at the head of the table.

"Earlier today, Hestia Jones attended the will reading for Albus Dumbledore," she said, slipping into a more official tone. "He left bequeathments for Ron, Harry, and Hermione. To Hermione, he left his personal copy of *The Tale of Beetle the Bard*."

Amelia paused and pulled a small, worn black book from the pocket of her robes and handed it to Hermione. She took it gingerly, almost reverently, and stared down at the golden letters adorning the cover.

“How did you get that?” Arthur asked a little incredulously.

“I have a plant in the Minister’s office,” Amelia replied. “He was asked to put them in storage. I expect it’ll be some time, if ever, that anyone finds them missing. Now, to Ronald, Dumbledore left you his Deluminator.”

Reaching back into her pocket, she pulled out what looked like an old, silver cigar lighter and handed it to Ron. It took it, examined it curiously, and clicked the button on the side. All of the lights in the room turned into little balls and were sucked into the tip of the Deluminator, plunging the kitchen into darkness.

“Ronald!” Mrs. Weasley yelled.

“Sorry,” Ron said.

Harry heard a metallic click, and all the lights returned to their places. Ron’s ears were red, and he stared down at the table sheepishly.

“How was I supposed to know that would happen?” he asked helplessly.

“It’s called a Deluminator,” Hermione pointed out. “What did you think it was going to do?”

Ron’s whole face turned red as Tonks snickered.

“And finally,” Amelia interrupted, “to Harry, he left you the Sword of Gryffindor.”

Harry's eyebrows rose in surprise. He looked to Amelia, expecting her to pull the sword out of her pocket. When she didn't, he looked at her in askance.

"The sword is missing," she told him. "No one's seen it since Dumbledore's death."

Harry sighed, slouched back in his seat, and folded his arms over his chest.

"Great," he muttered.

"It's probably at Hogwarts, innit?" Tonks asked.

"Most likely," Amelia nodded.

Briefly, she shared a meaningful look with Harry. It was another point in favor of his idea to take back Hogwarts. They needed that sword to destroy the Horcruxes.

"Well, that was nice of Albus," Molly said. "If that's everything, we should get back to the Burrow. It's getting late."

"You're more than welcome to stay here for the night, Mrs. Weasley," Harry offered.

Molly smiled softly.

"Thank you, dear, but I'd like to sleep in my own bed tonight," she said.

As she and Arthur made for the Floo, Ron and Ginny were allowed to stay by silent agreement. Everyone else slowly drifted back to what they were doing, but before Harry could head back to the library, Amelia placed a hand on his arm and held him back.

"There's one more thing I wanted to talk to you about," she said. "I want you to come up with a detailed plan for infiltrating Hogwarts. I want to know exactly how we're going to get into the castle, who we're taking, when, and how you plan to deal with Snape."

"Me?" Harry asked, surprised.

"It's your idea," she smirked. "Have it ready for the next Order meeting."

Harry nodded dumbly. Amelia smiled, patted him on the shoulder, and left to join Apolline on the couch.

Two days later, Harry had once again entrenched himself in the library, but this time with a purpose. He and Tonks were pouring over the Marauder's Map, planning the exact route they would take once they were inside the castle. Meanwhile, Hermione was reading through *The Tales of Beetle the Bard*, and Fleur was sipping a glass of wine while reading a romance novel that featured a maid and a minotaur on the cover. Harry thought it best not to ask too many questions about the contents.

"What do you think?" Tonks asked.

"We need two teams, at least," Harry said. "One from the east wing through the courtyard, and another one from the west wing from the main staircase. The courtyard is close to the Whomping Willow, but it's a long walk around the castle to the main entrance from there. They'd be better off coming from the One-Eyed Witch statue. It's a floor below, but they're still less likely to be spotted."

Tonks pursed her lips and nodded.

"We'll have to scout out Honeyduke's ahead of time," she noted, "make sure Hogsmeade is clear, but it's a good idea."

"If we can get control of the wards, we'll be set," Harry said, a ball of nervous excitement forming in the pit of his stomach. "Hogwarts is the safest place for Muggleborns to hide, and we need to find that sword."

"Not necessarily," Hermione said, glancing up from her book.

"What do you mean?" he asked, furrowing his brow. "It's the only way we know of to destroy a Horcrux."

"Yes, but why?" she asked expectantly.

"Er, magic?" Harry asked with a shrug.

Hermione huffed and rolled her eyes.

"Well, yes, but I was hoping for something more specific."

"Why don't you just tell us, little Miss Smarty Pants?" Tonks asked.

Marking her place in her book, Hermione set it aside and leaned forward on her arms, fingers clasped together.

"Harry, you destroyed a Horcrux without the sword, remember?"

Harry furrowed his brow in thought for a moment before it hit him.

"Oh, right, the Basilisk," he said.

“Exactly,” she smiled brightly. “And I think that’s why the sword can even destroy them at all. The Sword of Gryffindor is made of Goblin Silver. It only imbides that which makes it stronger. When you used it to kill the Basilisk, you stabbed it through the roof of its mouth, didn’t you? It absorbed the venom. If we can’t find the sword, we can go back to the Chamber of Secrets and retrieve one of the fangs from the Basilisk. They should still have venom in them.”

“Brilliant,” Harry grinned. “That’s a relief. I thought we were done for without the sword. Okay, so if we can’t take control of the wards, we need to go to the Chamber of Secrets and grab a Basilisk fang before we leave.”

Hermione and Tonks nodded before Tonks glanced down at the end of the table at Fleur and rolled her eyes.

“You got anything over there, princess?” she asked.

“Oui,” Fleur smiled over the top of her book. “I found a new position I want to try wiz ‘Arry tonight.”

Before any of them could respond, they were startled by a loud pop. All of them jumped in their seats and reached for their wands.

“Gerroff me!”

Mundungus Fletcher tried and failed to reach the House Elf clinging to his back. Kreacher had his legs wrapped around his chest, one arm around his neck, and the other was cocked back and holding a small, dented copper pot. With a snarl, he swung, and the pot connected sharply with the back of Dung’s bald head.

Clang!

“AHH! You little fucka!” Dung shouted.

He started swinging his body wildly from side to side, trying to shake off Kreacher, but the old Elf clung on tightly. A length of rope shot from the tip of Tonks' wand and wrapped loosely around his feet before it suddenly pulled tight. Dung's legs snapped together. He teetered precariously on the tip of his toes and then slowly fell forward. His short, fat body hit the ground with a thud, but he managed to use his arms to partially break his fall.

Kreacher rode his back all the way to the ground. Slowly, he stood up, raised the pot above his head with both hands, and brought it down on the back of Dung's head with all his might.

Clang!

"AHH! Stop it!" Dung screamed, bringing his hands up to protect the back of his head.

"That's enough, Kreacher," Harry said firmly.

Kreacher froze, the now deformed pot raised above his head. He stared at Harry for a long moment and frowned before he slowly lowered his hands. As he climbed over Dung's back, he brought his heel down sharply on the man's ribs, forcing out a pained grunt.

"Kreacher has brought the thief," he said, glaring down at Mundungus.

"I see," Harry smirked. "Excellent work. Now, let's find out what he knows."

Dung cautiously rolled over and glared at Harry.

"Whatcha send 'im after me for?" he asked, rubbing the back of his head. "You coulda just invited me over."

"No one could find you, you lump," Tonks scoffed.

"I had to hide, didn't I?" Dung asked as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "You saw what happened to Dumbledore."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure you're next on their list," Tonks replied sarcastically. "First Dumbledore, then Harry, and then the bastion of light himself, Mundungus Fletcher."

Dung rolled himself to the side, drew his wand, and aimed it at his feet. Before he could free himself, his wand was wrenched from his hand and landed neatly in Fleur's.

"Oi!" Dung yelled. "Give that back!"

"Not until you answer our questions," Harry said.

With a flick of his wand, he lifted Dung from the floor and tossed him roughly into a chair. Ropes burst from the tip of Hermione's wand and wrapped around him tightly. Dung grimaced and squirmed, but when he realized he wouldn't be getting free, he stopped and glared up at them balefully.

"You took some things from Grimmauld Place," Harry said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Ah, is Sirius mad about that?" he asked. "It wasn't nothin' 'e cared about."

"Then why didn't you just ask him for it?" Hermione asked pointedly.

Dung looked away.

"I still got some of that silverware if he wants it back," he offered.

“Sirius doesn’t care about the silverware, and neither do we,” Harry said. “We’re looking for a necklace like this.”

He pointed to Kreacher, who glared and held up the locket around his neck.

“Ah, that thing?” Dung asked. “I wanted to give that to some pretty young lass I met.”

“You gave it to a hooker?” Tonks asked incredulously.

“Course not,” Dung barked. “That hag from the Ministry took it off me ‘fore I could. Caught me sellin’ things without a license. Said she’d let me off if I gave it to ‘er. Didn’t really have a choice, did I?”

Harry shared a worried look with Tonks.

“What hag from the Ministry?” Tonks asked cautiously.

“What’s ‘er name,” Dung said, his face scrunched up in thought. “Umbitch, or summin’”

“Umbridge?” Hermione gasped. “But she’s in Azkaban.”

“Not anymore,” Dung shrugged. “You-Know-‘Oo let everyone out, didn’t he?”

“Great,” Tonks muttered. “Where can we find her?”

“How should I know?” Dung asked helplessly. “I didn’t go lookin’ for ‘er.”

“Fine,” she said, rolling her eyes.

They all shared a glance, and when none of them spoke up with another question, Harry decided they had everything they were going to get.

"I think that's it," he said. "Kreacher, you can take him back where you found him."

Hermione cut him free of the ropes and Fleur tossed him his wand.

"Now, hold on! That information should be worth summin'."

Before any of them could respond, Kreacher grabbed the sleeve of his robe and they both vanished with a loud pop. Sighing, Harry sat back down in his chair.

"How the hell are we going to get a hold of Umbridge?" he asked.

"We'll need to talk to Bones," Tonks said. "Maybe one of her contacts can get her schedule and we can snatch her up outside the Ministry."

Harry sighed again, took off his glasses, and rubbed his face.

"At least we know where it is," Hermione said.

"I know," he said, replacing his glasses. "I just wish something would be easy for once."

Tonks scoffed.

"Not likely, love," she smirked.

Kreacher returned with a pop, turned to Harry, and bowed.

“Would Master like Kreacher to bring him the Umbitch?” he asked hopefully.

“No,” Hermione said quickly. “It’s too dangerous. We’ll let you know if we need your help, but before you go, can you tell us how you got the locket? Please.”

Kreacher raised his head and looked at Harry as if asking for permission, so he nodded.

“Master Regulus lent Kreacher to the Dark Lord. Kreacher was taken to a dark cave and forced to drink a potion that made Kreacher relive his worst memories. The Dark Lord placed a strange locket in a basin. He ordered Kreacher to return to Master and never speak of what Kreacher saw.”

Kreacher wrung his hands and shuffled his feet, clearly troubled.

“Master was disturbed when he saw how weak Kreacher was, and ordered Kreacher to tell him what happened,” he continued slowly. “Kreacher only obeyed the Dark Lord because Master ordered him to, so Kreacher told Master what had happened. Master ordered Kreacher to show him the cave. Kreacher didn’t want to, but Kreacher obeyed, like a good Elf. Master ordered Kreacher to feed him the potion. Kreacher offered to drink it, but Master said Kreacher was already too weak, so Kreacher fed Master the potion, no matter how much Master cried and begged Kreacher to stop.”

A large tear fell from his right eye down his cheek. Hermione, who looked like she was on the verge of tears herself, reached out to comfort him, but Kreacher recoiled. Glaring, he wiped his face on his pillowcase.

“Kreacher obeyed and fed Master all of the potion,” he croaked. “Kreacher was so proud to retrieve the locket for his Master that Kreacher didn’t notice Master crawling toward the lake until it was too late. Kreacher tried to save Master from the dead, but Kreacher was too weak.

Master ordered Kreacher to destroy the locket, and then the dead dragged Master underwater, and Master was gone.”

He paused and clenched his long, bony fingers into fists so tight they shook.

“Kreacher tried,” he growled. “Kreacher used all the magic he knew, but the locket wouldn’t die. It whispered to Kreacher. Taunted Kreacher. So, Kreacher hid the locket until he could destroy it.”

Pausing again, he slowly lifted his head to look up at Harry, his eyes red and watery, but shimmering with hope.

“Will – will Master promise Kreacher he will destroy the locket?”

Harry slowly knelt down in front of Kreacher and placed a hand lightly on his shoulder.

“I promise I’ll do everything I can,” he said.

Kreacher held his gaze for a long moment before nodding his head and straightening his shoulders.

“Then Kreacher will help Master any way he can.”

Harry smiled and patted his shoulder gently.

“I’m glad to have your help,” he said. “You did a great job bringing us Mundungus. For now, I want you to go rest and make sure you get something good to eat. I’ll let you know when we plan to go after Umbridge. It might take some time, but I promise, I want that locket destroyed just as much as you do.”

Kreacher nodded, took a step back, and Disapparated with a pop.

Over the next few days, they discussed Kreacher's story, looking for any clue that might lead them to the missing Horcrux, but they came up with nothing. They would just have to keep looking.

On Tuesday, Harry, Tonks, Hermione, and Fleur made their way to the Order meeting at Grimmauld Place. So many Aurors had joined in recent days and weeks that most people were forced to stand, even in the expanded space. There were a lot of unfamiliar faces, but Amelia vouched for everyone attending. She'd also assured Harry that everyone had signed a confidentiality agreement. It wasn't foolproof. There were ways to circumvent contracts, but it made everyone feel a little better.

In the first half of the meeting, Amelia and the Aurors talked about the goings-on at the Ministry and the ways they were fighting them. Well, fighting was inaccurate. They had yet to actually cross wands with any Aurors or Snatchers. What they had done was feed the Ministry loads of false information, sending them on wild Niffler chases. At the same time, they had managed to find a way to intercept Snatcher dispatch orders, although Amelia was tight-lipped about how that was accomplished. Most of the Aurors spent their days going from house to house, warning Muggleborns that the Snatchers were coming.

Most of them found a place to stay with friends or family. Some disappeared into the Muggle world, forgoing magic until the war was over, but a few, with nowhere else to go, were staying with Order members with a room to spare.

The biggest concern was that this was only the beginning. The number of Snatchers was swelling daily, and soon, there would be too many to keep ahead of them. Already, the Order was being stretched to its limit. People were worried about their friends, their family, and the tension was starting to build.

"I know, Kingsley," Amelia said, staving off his complaints. "We need better protections, and we have an idea. Harry, would you explain?"

Harry swallowed nervously as everyone's attention turned to him. Some gave him rather skeptical looks. Tonks gripped his thigh under the table in silent support.

"Well, er, obviously the safest place to keep everyone is Hogwarts," he began nervously.

"Yeah, and how do you plan to get through the wards?" someone scoffed from the crowd.

"I don't," he said, feeling angry and offended. "We don't need to. There are two secret entrances into the castle. We know that Snape and the other professors will be having a staff meeting on the third floor on September 1st at 3 o'clock. Tonks and I came up with a plan to send in two teams. One will take the secret passage that leads from the Shrieking Shack to the base of the Whomping Willow. From there, they'll approach from the east wing of the castle. The other team will take the passage in the basement of Honeyduke's. It comes out on the first floor near the main staircase behind the statue of the One-Eyed Witch. They'll approach from the West side of the hallway and trap Snape in the hallway. He'll have nowhere to go, and we can expect at least Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick to help if there's a fight."

None of the people staring at him looked too skeptical now.

"Nice plan, lad," Moody grinned.

"Indeed," Amelia nodded. "We've considered other options, but Hogwarts is the best, as audacious as it might sound. I'll lead the team through the Honeyduke's passage. I know Ambrosius, he'll keep our presence quiet. We'll have to stage our entrance in ones and twos to keep a low profile. Moody, I want you to lead the team through the Shrieking Shack. Take Potter, Tonks, and anyone else you want with you. Pack a sleeping bag. You'll be sneaking in early in the morning and waiting there until it's time to move. The rest of you will hang back until we need you."

"You're sending Potter?" A large, burly Auror with a bushy brown beard that hung down to his stomach asked incredulously.

“Potter knows the castle better than anyone else in this room; he can think on his feet, and he’s fought more Death Eaters than half the people in this room,” Amelia said firmly. “I personally fought alongside him when we rescued the Greengrass ladies, and I trust him with my life. Anyone else have a problem with Potter?”

The burly Auror held up his hands in surrender, and no one else spoke up. Harry felt a swell of gratitude toward Amelia for coming to his defense. She gazed around the room and met everyone’s gaze unwaveringly.

“Good,” she said just as the silence started to become uncomfortable. “Then it’s settled. On September 1st, we take back Hogwarts.”

A cheer filled the kitchen.