

Kinsfire
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Dark Clouds

Chapter 1

Why is it so difficult to understand?

I hate everything and everyone.

Simple.

It really is as simple as that.

*I have been in here for God knows how long now. Long enough that my long awaited facial hair has finally decided to grow. Y'know, it's kind of frightening to realise that **fucking Azkaban** feeds me better than the Dursleys did.*

Speaking of Azkaban, I'm not sure which is worse - Dementors or Aurors. Dementors suck all the happiness out of someone and drive them insane. The Aurors have figured out how to leave me sane, but just as unhappy; they taunt me and make sure I'm aware that no one comes to visit me.

I was apparently tried without being there (I think they call that in absentia) and was found guilty. Since it was a Muggle that I killed, they won't sentence me to death. After all, Muggles aren't important enough to Kiss someone over.

If the situation were repeated, I'm not sure how I'd handle it. Would I wrestle with Vernon and let the pistol go off the way it did? Or would I let him murder me in cold blood? At least if I'd let him kill me, I would be with my parents again and not waiting for Voldemort to realise that I'm here.

Y'know, now that I think about it, if he shows up and offers me a job as his right hand man, I just might consider it. Not like any of the people I thought of as friends are worth the title. Turned their fucking backs on me. No one has even come by to tell me how disappointed they are that I so obviously turned my back on the side of Light or some such bullshit.

Assholes.

I look forward to the day one of them decides to show up to 'tsk' at me. I think they'll be disappointed with the choice of language that I use on them. I figure that I'll have to go on for a good, long while before I can get one of them to attack me.

I expect it'll be Ron. If I'm nasty enough, maybe I can get one of the girls to cry. Have to time that one out, I think; see how long it takes to get one of them to break into tears or whether they'll attack me.

Hmm, I think I hear footsteps coming down the hallway. Must be Aurors coming to torture me again. They like coming in and beating me or just generally taunting me. It usually involves some form of humiliating beating. That's why I'm currently sitting on cold stone with my blankets wrapped around me - yesterday they decided to break me by taking all my clothes. I don't know what time of year it is, but it's fucking cold in here. They probably realised they forgot to take the blankets, too..

Well, well, well. It's good, old Kingsley Shacklebolt, the scariest Auror in existence. Oh, this should be good - he's already furious.

"Just shut the fuck up, right now. You people gave up any rights on being angry with me when you abandoned me to Azkaban, so you can take that righteous fury of yours and just shove it up your ass. I don't want to hear any of your self-righteous prattle about how fucking disappointed you all are in my choices. If I hear you even say a word, I'll find a way through this door, rip out your liver, and eat it."

He's staggering back from the doorway. Good; he's afraid of me. "That's better. You and your precious friends abandoned me to Azkaban, so I can think of nothing you could tell me that would make me want to listen to you."

"Harry, I've come to release you."

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Chapter 2

Kingsley Shacklebolt was not expecting the door to the cell to explode outward, and it was only his Auror training that saved him from being crushed.

"You vile, disgusting bastard!" a hoarse voice yelled from inside. "What's the reason? Realising you're losing the war and now you need your fucking weapon? Do you really think that I'm going to leave this cell just so that your pet Aurors can get away with killing me? You actually think that after I was tried without *any* chance to defend myself, that I would be willing to trust *anyone* in the wizarding world? Especially you things that pretended to be my friends!" The voice stopped yelling for a moment, then resumed in a calmer, but world-weary tone. "Just pick up your self-righteous ass and carry it out of this prison. Let the Aurors get back to their games."

"Harry -" Kingsley began.

"Not that I can stop you from doing it, but I would prefer that you not use my name. The only ones who I'll allow to use it aren't alive anymore, and I'm not in any hurry to join them. Now get the fuck out of here and let the one who is 'obviously' my Lord and Master show up to take me," he finished sarcastically.

Kingsley blanched at that declaration. He could hear the sarcasm lacing the statement, but the fear that the young man had decided to join Voldemort was still a worry. He hoped that it was a particularly small worry.

He pulled his wand and watched as Harry shifted into a defensive pose and dropped the potentially entangling blanket. "You're going to earn it, Shacklebolt," he said, diving into the single corner of the room which was not in direct view from the doorway. "I'm not leaving this cell just to be killed for 'trying to escape.'"

Kingsley shook his head. When they had everything that they needed, someone was going to pay, if only for the annoyance of forcing him to fight someone who seemed to have an instinctive understanding of combat. *Either that, or the Death Eaters are even stupider than anyone imagined.*

He chuckled to himself as he had a sudden idea. He created a very small mirror in the room, against the far wall, and then manoeuvred it to show Harry, who was crouched in his corner, ready to attack with his bare hands and raw magic. He raised his wand to eye level and fired off a Stunner.

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Harry awakened an unknown time later, feeling warmer than when he had been in his cell. He could hear people nearby and worked hard to still appear to be unconscious. *Okay, they must really need me for something if they broke me out of Azkaban.* He listened carefully and realised that he was likely at the Burrow, what with the way that sounds bounced through the helter-skelter home. The door seemed to be closed, and he couldn't hear anyone in the room with him. He cautiously opened an eye and found himself looking at bushy brown hair. She appeared to be dozing in her chair, a book in her lap.

He thought for a while about what he might do. The room was silent, and it seemed to be dark outside. *If I can get a wand, I bet I can get a good distance away from here. I've got Hermione here, and I used to be able to use her wand.*

Where the fuck am I going to go to get a new one of my own? Even if Ollivander's was still open, I don't exactly trust that creepy old man. Knockturn, then. Damn, I need to get to Gringotts at least, for money. Crap, crap, crap. I'll figure out later how to do that. First, I need to get out of the Burrow.

He carefully sat up and felt for his glasses, which were sitting on the table next to the bed. He raised an intrigued eyebrow in response to their stupidity in leaving them where he could get at them so easily, and then stood and began to sneak around behind Hermione, working carefully to make no noise. He stopped when she moved slightly but realised that she was merely shifting in her sleep. He looked for her wand and then leaned over her to see if it was in her lap. He was impressed by the view of her cleavage that this angle afforded him, especially when he realised that he could see the handle of her wand between her breasts. *What the hell is she doing storing it there? It doesn't make it easier to get at, except for me.* He reached for it and pulled it out quickly, silently casting, "*Silencio*," as it slid free of her brassiere. She started awake and turned to find Harry looking at her with a sneer on his face for only a moment before a red beam sent her back into unconsciousness.

He looked about the room and realised that he had to be in Percy's old room. The window out afforded him the same view of the grounds that the view from the kitchen did, but from higher up, so he knew precisely where he was, and the greenery he saw in the light shed from the kitchen windows made him think it was late spring to early summer. He cast another Silencing Charm, just in case, and opened the window. He burgled Percy's room for some clothes that he Transfigured to fit and then cast a Cushioning Charm on the ground below before jumping.

He hit with a thump and rolled to his feet quickly. He looked at Hermione's wand and thought for a long moment after realising that no one had seen him drop from Percy's room. *There are probably tracking charms on this thing, just in case. Part of me wants to snap it and leave it behind, but I think I'll just drop it. The little bitch is really the only one with any hopes of locating me, and she's pretty solidly thrown herself into the wizarding world. Given her fuck buddy, I'm not surprised.*

He thought for a bit after he dropped her wand and headed for the woods. *I'm pretty much screwed, no matter how you look at it. I'm not going to be used by the Order and those pricks, I'm wanted for murder in the Muggle world, and the same goes for the wizarding world. I need to work something out, because I'm eventually going down. I know that. I just want to figure out how to take as many of them with me when I go. Scrimgeour, if only because he gloated so much about getting me into Azkaban. I'd love to take out the Aurors who enjoyed breaking my bones, but that's not likely.*

He ran for a short time in silence. *I want revenge. If I'm going down, I at least want to make sure that Aunt Horse-face and Cousin Fatso go down first. Now I need to get to Surrey from here. If I'm going down for murder, then I'm fucking well going to do the crime before I get executed for it.*

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He finally made it to the road as the sun was beginning to peek over the horizon. Looking up and down the street, he realised he was mere yards from the tiny village of Ottery St. Catchpole. He skirted the edge of the town but quickly realised that he was going to need to go into the town to learn the direction to Little Whinging. He'd only travelled between Little Whinging and the Burrow by magical means before, and had no idea how to get back to Surrey the Muggle way.

What the hell kind of excuse am I going to use to convince them that I should be helped? I don't want to hurt any of these people. They have no idea what happened and can only trust what the Muggle papers told them. To be honest, I really have to allow the same for the wizarding world, by and large.

I just want my betrayers to pay. He took a deep breath and stepped into the town, waiting for it to wake up.

It wasn't more than half an hour before someone came by in an older model truck, slowing down next to him. "Hey there, young man," said a man who looked old enough to have taught Dumbledore's grandfather. "You look lost."

Harry's mind worked fast as he put the finishing touches on a story he'd spent the last thirty minutes working on. "I am. Some ... 'friends' played a prank on me. I fell asleep in the back of their car and they dumped me, without my wallet or anything. I woke up a little while ago near here and wandered into town."

"You're a pretty sound sleeper if you didn't wake up when they got you out of the car," said the old man.

Harry winced and tried to look shamefaced. "Well, er, there might have been some alcohol involved."

The old man nodded. "I had a night or two like that myself when I was your age. Learn something from the experience?"

"Most definitely, sir. Now I need to find my way back to Little Whinging, in Surrey." He paused. "Assuming they didn't just drive me around for a while and drop me outside town, but this doesn't look like Surrey."

"No, son, you're in Ottery St. Catchpole in Devonshire. You're quite a long way from Surrey. Climb on up in here, and I'll see what I can do for you."

Harry blinked and found himself holding back tears. *Doesn't even know me, and he's helping me, even if it's just being nice.* He climbed up into the cab and rode with the man for a very short time, until they reached the petrol station.

The unnamed driver spoke to an equally old man sitting beside the front door of the station. "Daniel, could you let Cecil know that I won't be able to help him out today? I've got to help this young man get home. Some folks dropped him out here as a prank, and I'm certain that they left him without any money."

"Certainly, Charles. He'll understand."

Harry realised that the only word that fit his attitude right now was 'gobsmacked'. *A man I've never met is helping me return to Surrey.*

Charles filled the petrol tank on his truck and pulled away from the tanks with a jaunty wave at the proprietor. They were quickly driving down the road outside of town and headed for the nearest train station.

"I don't know when I'll be able to pay you back, sir," Harry said as they reached the station.

"Don't worry about it," Charles said, handing him the train ticket. "I've been in your shoes before, and the kindness of a stranger helped me. Just help some stranger yourself someday."

Harry nodded at the idea. "I will," he said.

As he settled into the cabin on the train back to Surrey, he found himself thinking, *Why did Kingsley want me free from Azkaban? Are the Aurors taking too many losses from Tom, and they need me to kill him off once and for all? Why couldn't I have met people like Charles earlier in life? He's the type of person I could be friends with, not those traitorous bastards that I left back at the Burrow.*

'You're like a son to us, Harry,' he sneered to himself. Screw you, Molly! If I was such a son to you, then why in hell didn't you visit me? Why did you trust the Ministry's take on this?

His eyes narrowed as he thought more. *I was told that the only way I was leaving Azkaban was as potions ingredients, so something has happened. When did someone decide that it was my time to face Riddle? I expect that they're hoping for a mutual take-down, so that they can get rid of two problems at the same time.*

Well, I'll be a problem all right. I'll make them earn they're damned kill. I'll kill Riddle for people like Charles, but I am not going down easily when the Aurors make their play for me. They'll find that Harry Potter has gone quietly for the last time.

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Chapter 3

After a meal paid for by Charles and a very long and annoying train ride with several transfers, Harry finally arrived in Little Whinging. He made his way to Number Four Privet Drive and put on a rather nasty smile as he contemplated what was to come. He knocked.

And waited.

And waited.

Finally, after several minutes had passed, he scowled and looked for the rock that they always hid a key under. Digging for it slightly, he pulled out and cleaned off the key in question. He then unlocked and opened the front door to find a dark and empty household.

He flicked on a light and walked deeper into the house. Looking down, he realised that Petunia had finally replaced that damned carpet that she was always making him scrub by hand. Given what had been staining it when he'd last seen this house, he wasn't terribly surprised that there was a brilliant white carpet in the place where blood had last been staining the floor.

He headed up the stairs to check Dudley's second bedroom. *I really need to get to Gringott's soon, but I want to make sure that everything was removed. Then I can just get rid of my frustrations on the place.* He popped open the door in a manner he'd always wanted to – he kicked it. The door slammed open, and he was surprised to see dust rising in swirls. He walked over to his desk and blew the dust away, surprised to be blowing dead spiders away as well, the dust had gotten so thick. He was utterly astonished to find his wand still sitting on his desk, and his trunk in the corner.

Why is this stuff still here? Why didn't anyone take it with them? Maybe they figured I really did want to murder the fat bastard and washed their hands of me immediately. Unbidden, his mind went back to the last day of real freedom he'd had.

He'd been working carefully on what homework that he could when he heard Vernon explode into the house. "BOY!!!" he bellowed, and Harry sighed.

Wonder what idiocy he's blaming on me now? Maybe he got rained on coming home? Harry stood and trudged to the door, opening it and walking out to be faced by Vernon, the most interesting shade of puce that Harry had ever seen.

"I am tired of it: you and your freakishness! You had something to do with it, I'm sure of it! I've had enough, and I'm putting an end to it!" With that statement, Harry suddenly found himself facing down something that the phrase 'hand cannon' could be used to describe. He ducked as the first explosion burst past his ear, and his hearing was abruptly replaced with a high pitched squeal. He thought about running and diving out his window, but he realised that all it would do would make it easier for Vernon to shoot him, this time in the back. He had only one real chance, so he began to wrestle with Vernon and they somehow reached the top of the stairs.

He was never sure how, but there was another explosion and suddenly Vernon was putting all his considerable weight upon Harry. Harry tried to hold him up to get out from beneath him, but Vernon's weight was too great. The both fell helter-skelter down the stairwell and ended up in a heap on the floor below. Harry lost consciousness as he felt something crack in his chest.

He awoke in a hospital with four policemen around him. Unlike the usual police Harry had seen, these men were all armed. "What's happened?" he asked quietly as he sat up in the bed.

"Your uncle is dead, and you'll be held on suspicion of murder once the doctor clears you to be released," was the only response he received.

He sat back heavily. *But I ... he had the gun, and ... oh my God ...*

It was an hour later when they came into his room with a wheelchair and prison clothes, since they'd cut his old clothing off of him.

What followed was a blur - them questioning him about his uncle's death and confronting him with the fact that it was Vernon that had the fatal wound - the only wounds that Harry had were from falling down the stairs after Vernon was shot.

It was then that he snarled out, "I'm betting that Aunt Petunia and Duddikins are saying that I bought the gun and waited for Vernon to come home, or some such crap."

The detectives shared a look and then leaned forward. "Exactly, Mister Potter. Mind telling us how you know exactly what their story is?"

"Why should I? You already have your minds made up. I'm an inmate at the St. Brutus school, aren't I? I'm the one who keeps beating up children and trying to blame it on poor Piers Polkiss and those wonderful upstanding boys. Right? That's what Aunt Petunia told you?"

"Fuck it, and fuck you. I'm guilty. Does that make you happy? It's what everyone wants to hear. You have a nice, solved case, I can go to prison like everyone wants, and Petunia can collect Vernon's life insurance. Give me the confession, and I'll sign it." He continued yelling in uncontained rage. "Got any other unsolved crimes? I'll plead guilty to those too! Petunia will certainly tell you that I did them, and that's all anyone needs!" He calmed down somewhat. "Just give me the damned confession and I'll sign it. I'm used to this by now."

He was stared at for a long moment by both detectives. Finally, one of them spoke up. "Let's talk again tomorrow, Mister Potter. In the mood you're in right now, you'd sign a confession saying you'd murdered Queen Elizabeth, even though she's alive and well. We'll give you some time to calm

down and talk again later." He was led back to his cell in the local lock-up, where he lay down and somehow drifted off to sleep.

He was awakened a short time later by two men coming into his cell. "Mister Potter? We're here to move you to a more secure facility."

"Not that I'm arguing, but why would I need a more secure facility?"

"You-Know-Who can find you much easier in here."

He blinked at them. "So the Ministry is jumping in to protect me?"

"You could say that. We've already gotten everything taken care of. Just take hold of this Portkey, and we'll be leaving." Harry touched it, and the familiar 'hook behind the navel' feeling gripped him.

He arrived in the secure ward at St. Mungo's. "You'll be held here to heal while the Muggles work out their case," one of the Aurors said, "and then we'll work from there as to your disposition."

"Okay," he said quietly as he lay down.

The next few days were a blur of boredom and pain as they worked on his broken bones and bruises. He'd been held for roughly a week when the same two Aurors came in and grabbed him roughly. "Well, Mister Potter, it's time to go to your new home."

"What?" was all he had time to ask before the Portkey that he had been handed dropped him on the shore of the North Sea. He was roughly grabbed by the Aurors there and shoved into a boat. Before he knew it, he was a prisoner in Azkaban.

Scrimgeour visited him about a week later. "Well, Potter, even your fame can't help you now. You were tried *in absentia* for the murder of your uncle and found guilty. The Muggles gave you the death penalty, but we talked them down to life imprisonment in Azkaban. You're here for life, boy, and out of my hair for good. We can prosecute this war the way it's supposed to be done. Not so much fun being Dumbledore's man now, is it?"

Knowing he had nothing to lose, Harry said, "So that's why I'm here. You'll find a reason to kill me at some point, I'm sure. I wouldn't help consolidate your power, so you need me out of the way." He found himself backhanded for that comment.

"I'd watch my tongue, boy. You're in here for the rest of your life. You get too far out of line, and I'll give the authorisation to push you through the Veil." Harry simply scowled at the Minister, who grinned evilly at him. "Well, I have my office and my home to return to. Enjoy the rest of your life, Potter."

Except for the occasional beatings from the Aurors who kept an eye on him, he had no real contact except for those rare occasions when Scrimgeour would come by to gloat and tell him how his supposed friends had turned on him and testified against him when they decided to put him on trial in the wizarding world, both for his uncle's murder and for attempting to foment hysteria. He had protested, but they had simply informed him with no gloating. He was forced to eventually accept it. His days blended into each other, until the day Shackbolt arrived.

He came to himself again, still staring at his trunk in the corner. *Well, they'll learn. They abandoned me.* He walked to the front door and opened it to find a group of ten people in Auror robes spread across the lawn.

Well, either there are tracking charms all over me, or they've been monitoring the place. Knew I should have hit Gringott's first. Oh well, time to piss off some people, since I'm not making it out of this one in good condition.

"Ah! I was wondering where you assholes were!" His eyes fell on one of his most frequent torturers and breaker of bones during his stint in Azkaban. "Time for some fun!" He raised his wand and let his anger fuel the Bone Shattering Curse, which erupted from his wand with enough force to actually move him backwards slightly. The beam screamed soundlessly toward the Auror and blew through the man's shield, striking him solidly in the groin. *Huh, I wasn't aware you could scream so loudly while inhaling.* He fired off several more spells, mostly stunners, as he backed into the house.

He heard someone Apparate six feet behind him and spun to Banish them. They struck the wall hard enough that plaster and bone broke. There was a brief lull in the battle, which he used to pick up the broken Auror and get behind them. As the remaining eight Aurors came into the household by various means, they were disturbed to find one of their own being used as a shield.

"Shoot him," the injured Auror croaked. "Take him down. Take me out if you have to."

"Very noble of you," Harry growled. "At least it would be if the Aurors weren't torturing bastards to start with. You just realise that you get to win yourself an Order of Merlin for bringing in the psychotic Harry Potter, even if it might be posthumously?" He stuck the point of his wand literally into the Auror's ear. "Do you people really think I care? All I know is that if I go back there, all I have to expect is a lifetime of broken bones, cuts, and bruises that take forever to heal. So I'm not going back. And you guys can't kill me - I was the fucking 'Chosen One'. Might want to think twice about pushing me through the Veil or finding a Dementor or hitting me with the Killing Curse or whatever you do to execute pesky innocent men." He scowled. "Oh, sorry, I forgot. I was found guilty *in absentia*. Forget I said that." He smiled an evil smile. "So, how do we deal with the standoff? I'm already a wanted man for the murder of Vernon Dursley. Do you really think I'm averse to the idea of actually *earning* my sentence for murder?"

"Put the wand down and we can talk about it, Mister Potter," a female Auror said. "There are still eight of us to one of you. We'll win in the long run, and we don't want you dead."

"Of course not. Then you lose your plaything," he snarled back at her.

I honestly have no idea what you're talking about. No matter what, you're looking at some time for assaulting the Aurors that you have. Is there any way of convincing you to let Dave free and keep the time you'll have to serve down?"

"What do you figure they'll add to my sentence?" he asked quietly. "Five or ten years?"

She nodded at him.

"So after I've died in prison, they'll resurrect me and force me to serve another ten years? *I'm already serving a life sentence, you stupid bint! What's another ten years? What's another fifty?*" He raised his wand again. "So, what should I cast, a simple 'Stupefy'? Maybe a 'Quirritatio'?"

Everyone winced at the thought of the Shouting Curse being cast in someone's ear, especially when the sound could be heard a mile away when simply cast into the air and would injure those in close proximity. It would be a particularly nasty way to kill the man.

"I could cast the Blasting Curse!" he said with a voice that sarcastically mimicked happiness.

"Why are you so hell-bent on hurting him? He has a family and children."

Harry looked at her and started to respond but then saw something from the corner of his eye. The man in his arms was crying. It was not fear, Harry could tell, but the thought that he might never see his family again. He slumped, let go of his hostage, and let his hands drop to his sides. "Go ahead. I won't do to them what Riddle did to me." He looked up and saw an Auror snarling at him and made no effort to move as the Bludgeoning Curse that struck his head took his consciousness.

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Chapter 4

He awoke to find himself in St. Mungo's, shackled to a bed. He was surprised that he didn't hurt more, considering what had been used to bring him down. One of the people at the foot of his bed immediately stepped out of the room, and no more than two minutes later, Kingsley Shacklebolt and a woman whose posture screamed Auror entered.

"And who might you be? Chief Torturer or Head Doctor to make sure that I don't get too badly hurt during your games?"

"Why do you have such hatred for us?" she asked. "According to Auror Shacklebolt, you wanted to be an Auror while you were at Hogwarts."

"Well, that's pretty well fucked now, wouldn't you say?" snarled Harry, stressing the word 'fucked'. "Not being able to finish Hogwarts gives one problems with such lofty career plans, and life imprisonment in Azkaban makes it a tad difficult to get to my training classes, I'd think. Let's not forget that I'd probably fail out of the mandatory Torture and Abuse of Prisoners classes required for all Aurors."

"Where is all this anger coming from?" Shacklebolt asked in bewilderment.

Harry glared at the man. "Hmm, you come to *Azkaban* to take me from my cell, stun me just to make sure I don't break your fucking neck as you so richly deserve for abandoning me to that hell-hole without making any effort to find out if I was even guilty, and you wonder why I'm *angry*?" Harry yelled. "Scrimgeour shows up regularly to taunt me about how the wizarding world hates me again, showing once again that the wizarding world let their newspapers do their thinking for them, and all my so-called friends immediately accept that what the Ministry says is true. I'd have thought that at least one of them would trust that I wouldn't murder Vernon Dursley no matter how much the fat fucker deserved it, but not even that bushy-haired cunt thought that something was out of line. I have rotted in that God forsaken prison for about a year because witches and wizards are too fucking stupid to think for themselves, and you wonder where this anger is coming from? You pull me from that pit to do your dirty work before throwing me back in, and you wonder why I'd gladly kill you, Shacklebolt?"

The woman looked at him for a very long time. "We'll deal with the rest of your complaints at a later time," she finally said. "'Life imprisonment', you said. When was your trial?"

"How the fuck should I know, you stupid bimbo?" he yelled at her. "I was tried *in absentia* in both the Muggle and wizarding courts and found guilty. As you well know, I might add. I've been in Azkaban for about a year, though, so that should narrow it down. I was given a sentence of life in prison with no possibility of parole, and that's because the man I supposedly murdered was only a Muggle, so it wasn't like I killed anyone human. The only thing that kept me even remotely sane in that shithole was my desire to see Tom dead, preferably with as many of you dead as I can manage."

"For your information, Muggle courts don't *do* trials *in absentia*. And their system is so slow, if you'd been charged with murder, you'd still be awaiting trial. Who told you you'd been tried in a Muggle court?" Shacklebolt asked in confusion. "We've looked for you for this last year and only ever saw the arrest and later the escape notices in the newspapers." His look went hard. "And we only found those because someone you owe a major apology to found the references. I believe you just called her a 'bushy-haired cunt'?"

Harry sneered. "You guys are good, I'll give you that much. Trying to pretend that you know nothing about the situation, hoping that I'll believe you, and then when I finally fulfil that fucking prophecy of Trelawney's, you'll trot out that old case and throw me right back in so that Scrimgeour can be the fucking hero of the Ministry. Go ahead, try to convince me that all my old friends really trusted me the whole time before they stab me in the God damned back again when everything is done." He sat up as best he could in the bed, noting that while he hurt, it certainly wasn't enough to keep him in the bed. "If they loved me so much, then where the fuck were they when it came to visiting me? The only visitor I ever had, other than your friendly neighbourhood Aurors, was Rufus Scumgouger, so that tells me that visitors were allowed."

"We didn't even know where you were, you little arsehole!" Shacklebolt yelled, finally fed up with the verbal abuse he didn't feel he deserved. "With the furore around the happenings at Privet Drive, we didn't know where you'd disappeared to!"

"A likely story," Harry snorted. "You guys are pretty well trained in all sorts of techniques to break a guy down. Very few Aurors are worth anything, though. You've mostly got lapdogs like Dawlish who follow anyone with some power. I remember that little altercation you all had in Dumbledore's office. Did you ever get in trouble for helping a fugitive escape, Shacklebolt?" He paused only long enough to take a breath. "I guess the most vicious ones are sent to Azkaban to beat up on the prisoners, though. I must compliment the Auror division on their excellent technique. I hadn't known that sandbags on the back before beating someone with a truncheon will prevent bruising. Did one of your people discover that by accident, or was it in higher level Auror training?" He paused again for a moment of thought. "Why all the questions? Did my case get handed to a new department? Are you the new Head Abuse Agent or something?" He aimed that last at the woman that had accompanied Shacklebolt.

Shacklebolt growled. "She happens to be my superior, Senior Auror and head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Connie Hammer. You know, the one who took over for Madam Bones when she was killed?"

Harry laughed with no humour. "So it *is* the entire Auror department involved in this." He sighed. "What do you want out of me?"

The woman scowled. "Can you tell me what happened a year ago, please? Assume that I know nothing about the situation, and that I had nothing to do with your incarceration. That's true, but I doubt you'll believe it right now."

He looked at her for a long moment before he sighed again. "Okay, I'll play your game, Director Hammer. My uncle, Vernon Dursley, came home screaming louder than usual about something being my fault. Never did find out what I'd supposedly done this time. Came up the stairs and pulled out this huge handgun and aimed it at me. Fired at me once and pretty much deafened me for a while. We fought, and at the top of the stairs, the gun went off again. He fell down on me and we both went down the stairs. I woke up in a Muggle hospital, under guard. I was questioned after I'd

healed a bit and informed that my aunt and I were going to testify against me for bringing the gun into the house and killing my uncle. They took me off to what they called a holding cell. That night, two Aurors came in and removed me to Azkaban, where I've lived ever since. Not much to it."

"How did you find out about the life imprisonment?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Remember my telling you that my only visitor was Scrimgeour? He's the one that told me about being convicted in the Muggle world, and about how the Ministry was trying me for murder as well."

Hammer's face went blank, as if it had been suddenly replaced with a mask of steel. "Wonderful. We got rid of Fudge, who liked to throw people in prison without a trial, and now we have Scrimgeour, who apparently likes to throw his enemies into prison without a crime. And we can't even begin to prove it."

Harry's eyes blazed. "What do you mean, 'without a crime'?" he asked coldly.

"Just that, Potter," Shacklebolt responded. "From our point of view, you simply disappeared in early July of last year. First the Order, and then a number of other sources have been trying to locate you ever since."

Harry stared at them for a very long moment. "You realise that I have no reason to believe you. I've spent a year being beaten and tortured by Aurors in the Ministry of Magic's main prison. Everything that Scrimgeour told me fits perfectly with the way that the wizarding world has treated me since the day I joined it. Hell, the way the *entire* world has treated me. No one ever noticed the lousy clothes that I wore. No one ever asked after the bruises and such. For as long as I can remember, I've been referred to as a student at the St. Brutus School for Incurably Criminal Boys. Then I went to Hogwarts and became alternately the Saviour and the Dangerous Psychotic." He paused for only a moment. "Well, it fits the pattern. My sixth year was me being 'The Chosen One'. This last year was obviously time for me to be the Dangerous Psycho again. Now you guys need me for something again, so 'The Chosen One' is being trotted out again. Or is that being pulled out of his hole?" He shrugged as best he could. "Tell you what, though. Point me where you need me to go, and I'll make sure that I earn Azkaban afterwards, okay?"

Both Aurors looked at him with worry. "What do you mean by that?" Director Hammer asked.

"Simple. Assuming that you're telling me the truth, which I seriously doubt at the moment, that means that I'll want to hunt down and kill Scrimgeour for doing what he did to me. For the taunting he put me through, lording over me his position while I was in that cell - well, killing him sounds like a good idea anyway."

"You can't -" Shacklebolt began.

"Fuck you," Harry snarled, his temporary calm shattered in an instant. "I spent a year in that prison for the crime of being a victim yet again, and you have the audacity to tell me that I can't do something like that? Do you really think I fucking care? If it weren't for the fact that there are a handful of Muggles out there that are nice guys, I'd just as soon leave England and Europe to Riddle, and let all of you die like you deserve." He paused. "Since I'm your weapon of choice, can I assume that the Horcruxes have at least been found and destroyed?"

"Who was using Horcruxes?" Hammer gasped.

"Why must you insult my intelligence?" Harry asked with a growl. "You know damned well who's psychotic enough to do that! You think that wouldn't be the method he'd come up with to be immortal? It gives him his jollies to commit the murders and to know that he can use them to stay immortal." He scowled at the pair of Aurors.

"Yes, they have been found and destroyed," Shacklebolt said, drawing a sharp look from his boss. "In between times trying to locate you, Granger and a surprisingly large number of Weasleys went looking for them. Led to an interesting row between the youngest one and Molly."

Harry actually smiled at that thought. "Ginny always was something of a firebrand. Did anyone record it? You'd make a fortune selling it."

Any possible humour of the moment evaporated when a certain man with a leonine appearance arrived at the doorway. "Director Hammer, I was told you were here. May I speak with you and Auror Shacklebolt for a moment?"

Shacklebolt scowled for a moment before smoothing out his clothing. He clapped Harry on the shoulder and said, "I'll be back at some point to talk with you some more. Keep an *ear* out for things, all right?" The large black man left the room, and Harry looked at the shoulder that he'd just clapped.

There was a flesh coloured ball of string there, and Harry immediately got what he meant. He stuffed the Extendable Ear into his own and motioned the other end to the door. It was at the door jamb moments later.

"... without speaking to my office first," Scrimgeour was saying softly. There was a tone of warning in his voice.

"I didn't think we had to run every missing persons case across your desk, Minister," Hammer replied neutrally.

"Yes, but this is the Boy-Who-Lived," Scrimgeour said back, the warning tone gone.

"He hates that title," Shacklebolt said.

"He needs to learn to live with it. It can open a lot of doors for him, if he knows how to use it."

"Be that as it may be," Hammer said, "I've heard a rather disturbing story from that young man in there. He reports that he was taken from a Muggle holding cell into custody at Azkaban and told that he was tried *in absentia* in both the Muggle and Wizard worlds. You were his only visitor,

according to him."

"...and I undoubtedly taunted him and told him that things would be different if he worked with me." Harry couldn't see it, but the pause just seemed to hint that the man was shaking his head. "It sounds as if he's cracked under the pressures of being the Chosen One. Our last conversation had been less than pleasant, I must admit, and he told me that he was Dumbledore's man, through and through. Whatever made him crack caused him to fixate on that, I'd wager."

"Then it would probably be a good idea to consider moving him to the long term care ward here when he's healed up," Shacklebolt said.

"Any idea when that will be?" Scrimgeour asked.

"I asked the Healers before going in to talk to him," Shacklebolt answered, "and they think that it will be three to four days before they'll be willing to release him. If he's staying here, then I'd recommend letting them have their say and keep him here."

"Very well, Auror Shacklebolt," said Scrimgeour. "Just make sure that he's guarded well. Director Hammer, may I speak with you for a minute?"

"I'll head back inside, Minister," Shacklebolt said and then made good on his statement by entering the room and closing the door behind him. His face was a mask of rage. Whispering, he said to Harry, "I'll swear a binding magical oath to let you hospitalise me if you want to, but just promise me that when you eventually go after Scrimgeour, you let me help." Shacklebolt was nearly vibrating, he was so angry.

Harry's eyebrows rose. "Huh, so maybe you were telling the truth," he finally said. "Can I assume that your little decision to get me put in the long term care ward was simply an excuse to help me get out from under Scumgripper's thumb?"

Shacklebolt snorted softly. "Officially, no." The look the large black man was giving him, however, told the truth. "Also, you're actually to be released tomorrow, rather than in three or four days. I'd recommend that you find somewhere to hole up for a short while." He scowled. "The problem is figuring out where that might be. I'd offer an Auror safe house, but with the attitude toward us that Scrimgeour managed to instil, that one's right out. You ran from the Weasleys once already, so I doubt that you'll be willing to stay there now."

"That's a safe bet. I can't go back to Privet Drive, because too many know about it."

"That and the fact that Petunia still lives there. Well, after simple Muggle forensics showed that it had been Vernon carrying the gun, they had another conversation about the day he died. A rather long one, I understand. Dudley was a little surprised to discover that people were suddenly willing to come forward about his crimes, so he's currently doing about fifteen years for several robberies that he forced others to do. Petunia had insisted on her story to the end, so she was hit with a charge of perjury, and she's scrambling to stay out of jail herself. She's got the house up for sale to pay for her own trial defense, as well as all of Dudley's appeals. As it currently stands, the taxes are about to cause Number 4 to go up for sale."

Harry grinned. "If I'm not actually a criminal, then I think I'm going to want to purchase the place. I think it would give her a surprise to come back and discover that all the locks have been changed, and she has nowhere to live." He paused. "Actually, has anyone thought of the fact that she knew what Vernon was doing? Doesn't that make her an accomplice to my attempted murder, and possibly even an accomplice to Vernon's accidental death?"

Shacklebolt looked interested. "I'll put a bug in the ear of the right people in the Muggle court system. I need to talk to them to get the charge of escape dropped anyway, given what was discovered about the way that the Dursleys 'raised' you." The big black Auror's voice was dripping with sarcasm and not a little menace.

"I'll find somewhere to hide," Harry finally said. "I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, simply because it feels like you're being honest with me. Besides, I have little left to lose and no other real options. I have to remember that you worked with Dumbledore, however, and he was the reason that I was so rudely forced to live in Little Whinging."

"I'd like to say that he knew what he was doing, but the fact that someone already inside the wards managed to deal such a major blow to us by doing something that allowed our dear Minister to try to frame you for a murder tends to point otherwise. All I ask is that you give us a chance to show you otherwise at some time in the future."

"We'll see," was all that Harry would say. Shacklebolt took the hint and left him alone in the room.

Harry stood up from the bed and looked around. His wand was in a drawer in the table next to his bed, and clothes in his size were waiting for him in a small closet. He quickly dressed and thought carefully about where he next wanted to be and then illegally Apparated to the front steps of Gringotts.

He was in the bank before anyone noticed him and was more than a little surprised by the lack of customers. He headed to a counter and waited to be noticed. "Key please," the goblin said.

"No idea where it is," Harry replied cheerfully. "Probably taken by the same sons of bitches who locked me up."

The goblin looked a little shocked, which was unusual. He murmured to another goblin, who ran off somewhere. Moments later, another goblin appeared. "You say that your key was stolen?"

"Can we talk somewhere private? I'd prefer that the gossips not get any more of a pay-off from the Daily Prophet than they're already going to get - word that I'm back is powerful, but word of my Gringotts business? Not theirs to know."

The goblin smiled and motioned him to an office. "Not to be rude," Harry said, "but I really need to get some money and be out of here before the

Ministry can get their hands on me again."

"Right to business," the goblin said. "I like that. Now how is it that you came to be here without your key?"

"Short answer is that the Ministry grabbed me and threw me in Azkaban for a year. Without a crime, from what I'm told. Scrimgeour wanted me out of the way, since I won't support his doing nothing against Riddle. So I can only assume that he has all my property as well." He scowled. "Actually, no.. My wand and trunk were in Little Whinging, so maybe the rest of it is as well. But I can't be sure of that."

The goblin smiled, showing no teeth. "I can call the key here, if you're willing to submit to a test to prove that you are whom you claim to be."

Harry stuck his arm out. "I expect it involves blood, so you might as well take what you need."

The goblin laughed. "Nothing so crass. We have the master keys for all vaults. If you are on the list to have access to the vault, then the key will appear."

"What if I'm someone like Draco Malfoy under Polyjuice Potion?"

"You die. We are not fooled by simple potions."

"Fair enough. What's the test?"

"Simply put, the master key for your vaults." The goblin reached into a drawer and pulled out a ring much larger than could possibly have fit in there. He flipped through them for a moment and then held out a single key. "Grasp this and we shall know. If you are not a Potter, you will die a rather painful death."

Harry shrugged and reached out for the key. "Hold!" the goblin suddenly said. "You have proven to my satisfaction that you are whom you say." He set the keys back into the drawer. "I am sorry for testing you, but only the insane would be so willing to touch a key not their own, knowing it meant certain death. You are not insane. Therefore ..." he finished, reaching into a different drawer, "your keys."

"I thought that I only had one," Harry said.

"You have reached the age of maturity in the wizarding world, so the remainder of your parents' wills came into effect."

"Do you have a copy here?" A sheaf of papers was slid toward him. After a moment of perusal, his eyebrows rose. "I wonder if Lupin knows about these properties." When he looked up, the goblin was smiling at him slightly. "Sorry, mind wandered. It appears that I have properties in Wales, Scotland, France, and apparently a nice hideaway in Pennsylvania, in the United States." He grinned. "Think I've found my hidey-hole." He shook his head. "Well, I think it's time to get my arse in gear and get some money. You guys have any branches in the U.S.?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter. The closest to where you seem to be thinking of is in New York City."

"Excellent. I'll get some money here, change it to pounds, and then buy a ticket to the United States. Unless, of course, I'm lucky enough to find a Portkey in the vault."

—

Harry settled back into the comfortable chair on the porch of the large home in the mountains of Pennsylvania. He'd found a Portkey in the vault, as well as a lot of information on his family history and finances that he was currently working his way through. He had a goodly chunk of money available, so he certainly didn't have to work. He was working out some, trying to get his strength back. As much as it seemed a wonderful idea to just tell the wizarding world to go screw themselves, Riddle had a love of making the Muggles suffer for his insanity, and Harry wasn't about to allow that. If for no other reason than he owed it to Charles and all the other Muggles like him.

According to Shackbolt, the Horcruxes were all eradicated. This led to Harry's curiosity about Nagini, who Dumbledore had been sure was a Horcrux. *Damn. I'm going to have to contact someone about this question, and the second I do that, they know where I am. I don't get a moment's peace after that.* He looked to Hedwig, who had spent some time trying to catch up with her wizard, and had luckily succeeded *before* he left England. He hated to think of the cuffing he would have received if he'd forced her to fly to the Americas. "What do you think, girl? Should I call them and bring them after me, or leave them to themselves?"

His owl merely looked at him and barked in the manner that he had learned years ago meant, "Your decision, boss." He loved the looks that he got from people - everyone else's owls hooted in one way or another, but Snowy Owls tended to make a noise closer to a bark.

Shaking his head, he said, "Best to know now, rather than let lots of people die, or worse, go running in and assume I've killed him just to watch him rise again if they *haven't* found all the Horcruxes." He sat down and wrote a letter.

—

Miss Granger:

Perhaps it's Mrs. Weasley by this point; I can't say as it really means a damn to me.

I am writing because a mutual acquaintance made a reference to a certain bit of soul searching that you were involved in. He said that you'd found all the knowledge that you needed.

*I need to know that you were successful. More precisely, I need to know exactly how successful you were. Did you root out **all** of the dark corners?*

Please respond soonest in regards to this information. It will be a deciding factor in the speed of my recovery.

*As some proof, might I mention a certain incident at Privet Drive , involving a complete lack of light and a momentary reversal of direction?
Only three people know of it, to my knowledge.
Harry James Potter, ex-prisoner*

Letter in hand, he Apparated to New York City and looked in on the goblins, managing to get their help in hiding where the letter was sent from. He was sure that he'd be seeing a response from her before very long.

He wasn't wrong. When he awoke the next morning, he found Hedwig holding a letter. "I know you didn't fly to England to pick that up, girl. Just wanted to make sure I read it, huh?" He mock-scowled at the self-satisfied noise that his faithful friend made and sat down with the letter.

*Harry Mr. Potter,
My apologies for the informal beginning. I don't wish to waste parchment for a single mistake, however.
Your mention of that incident secured the fact that you are in fact Harry Potter.
As for the soul searching, as you phrased it, I would appreciate a chance to meet you in a face to face situation to be a bit more precise in telling you of my therapy. Such things are certainly not for insecure channels such as letters.
I give you my witch's oath, as evidenced by my signing this letter in my own blood, that I will make no effort to steer the conversation away from the information that you are after. Unless you choose otherwise, the conversation will regard my therapy and your part in it and nothing else.
Hermione Jane Granger*

He was surprised to see that the letter was in fact signed in blood. After several minutes of thought, he contacted the goblins in New York and asked for a small conference room where he could speak privately with Hermione, which they gladly made available. For a small fee, of course.

*Miss Granger,
Your letter tells me more than perhaps you are aware. I find myself hoping that you and a few guests might be able to meet me in New York City on the first day of July and perhaps even stay a few days. In my researches, I found that the Americans rather enjoy celebrating the day that they declared independence from the British Crown. Given my feelings toward the current government there, I am looking forward to the festival myself.
Perhaps, if things go well, we might enjoy it together.
I apologise in advance for how I may react to certain things. A year in Azkaban will affect a man, so you can well imagine how it might affect the boy that I was.
I look forward to your response. If it is possible, we will meet in New York City at the Gringotts branch there, known affectionately to the Muggles as the Federal Reserve Bank. Yes, for all intents and purposes, the United States government needs the goblins.
Due to the circumstances, I would ask to dictate the guest list, should you decide to come. I would prefer to see no more than yourself, Ron and Ginny Weasley, and perhaps Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood, if you are in any sort of constant contact with them.
I look forward to discussing your therapy - thoughts of it are foremost on my mind at this time.
Yours,
Harry*

He sent his response on June 24th via the goblins and was fairly certain that, if things hadn't changed too much, that at least Hermione would be in New York City no later than the 27th. He expected the 26th, to be honest. He wasn't sure how she (or they, he admitted to himself) would arrive, but he was quite certain that they would contact the goblins to make sure that he was made aware of their presence in the city.

He received a falcon on the 25th, informing him that four people had arrived via international Portkey and had asked that he be made aware of their arrival. His eyebrows rose, and he smiled to himself. *She wants us to be friends again. I'm really going to have to fight the last several months of anger at them.*

He headed to New York on the 26th to tail them as best he could. He wanted to hear them talk without knowing he was in the area.

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Dark Clouds

Chapter 5

Harry made it to New York City the next day and began to search the city for Hermione and the others. He knew he was lucky to find them so quickly when he spotted them in an outdoor café in Greenwich Village. Once he got a good look at them an eyebrow came up. Luna was dressed in an interesting manner, one guaranteed to cause interesting blood flow problems for people. It appeared that she had taken a lesson from William Ware Theiss when designing her dress, because it was short, stopping about halfway between knee and groin; it appeared to be diaphanous, although he wasn't going to draw attention to himself by staring hard enough at her to find out; and it looked as if it left her entire back bare, with cloth covering her breasts and criss-crossing just below them, leaving her navel free. Ron was apparently having trouble keeping his eyes off of her, and Harry could understand that completely. *Whether or not I can trust them, I have to admit that she looks damned hot in that thing.* Ron looked uncomfortable in cargo shorts and a polo shirt, while Hermione and Ginny, wearing something similar to Ron looked ... well, with the way all three women looked, he was expecting an accident at any moment.

Harry was wearing a simple short sleeved light blue button-down shirt with summer-weight tan trousers, a leather fedora that seemed to have had better days, and a new pair of glasses he had bought in just the last few days that darkened when the sunlight hit them. He sat down at the table next to them and pulled out a book. Before he could be waited on, he thought of something and carefully cast a spell on his throat. When next he spoke, he sounded like the actor from a show he'd caught the other day, the one who was playing some British guy named Giles. He settled in to listen to the other table, while not being obvious about it.

Hermione's resigned exasperation was the first thing he heard. "I am not having this argument with you again, Ron. I'm going to send him a warning about it, in fact. I promised him that I would not talk about anything except the hunt. I signed that letter in blood, Ron. You know what that means. If you try to talk about it, it makes *me* a liar, and I won't have that. His friendship is worth losing my magic over, but *that* will not get his friendship back."

"She's right, Ronald," Luna said softly. "I understand why you wish this, but doing only what we came for is the best route."

"I want my best mate back!" Ron said angrily before taking a breath and calming. "Sorry. I'm not mad at any of you. I'm mad at that bastard we have as Minister for doing this to him. If it weren't for what it would do to Mum and you guys, I'd gladly earn a spot in that place by making sure Scrotum-gripper can never do that to another person."

Ginny snorted her laughter. "I love how the Order seems to keep coming up with new names for our oh-so-loved Minister." She sobered quickly. "How do you think I feel though, Ron? We broke up amicably at the end of fifth year - sixth for you, and he disappeared. Neville came into my life then, and ... how do I tell Harry that I fell in love with Neville?" Harry could nearly hear the tears in her voice. "Isn't that just another betrayal to him, though? As far as he knows, we just chose not to visit him, rather than not knowing where he was. Now his ex-girlfriend has taken up with one of his other former friends."

"Do you still love him?" Luna asked.

Ginny thought for a long moment. "Can I see spending the rest of my life with him? No, unfortunately. I've learned that I'm too passionate and quick to anger, and he was too willing to accept it from me. Can I see quick passionate flings where clothing ends up in non-connecting rooms? Definitely. What do you think got me through the nights when the hunt started? I had very tired fingers," she finished with a patented Weasley blush.

"So you'd want him as a fuck-buddy," Luna stated simply.

"He means more to me than that, Luna. I love him, but I could never be married to him. I ... if I could find a way to have him as a lover and not hurt my Neville in the process ... Or you, for that matter," she said, leaning over and kissing Luna lightly on the lips. "Bed warmer, maybe," she chuckled. "But nothing but sex? Never."

Luna laughed. "If it wouldn't hurt my Ronald, I'd willingly bear a child for Harry. I feel the same way as you about him. I love him but not as a life partner." She kissed Ginny in return. "And I used 'fuck-buddy' to make you think about it." Ginny nodded her understanding.

"To be honest, Luna," Hermione said, "can any of us say that we *wouldn't* give him a child if he asked?"

Harry started violently enough that he knocked his water glass over which stopped the conversation at the other table for a moment. Harry cursed himself inaudibly as he quickly cleaned up the spill.

Luna, who was seated such that Harry was afforded a brilliant view of her cleavage, asked, "Are we bothering you, sir?"

"My apologies," he replied. "I will admit to being somewhat distracted by your attire. It is quite attractive, although I would recommend care in rising to your feet, unless flashing New York City is your intention."

"Thank you for noticing!" she replied brightly. "I did design it to attract attention, but I doubt I'll actually 'flash' anyone, if by that you mean show off what some call 'naughty bits'." Her eyes sparkled with mirth.

"You sound familiar," Hermione said.

"Are you a fan of 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer'? I've been mistaken for that man when people hear my voice. Some actor whose name I forget."

"Never saw the programme," she admitted. "That's likely who I'm thinking of, though." She shook her head.

"It is nice to hear someone from home. What brings you to the States?" he asked, since he seemed to have become involved with their conversation by accidentally drawing attention to himself.

"We have to meet a friend in a few days," Ginny answered. "Some ... um, bad things happened and he disappeared for a while. Now, through no fault of his, he thinks we abandoned him." She sniffed once, obviously trying to hold back some tears.

"So you're here to work out the problem with him?"

"As much as we'd like to, no," Hermione answered. "For reasons that seem good to him, he doesn't trust us. We have information that we know he needs, and he asked us for it. So we'll meet, tell him what he needs to know, and go back to England."

"Forgive the question, but you're not going to try to make him listen to your side?"

"I promised him that we wouldn't. I won't break that promise to him. I'll mourn the lost friendship and deal with life from there." Hermione answered quietly.

Ginny growled. "Let's not forget making the bastard who made him hate us pay."

"Sounds like one of these American ... what do they call them ... oh yes, 'soap operas'. I have no idea why they're called that, however. Maybe because you need some to clean the bad writing out of your brain after watching one," he hypothesised with a grin.

Hermione chuckled slightly, if a little sadly. "I supposed it *would* read like a penny dreadful if someone wrote it down, now that I think on it."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" he asked, amused by her comment.

"If it ended with us being his friends again, then it would be a *wonderful* thing," Hermione said. "But that move will *have* to be his, no matter how much we want to tell him."

"Make him come to you?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

Ron scowled. "No. The promise was made that we'd talk about one topic, and one topic only. If we try to talk about what happened, we prove that we can't be trusted, which is what he already thinks because -" Ron stopped, sneering, but it was obvious that he was not sneering at the person he was speaking to but at the entire situation.

"Forgive my brother," Ginny said. "He used to be Harry's best friend, before everything went for six. We were all his friends, but the real crime is that the friendship between Ron, Hermione, and Harry is gone. They were thick as thieves, at each other's backs, and that was all destroyed by one man."

Harry stood as the waitress arrived with his order, and he quickly asked for it to go, citing something coming up. He turned back to the group and touched his hat as if to tip it and said, "Well, good luck with your meeting on the first. Definitely be punctual, though. Goblins hate people being late." He was gone before they could realise what he had said.

--

Well, that was interesting, he thought a couple hours later as he settled onto the porch of the Pennsylvania home, giggling slightly to himself at the little ender he had thrown at them. *Hell of a reaction from everyone*. His musings stopped as he saw a falcon swooping down toward him. It landed on the railing and held out a foot. The letter within was a barely readable scrawl.

Mr. Potter,

DO NOT ATTEMPT THE MEETING ON THE FIRST!

This is Hermione Granger. Ron, Ginny, Luna, and I are in New York City early, and we were at an outdoor cafe. I admit that we were talking amongst ourselves in regards to you but were not saying anything that could give evidence as to who we were talking about. (It was a mixed Muggle/Wizard cafe, so we were careful in our language. Although the occasional reference to wizarding England may have slipped in.)

A man sitting at the next table became part of our conversation, and as he left, he told us not to be late for our meeting on the first, because the goblins prefer punctuality.

Scrimgeour must have realised we are here to meet you and sent an Auror team. The man had a British accent.

The goblins have stated that they will wait for your response, and we are waiting for your answer as well.

I will repeat the previous message, however.

PLEASE DO NOT ATTEMPT THE MEETING ON THE FIRST!

Hermione Granger

Hmm, that wasn't what I intended to cause with that little quip at the end. So much for being funny. He looked up at the falcon. "I appreciate the delivery. I will be heading to the bank directly to talk to them, so you don't need to hang around. Feel free to hunt, if you would like." The falcon bobbed its head and took to the air.

He Apparated near the bank and walked in, noticing the four seated near the wall. He ignored them for a moment, but he did peripherally see them sit up straighter. He was met by a goblin. "I see you received the message," the bank employee said without preamble.

"Yes. Is it possible to change the date of the meeting, since I'm here now, and they're sitting over there against the wall? I am willing to pay the extra fee for changing the scheduling."

"We always have a conference room free. There will be no extra charge, Mr. Potter." Harry nodded and bowed slightly to the goblin, who grinned back, showing no teeth.

"I thank you for the honorific," Harry responded as the goblin motioned to the four against the wall. At the goblin's look, he said, "A very smart woman once taught me a lot about the goblins. She tried very hard not to trust purely wizarding sources."

"Ah yes, you are from England. Forgive me, but your attitudes over ... no, that is rudeness to a customer."

"Would it be safe to assume that the American goblins might think that the English wizards are suffering from ... oh, what did that author call it once ... ah, yes - recto-cranial inversion?"

The goblin snorted twice in an attempt to hold back his laughter. "I would never presume to correct a customer's statement," he said in a tone that told Harry everything he needed to know.

The group was led to a small conference room and they all took seats. Harry opened the conversation. "I appreciate the warning, Miss Granger. This allows you to talk about the situation, if you desire, since your oath would prevent you even greeting me. I will also allow reasonable greetings."

"I thank you, Mr. Potter," she replied, a look of pain on her face. "You received the warning and were able to change the meeting date, so I don't think anything else needs to be said on that front, other than my apology for talking about it and not considering that an Auror might be near at hand."

"I won't verbally tear anyone a new one if you choose to call me Harry, alright?" he replied with a small smile. "And I appreciate the apology, even though it isn't necessary. The oath didn't forbid you from talking about it whatsoever."

"Thank you - Harry," Hermione said, a little shyly at the last word. "As for our stated purpose here, Kingsley was incorrect. We have *not* destroyed *all* the Horcruxes that Voldemort created, but we have verified that he is unaware of the destruction of the ones we have found. So far, we are aware of the destruction or dissolution of the following Horcruxes: Tom Riddle's diary, but you know all about that one; you also know about the destruction of the ring; the locket was located at 12 Grimmauld Place, since R.A.B. turned out to be Regulus Black; the Hufflepuff cup was found and cleaned of the taint; and the long bow that Ravenclaw once owned was found to be one as well. It too has been cleaned of its taint without destroying it. We *have* been able to verify that the snake that Voldemort keeps with himself is the final Horcrux, and that is the one that we have not destroyed yet."

He relaxed openly. "That was my worry. I wouldn't put it past the little freak to create more if he knew the old ones were gone. At least now I know that I need to return to deal with only one."

"Might I be permitted to add something extremely peripheral to the previous statement?" Hermione asked. "It doesn't apply to the hunt, but it does refer to your return to England. Well, in a way it applies to the ... oh, bother! Never mind," she said, tears in her eyes. "I will *not* break my oath to you." She pushed her chair back and stood.

"Where are you heading, Hermione?" he asked. "We've got the conference room for an hour. Sit down and tell me what you were about to."

She sat back down with a small smile. "Scrimgeour really screwed you over, but we've got contacts in the Muggle government. If you return and let Kingsley Shacklebolt guide you, we can clear up your Muggle legal problems. Right now, the only thing they can get you on is escape, and since the wizarding government was involved in that, the charges will be completely dropped." She blinked and pulled her wand. "I swear by my magic and my life that what I have said to you is true - that I am not attempting to trick you back to England." A gentle pulse of silver surrounded her for a moment, and she smiled.

"I trusted you," he said with a smile. "You were willing to sign a blood oath before." He sat back for a moment before sitting up straighter. "How long do you have your hotel room for?"

She blushed. "We're borrowing a flat that my parents have here in New York City. They end up coming over here so often, especially since we have relatives here in the States, that they actually found it easier to buy a place here."

"You four have any problems with vacationing in Pennsylvania for a few days?" he asked impishly.

All four sat forward with shock and hope in their eyes. "Are you inviting us somewhere in that state? Luna asked.

"Yes," he said. "We all need to talk, and the Pennsylvania home that Mum and Dad left me is perfect. A huge amount of land where we can do whatever we want, and scream as much as we want, and do magic if we so choose." He paused. "You could even walk around naked if you so desired, Luna," he added with a comically lecherous grin.

"Do you desire it, Harry?" she asked, completely seriously.

"The decision is always the lady's," he said. "I certainly imagine that Ginny would enjoy it. Come to think of it, so would Neville and Ron."

At their stunned looks, he said, "Look, even if I'm working through a lot of conflicted emotions, you guys showed me a lot, first by talking the way you

did without knowing that was me, and when I pulled my little joke, the speed with which you contacted me told me more than I ever thought I'd find out. Yeah, the guy you thought was an Auror was me. That's how I knew about the meeting." He paused. "I am stating that you are free to talk to me about anything that you choose to, as long as I have the right not to answer." He paused again. "I never meant to have you freak out over that. I didn't realise until I got the frantic letter that you could take it some way that I didn't intend, and for that I apologise."

Ginny shot to her feet and ran closer to him, obviously planning to hug him, but she skidded to a stop suddenly. "I have a confession, Harry," she said, starting to cry.

"I was at the table next to you, remember. It was Hermione's comment that made me spill my water. Does he treat you well?" She blushed furiously. "Hmm, that may be Too Much Information territory there," he added with a laugh. "While I'm in a *good* mood, I'll tell you that I am glad that you're happy. I want to warn you, however, that I will quite likely backslide and get extremely angry at times and rail at you and call you names. Knowing that I was betrayed *only* by Scrumgeezer makes it easier, though."

He looked to Ginny. "In a way, it makes it easier that you're with Neville now. The old relationships are never going to be the same. I have close to a year of hating you for something that you never did, and I have to work through that. I can't see romance happening with any of you ladies for the time being. Earth-shaking sex would be a nice idea, but that's probably simply because I've been a year without anything female around."

Luna looked at Ron, who smiled and nodded. "I'm certainly agreeable to the Earth-shaking sex, if it will help relieve some of your tension. I love Ron, but I was not jesting when I stated that I would gladly bear you a child, if you so desired, as long as Ron would not be hurt."

"And I'd raise it as my own, if you decided not to raise it yourself," Ron said seriously. "I will never knowingly betray you again, Harry, even if it costs me my life. If having a child with my fi ... girlfriend is what you need to prove that I will never betray you, then you two have my blessing."

"We're getting a little ahead of ourselves, aren't we?" Harry laughed in response. "For God's sake, we just met again! Let's look around the place before we try to figure who's sleeping in whose bed!"

They left the bank and headed for the Granger apartment. "Mum and Dad both have relatives enough that we don't have any real worries about the place," Hermione said. "It doesn't spend more than a month without *someone* visiting New York." They packed quickly and were soon standing on the lawn of Harry's Pennsylvania property.

"The land here is clothing optional - my decision. There've been a couple days already I just didn't feel like getting dressed, and I doubt I'm going to change that. A few miles in one direction is a nice little town called Wellsboro, and another called Mansfield off that way," he said, waving generally in an easterly direction. "No one visits here, from what I can tell, and we're far enough back from the highways that if any of you walk around here in any state of undress, no one but us will see it."

Luna nodded, and a moment later proved to Harry that she was a natural blonde. "It's quite warm out, and I feel comfortable this way."

"It just got a lot warmer," Ron murmured with a smile as he pulled on his collar.

"I'd say downright hot," Ginny replied with a grin.

"Yes, yes she is," Ron said with a small laugh as he gave Luna a quick kiss.

"What am I, chopped liver?" Ginny asked in mock annoyance.

"No, you're my sister. I think we'd all be disturbed if I started thinking of you that way." He paused. "Besides, you're a Weasley. How could you be anything else but drop dead sexy?" he asked, finishing with a wide grin.

Harry looked at Ron for a long moment before saying, "I think it best that I not respond to that," with a wry grin. He looked to Ginny. "I will say that I think Neville is a lucky man. At least he got to count your freckles."

She smiled sadly. "If it hadn't been for Doofus Scumgrazer, you'd be the one who knows intimately how many I have."

Harry chuckled. "If Neville is a smart man, he keeps forgetting, or likes to make sure that none have disappeared, or new ones haven't appeared." She blushed furiously once more in answer. "Yup, definitely Too Much Information territory."

"You started it," she murmured. "Do you mind if Neville shows up at some point?"

"I'd like to see him, actually. Was he covering for the four of you, or just in the middle of something he couldn't escape?"

"Family business," Hermione said. "He's through with school, so it was time to take over as official Head of Clan Longbottom." She shook her head. "He's managed to put the fear of God into some of the darker elements on the Wizengamot, I'll tell you."

"He must have taken scary lessons from his grandmother," Ron said. "That woman can terrify you if she puts her mind to it."

Harry laughed for a second. "Okay. As much fun as this is, we should likely do some planning for my eventual return to England while I'm still in a good enough mood to discuss it. How does that sound to everyone?"

Hermione nodded and looked to the others. "If no one minds, I think I'm going to follow Luna's lead," she said and peeled her shirt over her head, then quickly undid her bra, sighing happily as it unfastened. "Damn, that feels good to do that."

"Looks pretty good, too," Harry strangled out as he turned away.

"You can look, Harry," she said simply.

"I think I should take a cold shower first. Offering the nudity was one thing, but I forgot that all three of you are pretty with your clothes on, and I'm learning that you're ... oh Merlin do I want to fuck you and Luna right now, Hermione," he said.

"I can join you in that shower then," she said simply. "No commitments from it, just a release of tensions." She smiled impishly. "Besides, that would fulfil one of my fantasies."

"That makes it sound so cheap, though," he said, not having heard her last sentence. "As much as I want to not give a damn about it, you guys have been better than I thought you would be. When I really thought about what happened – being given some help in escaping Azkaban – it made me realise that you guys didn't know a fucking thing about what had happened to me."

He sighed. "I spent a year hating you guys, and you were my best friends. So if I were to take you up on your offer, Hermione, there would be an aspect of rape to it, since there would be some anger to the act. You were always there for me back then, so -"

He stopped speaking, his entire demeanour saying that he'd just had an epiphany. He punctuated it by slapping his forehead. "Harry, you are a fucking idiot. Stupid, stupid, stupid!" He answered their unasked question when he looked up by saying, "Here I was bitching that none of you had given me the benefit of the doubt about my innocence, and I wasn't giving you the benefit of the doubt, either. I relied on Scrimgeour's word in it all. I trusted it completely." He scowled. "Here I was demanding that you should have trusted me, and I was using a double standard."

Hermione walked over to him first and hugged him. "It's all right, Harry. Did you feel that way from the beginning, or only after we'd not visited after a few months?"

"Months," he admitted.

"So you began to hate us after all the evidence that you had available told you that we'd abandoned you?" He nodded. "This is like in fifth year, Harry. You did everything you could to verify. It wasn't until later that you learned that Kreacher *could* lie to you."

"I should have known better," he growled. "All I had was the word of the Minister, who had already shown that he'd do anything to control the way the fight against Voldemort was happening, and the word of the Aurors who were beating me. Nothing really convincing."

Ron looked at him. "Are you gonna make me smack you for doing another post-fifth year on us? Getting all depressed over stuff you had no way of knowing?" He sighed. "Harry, he pulled a perfect bit of standard prisoner breaking crap on you. Isolate you and make himself - and those he trusts - your only sources of information. You don't hit the prisoner over the head with it, either. You tell him slowly, maybe mix it with some beatings, maybe even allow some Auror or another - preferably a good looking one - to be nice. After a year, you were angry with us. I'll bet that within another six to eight months that you'd have sworn to be Scrimgeour's man. *Any* man or woman will break after enough psychological torture."

He took in Harry's astounded look. "Yeah, I didn't study much before, until Hermione figured out what my problem was. Once she helped me figure out how to look at my classes in a strategic sense – how to attack my studying, if you will – it became a lot easier for me to learn things. Last year I was in the library as much as she was. That's where we finally realised that she and I weren't going to work as a couple. But to get back to where I was, I started reading Muggle resources as well, and I found references to torture and the like. I've a suspicion that Lestrage is the way she is because Voldemort broke her and rebuilt her the way he wanted her to be. She was probably always going to be a Death Eater, but she likely wouldn't have been as psychotic as she is."

Harry laughed. "Okay, this is a lot to take in. Somehow a Luna comfortable enough with her body to be naked in front of another man doesn't surprise me –"

"Nude," she interrupted. "I'm nude, not naked. I'm only unclothed."

After gaping for a moment and shaking his head, he bulled on. "Luna doesn't surprise me, but finding a Hermione willing to be topless in front of Ron and me, and a Ron who can talk psychology in a manner that does not get him corrected by that same Hermione is a bit much to take in. It's as if I stepped out into another universe."

"It *is* a different world for you," Hermione agreed. "Things can change a lot in a year, and we're proof of that."

"Let me go get that cold shower," he finally said. "I think it will help me concentrate." He turned and headed into the house.

He was startled to find Hermione behind him when he turned around, stepping out of her underwear. "I wasn't joking about fucking you in the shower, Harry. No commitment, like I already said."

He took a deep breath. "It's likely that had things worked differently ... no, that's not true, because I wouldn't have invited you here. You are obviously still the woman who was my friend in Hogwarts, so I have to act properly toward you. I would not have cheapened you by accepting a meaningless screw when we were at Hogwarts, so I will not do it now. God knows that all three of you are going to be causing this reaction in me, but I'm kicking you out of the room while I still have my principles." He carefully handed her knickers and shorts to her and gently pushed her from the room.

What's changed? He asked as he began to strip for his shower. *It was just a few days ago that I'd have gladly ... hell, if I hadn't been trying to escape the Weasleys, I'd probably have copped a rough feel. Why am I worrying about her feelings just a day or two later? I've been royally marked at them for a while, and suddenly I'm back to buddy-buddy with them? I'd have gladly fucked her blind a couple days ago! What the hell is going on?* He shrugged and stepped into the shower.

He then spent the next fifteen minutes under a stream of water that could have been classified as an extremely localised ice storm.