

## After the Fall Inferno

I.

### Inferno

The war raged for three years after Harry Potter left Hogwarts, and the toll mounted on both sides, with long lists of prominent names on both sides. On the side of the Order, the memorial plaques included Weasley, Snape, Lupin, Longbottom, Fletcher, Abbot and Bones. Lists of fallen Death Eaters contained Malfoy (Sr.), MacNair, Crabbe father and son, Parkinson and Zabini. The names of less illustrious personages on both sides filled out the lists, and longer still were the lists of names from the undeclared middle, those who didn't particularly care who controlled the Ministry, but just wanted to raise their children, operate their businesses, and do their magic in peace and quiet. The longest list, unfortunately, was that of Muggles who had wandered into something they had no clue about, and were caught in the cross-fire.

Voldemort continued to rule his Death Eaters with an iron fist, and had lost almost as many to his own violent whims as to the opposition. His ranks, however, had been swelled by the addition of the Dementors of Azkaban, which had unanimously swung to his side. He was aided and abetted by the Ministry, still led by Cornelius Fudge, who had finally declared himself for the Dark Lord and brought the entrenched old-boy network of the bureaucracy with him. The Magical Law Enforcement Department, however, was filled with Muggle-born and half-blood Aurors, and purebloods with finely developed senses of justice, and they had gone over to Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix to a Wizard. Fudge could pass all the restrictive laws he wanted; there was no one to enforce them. The non-human races of England, knowing what their fate was likely to be under Voldemort, had likewise declared for the side of Light, most of them declaring loyalty to Harry Potter personally, but this was of less import than it might have been. Despite the Ministry harping on the "werewolf threat" for many years, for example, it was discovered that there were actually less than twenty such individuals in Britain, and few of them were competent combatants. Likewise, there were only five vampires in the country, the rest having fled long before. The remaining vampires, however, proved to be much more useful in combat than the werewolves. The goblins had locked themselves down in Gringott's and proclaimed neutrality while trying to keep the economy going, but it was known that they were passing information to the Order. The house-elves, potentially the most powerful allies of all, maintained their loyalties to their individual masters and abstained from the fighting.

Given the relatively small numbers on either side of the war, there were fewer pitched battles than skirmishes, and both sides spent rather a lot of time covering their tracks and Obliviating Muggles. By the fall of 2001, both sides were exhausted. Then something – nobody was quite sure what – happened in the Muggle world that suddenly resulted in large numbers of Muggles becoming watchful for anything strange going on in their communities, and even armed patrols of Muggles bent on suppressing "terrorism." For all the Death Eaters' scorn of Muggle technology, it was discovered that one Muggle with a machine gun could do serious damage to a skirmish unit before somebody cursed him, and that Muggles so armed rarely travelled alone.

The war came to a screeching halt while both sides assimilated this new development. It was obvious that if they continued, it would lead to the Muggles learning about the community in hiding, and that would inevitably, given the disparity in numbers, lead to the decimation if not the total eradication of wizard-kind in England. Neither side wanted this to happen, but neither side particularly wished to put the war on hold for another decade. Neither, however, would either side yield to the other. It was, perhaps, inevitable that it came down to a time-honoured precedent: the duel of champions, trial by combat, winner take all.

No matter how many times, over the years, Harry's friends had reassured him that he would not be alone, that there would be others fighting beside him and watching his back, he had secretly always felt it would come down to this, so when Voldemort's challenge was delivered, he wasn't surprised. Dumbledore didn't seem to be surprised, either, and it was surprisingly easy for terms of combat to be reached. On Halloween, 2001, almost the entirety of the British wizarding community packed itself into the giant Quidditch stadium that had been constructed for the World Cup seven years before. The Order and its allies filled the first few rows on what had been the Irish side; the Death Eaters took the Bulgarian side. Every active participant on either side had signed a pledge agreeing to abide by the results of the combat, to acknowledge the winner as the rightful Lord of Wizarding Britain, and to submit themselves and their property to the winner after the combat. Hostilities, however, were to cease immediately. The next row was filled with the students from Hogwarts; their black robes formed a distinct line between the non-combatants and the neutrals, and the seating gave all the excited students excellent views. The upper rows were filled with almost the entire non-aligned population of Wizarding Britain, who were also bound by the terms of the pledge; some of them had the sense to be vitally concerned with the outcome, and some of them were just there for the spectacle.

At noon exactly, two small figures, both cloaked and robed in black, stepped out onto the hastily-mowed grass of the Quidditch pitch. Harry was obvious, his hood thrown back, unruly hair additionally tousled by the breeze, sunshine sparking off his glasses. The other figure was somewhat taller and moved with an almost inhuman grace. When they reached the centre of the pitch, Lord Voldemort pushed back his hood. Perhaps for the first time in seven years, he stood exposed to the light of the sun, blinking his red eyes in pain. There were gasps and hisses of surprise in all sections of the stands, as very few were prepared for the snake-like appearance of the Dark Lord. It appeared, from the revulsion on the Death Eater side of the stadium, that he had allowed only his inner circle to see him, and the rank and file were taken by surprise. Down on the pitch, Harry allowed himself a small smile and wondered how many of them would still be sitting on that side of the stands once all was said and done.

Cooperating for the first time ever, Harry and Voldemort raised their wands to cast the circle in the ancient and deadly duelling format they had agreed on. Voldemort spoke first:

*By Earth and Water, Fire and Air,*

*We abjure powers to flee this Ring.*

*We clear it now, let all beware.*

*Through here shall pass no living thing.*

Then Harry took his turn:

*Inside all Rule and Lawsuspend;*

*From here may nothing outward flee,*

*Or inward come. The Circle ends*

*When two are one and one is free.*

As they spoke, lines of fire sprang up and formed a large circle about them. Harry's half was Gryffindor red, while Voldemort's half was Slytherin green, and a dome formed of ghostly light in the appropriate colours, strong enough to be seen even in the autumn sunshine but weak enough that the combatants could be seen within.

There was a moment of silence as Harry and Voldemort sized each other up, a long pause as each waited for the other to commit to movement, to a spell.

It was Voldemort who broke and struck first. He hissed a sibilant spell in Parseltongue and slashed at Harry with a beam of blue light shooting from his wand. Harry countered with a shield and responded with a pulsing attack of his own, and from then on it was a battle between masters of special effects. Creatures appeared and were slaughtered, weapons appeared and disappeared, spells ricocheted from shields and splashed against the dome harmlessly.

No one watching could tell exactly where the turning point was, but it became clear that Voldemort was getting more and more frustrated at his inability to break through Harry's shields, and Harry in turn became more confident and shifted from defensive to offensive spells. At length, he flung up his wand and chanted,

*Voldemort, this now must end,*

*I shall no more my powers lend*

*To please your fancy. I defend*

*My people, and your power rend.*

*I swear by Merlin's hallowed name*

*That I shall thwart your evil aim.*

*And further, I refute your claim*

*That Blood and Power are the same.*

*You are summoned to the fray.*

*This is the final test, I say.*

*While I live, the light of day*

*Shall cease till you are done away!*

As he finished this incantation, the light level in the stadium suddenly seemed to drop. The astounded audience looked up, expecting to see a cloud cover summoned by the spell. Instead, they saw the pale disc of the sun no brighter than the moon, and stars peeking out around it. It was an impressive show of sheer power.

Voldemort didn't even bother looking up, but chanted in response,

*Your boasts are fearsome, would-be Lord,*

*But I fear not your verbal sword.*

*Threats are easy to afford.*

*But I, too, weary of this game,*

*So I accept your test of flame.*

*Beware! 'Tis I who'll win the fame!*

*And when this little farce is done,*

*Then death shall come to Lily's son,*

*And I shall be the ruling one!*

A wall of white light formed, dividing the red and green hemispheres, and wobbled uncertainly between the two combatants before firming up. It glowed brightly in the twilight of the stadium, and magic crackled and hissed along the barrier loudly enough that the watchers could hear it. Then it shifted back and forth between the opposed wizards with more certainty, under control now, as each of them fought to send it, by pure force of will, toward his opponent. It pulsed with power and shifted between the two, giving and gaining as each sought out the other's weaknesses. It seemed a fairly even match for a time. But then the wall of white fire began moving inexorably toward Voldemort.

As the dome slowly turned red, crowding out the green, Voldemort's face took on a look of fear bordering on pure terror. The crackling wall of power advanced slowly but unwaveringly, and he retreated to the edge of the circle until he could go no further, held by the unyielding barrier of magic. As the white wall contacted him, he began to disappear in a blaze of light. He let out a long, agonized scream, edged with fury, which slowly faded as the wall pushed through him. Then he was gone, and the completed circle flashed a brilliant red and disappeared as well. All that remained was his wand, lying in the grass. Harry, wavering with exhaustion, walked to it and picked it up. With the last of his physical strength, he snapped Voldemort's wand before falling to his knees on the grass of the pitch. As he dropped the pieces, the phoenix feather within the shaft caught fire and the dry yew wood burned fiercely but briefly until all that was left was a small pile of ash.

A profound silence reigned for a moment, then, as the sunlight returned, screams of joy erupted from the side of the stadium occupied by the forces of Light (which now seemed to have considerably more people sitting there than when the duel had started). Many on the Death Eaters' side sat slumped in despair, their heads resting in their hands. Others sat still, their minds racing as they tried to figure out how to save something from the wreckage of their cause.

Four young women, one with brown hair, one with red, one with black, and the fourth bright blue, jumped the edge of the stands and landed on the grass ten feet below. They ran to Harry's side and helped him to his feet, while others swarmed onto the field behind them.

Harry touched the side of his throat with his wand, casting *Sonorus* before he spoke so that everyone present could hear him clearly. "*By virtue of victory in single combat, I claim what is mine. Light and Dark united under one Lordship, so that all of Wizard-kind, pureblood, half-blood, Muggle-born and Squib, may stand as one. From this moment, there shall be peace between you. I give you the next week for celebration, and for all combatants to place their houses in order. On the seventh day, I command that all who swore to either side shall attend me at Sigston Castle, the former headquarters of Tom Riddle, the so-called Lord Voldemort. I shall hear petitions for mercy and for reward at that time, and offer judgment where it is due. So mote it be!*" He ended the spell and turned wearily to Hermione. "Take us home, Hermione. We have a lot to do." The four women clustered around him and they all vanished with a loud CRACK!

Early in the morning of November 7, the gathering at Sigston Castle began. This was one of those places which had been made Unplottable and protected from Muggle intrusion centuries ago; it could be found on lists of "Vanished Castles" with the notation "Only the moated enclosure remains." And indeed, from a distance there was nothing but a few weedy hillocks inside the moat. But if one got past that moat, one could see the castle, still standing and maintained by magic over the long years. Most recently, it had been used by Voldemort and the Death Eaters as their headquarters, the last owner having conveniently died one day after changing his Will to bequeath the property to Tom Marvolo Riddle. By right of conquest, Harry Potter now took it for his own, and waited for his allies and enemies to come to him.

And so they did. By Portkey and Floo and broom and Apparation they came, subdued or jubilant depending on which side they had favoured.

Bound by the oaths they had sworn when the duel was proposed, none of the losers fled, but came to face the judgment. None of the winners stayed home, secure in their victory. All brought their accountings and their petitions. There were some jeers and snide comments between the sides, but no spell-throwing. The peace held.

The Great Hall of the castle had room and chairs for all, although just barely. House elves circulated with trays of beverages and sweet cakes appropriate for the hour, and petitions were collected from those who had not sent them on ahead. At precisely ten o'clock, the double doors at the interior end of the Great Hall opened without ceremony, and Harry walked into the room and mounted the platform where Voldemort's throne still stood. Some of the attendees, former Death Eaters for the most part, rose hastily, until Harry gestured with some impatience that they should sit back down again.

The young man who stood before the assemblage was very different from the one most knew. As a student at Hogwarts, he had dressed in school uniform or in too-large Muggle clothing, and had never taken much notice of his appearance. As a warrior for the cause of Light, he had taken to wearing unrelieved black after the death of Ron Weasley. His clothing had been plain, usually black jeans and shirt or jumper, or black robes, with a plain black cloak. He had not needed any uniform or fancy dress to assert his authority. Now he wore a sweeping dress cloak of velvet with fur trim, over a black silk shirt, black trousers and boots. His only ornament was a silver band that passed across his forehead, bearing a lightning-bolt device that exactly covered his scar. He looked every inch a Lord, in dress and in bearing.

Voldemort's throne was a gruesome thing, old-fashioned and massive and not terribly comfortable, with legs and arms and back carved from dark wood in the shape of twisted serpents. Harry looked at it consideringly for a moment, while all waited to see whether he would take Voldemort's throne – and by extension Voldemort's role as Dark Lord – or whether he would replace it with some lesser chair. Deliberately, Harry drew his wand from his sleeve and pointed it at the throne. With a flick, it exploded into flinders which bounced harmlessly off Harry and all close to him.

With another flick, a new chair appeared where the old one had stood. This was just as large and imposing, if a bit less throne-like. The legs and arms were carved from golden wood to resemble a lion's paws, and a roaring lion's head surmounted the back. The seat, back, and armrests were well padded and upholstered with red velvet. Altogether, it was a much more appropriate chair for a Gryffindor Lord, and Harry seated himself upon it with every evidence of satisfaction.

"Now then, before we get started, a few introductions. You all know me by reputation, some in person. I'm Harry Potter. Lord Harry now, I suppose. I never wanted to be the supreme Wizard of England, but I didn't have much choice. Now that I have the job, though, I'm going to give it my best ... and I'm going to make a few changes in the way things are done around here. To help me, I've enlisted the aid of four extraordinary women, who will form the core of my Council. Ladies?" The door opened again, and four young women entered and stood before the platform, facing the audience. Each was clad in clothing of silver-grey, but all in different styles.

"This is Hermione Granger. She's my chief of staff, personal secretary, librarian, and general expert on Looking Stuff Up." Hermione, wearing traditional witches' robes, bowed slightly to the audience.

"This is Ginevra Weasley. She's my chatelaine, hostess, business manager, and is basically in charge of anything that relates to me personally." Ginny, wearing a fine gown, curtsied gracefully.

"This is Nymphadora Tonks. Head of Security. Don't mess with her." Tonks was wearing a tailored uniform-like garment under a men's style open robe, which offered greater freedom of movement than a witches' robe. She glared at the assembly as if daring it to try anything.

"And this is Elizabeth Figg Martin. Liaison with the Muggle government, expert on Muggle jurisprudence. Don't mess with her, either. She may be a Squib, but she's more than capable of defending herself, and any insult to her is an insult to me." Elizabeth was older than the other three, seeming to be in her mid-thirties with black hair and dark eyes, and carried herself with assurance. Her clothing was styled as a Muggle business suit in the same silver-grey as the others. She nodded in greeting to the assembly, and many craned their necks to get a good look at her. The others they knew; she was an unknown quantity.

Harry waited until the stir died down a little before he continued. "If anybody – and I do mean *anybody* – tries to give any of these ladies trouble, I will deal with the matter personally." He conjured chairs for the ladies, not as grand perhaps as his own, but still quite ornate, with lionesses' heads on the back. "They speak for me and can deal with day-to-day matters on their own authority. This doesn't mean they can be bothered with trivial things."

Once the women were seated, Harry rose from his own chair and paced as he spoke. "I'd like to take advantage of my captive audience and say a few words. I've invited members of the press to be here today, not only to be able to report on what happens and to whom, but also to let those who aren't here know my plans for the future." He glanced over at the press corps, who were already hunched over their parchments, scratching away with their quills. *Uh-oh. Wait a second.* He jumped down off the dais and strode over to one particular female reporter in an aisle seat, and snatched the acid-green quill out of her hand. "No Quick-Quote-Quills here, Rita. You do your reporting honestly from now on, or not at all." He snapped the quill into several pieces and then Vanished the lot. Then he returned to his position on the dais and resumed speaking as if he'd never paused.

There was the distinct sound of teeth gnashing from the press section.

"Over the last twenty years, the Wizarding Community has been divided in a violent conflict between two groups, Voldemort's Death Eaters and the Order of the Phoenix, under Albus Dumbledore. On October 31, 2001, that conflict ended, and for the first time since Merlin, there is one single, absolute power in Wizarding Britain. Me. Voldemort is dead, his surviving Death Eaters sworn to receive their judgments from me. Likewise, the Order of the Phoenix is disbanded, since its entire purpose was to combat Voldemort. Its individual members are also sworn to receive judgment from me. In so doing, justice will be dealt for the wrongs committed on both sides. Justice tempered with mercy. I am not a Lord wholly of the Light, but neither am I wholly Dark. The majority of the magical community was not sworn to either side, but was composed merely of wizards and witches who desire no more than to go about their business and live their lives without interference. It is for them, really, that I fought."

"For all that my father's family were purebloods, my mother's were not, and I was basically raised as a Muggle-born myself. In many ways I am, and always will be, an outsider to this culture. But from the perspective of someone outside looking in, I can see many things that need to be changed if our people are to survive in the coming generations."

"There are three main things we need to do. The first is to rebuild our institutions. The Ministry for Magic has been torn in half, and nobody had much trust in it even before that. The official press has been discredited – the Prophet has been little more than a Ministry mouthpiece for the last five years. Fortunately there have been others who were willing to print in the face of official opposition. Hogwarts survives, but its staff has been decimated. Permanent professors for Defence Against the Dark Arts, Potions, Arithmancy, and Care of Magical Creatures need to be found to replace those lost in the war. Additionally, we will need new instructors to cover new educational initiatives I have in mind. It is vital that all of our children receive the best possible educations. I cannot tell you how shocked I was when I found out that Hogwarts was not for all in the Wizarding World, but for the wealthy, regardless of talent, for the talented, regardless of wealth, and for the Muggle-born with power, to bring them into our community. More than half of our children are relegated to home schooling, to Muggle schooling, or to apprenticeship programs. As a result, a tremendous amount of talent is going untapped, not used to its fullest potential. That must stop."

"The second thing we need to do is rebuild our numbers. This war has taken its toll, as all wars do, primarily among the young adults, most of whom went from school directly to the battlefield and did not stop to have children in between. The best and the brightest of a generation have been lost. The greatest cost was to the purebloods on both sides of the fight. They are already allowing themselves to die off – between their habits of marrying only other purebloods, and having only one or two children so as not to have to divide family fortunes, they're not reproducing enough even to replace the existing adults, much less increase the population. If nothing is done, the last of them will be gone in four generations. And the last of them, for your information, will probably be Weasleys. After four generations, it will be marry half-bloods or Muggle-born, or die out. It's already too late to save some families. The Boneses, the Bulstrodes, the Parkinsons, the Mallorays, and the Mackemulls have only female heirs. The Zabini heir is dead, the father is in Azkaban and won't be getting himself another. The last Goyle is in St. Mungo's for life, and he won't be getting any

heirs, either. And the last Malfoy has to make one piece before he can find a heir. Anybody want to take that book on that happening?" Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Draco Malfoy, seated in the third row, wince, and his mother put an arm protectively around his shoulders. "The Crabbe, Black, Snape, Longbottom, Lestrangle and Lupin families are gone. Both surviving Dumbledores are so old it's doubtful they'll be having children in the future. These are losses of talent and power that can never be replaced."

"I'm not in the business of telling anyone who they should or should not marry, or what they should do with their fortunes. But you might want to think about it, people. Why have you bothered fighting for something you were throwing away anyway?"

"Our middle and working class families have been decimated. Many, those who could afford it, have picked up and moved, lock, stock, and barrel, to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. The children who have been educated in the Muggle system, especially the talented ones, are finding lives for themselves among the Muggles. Artists, writers, musicians and actors can get away with being a little eccentric, and they have better opportunities among the Muggles than among us."

"Then we have our Squibs. Relegated to marginal lives at best among us, scorned for lack of talent, those that can also move to the Muggle world. Most of them become Muggles for all intents and purposes. And most of us would say Good riddance! Without magic, what can they ever be besides, perhaps, a servant? But they still carry magic within, and in future generations that magic can resurface. I can personally attest to two cases where this has happened, and there must be others. We'll never know how many of the so-called Muggle-born are actually the children and grandchildren of Squibs, reclaiming their heritage. If we keep the Squibs within our community, encourage them to marry each other and even to marry wizards and witches, perhaps the flame of magic can be rekindled, and those children will not lose their history and their families."

"Finally, we have the Muggle-borns. New talent, new blood, new strength. But of the Muggle-borns judged promising enough to attend Hogwarts, less than half actually do. Most stay within their own communities and remain untrained. Of those that do attend Hogwarts, about a third do not stay within the Wizarding community. Again, they go back to the Muggle world, trained and therefore safer, perhaps, but just as lost to us. The reason that so many of them leave is because of the obstacles we place in their way, the prejudices that will not let them succeed."

"The third thing we need to do is to come to terms with the Muggle world. Ignorance can only hurt us. Wizards once deemed themselves powerful because they had abilities beyond those of the Muggles. It was safe to look down on them once. But now their technology has, in many ways, surpassed our magic in terms of destructiveness, their numbers greatly exceed ours, and if it came down to a struggle between them and us, it is inevitable that they would win. We discovered this at the Battle of Brighton, where Death Eaters and Order of the Phoenix Aurors alike were massacred by a squad of British Army MPs. One man with a machine gun killed twelve trained Wizards in less than thirty seconds. Two Aurors survived, and it is thanks to those two and those two alone that our entire world was not exposed to Muggle scrutiny. Right now they're involved in a war of their own. They're jumpy as all hell, and perfectly willing to shoot anything that looks odd. And we certainly qualify. A week ago, we fit almost the entirety of our people into one stadium. If the Muggles had known of this, they could have destroyed our entire people with one bomb! There has never been a Wizard with that level of power. We kill one-on-one, up close and personal; they kill *en masse*, from a safe distance. I'm not saying we should subject ourselves to them. But we need to keep our people safe, and understanding is the key to that."

"It's our job, now, to put aside the pain of the past generations and remake ourselves. And to this end I dedicate myself – to the welfare of Wizardkind as a whole, not just part of it."

"Now to business. Albus Dumbledore, you are summoned!"

The elderly wizard had been expecting, indeed welcomed, the call. He had been Harry's mentor and adviser for years now, and given the youth of the new Lord and of his Council, it was obvious that he would be continuing in that role. Confidently, he stepped forward. "Yes, Harry, very good, very good indeed! We do have rather a lot to do, don't we?" He shifted a large bundle of parchment in his arms. "I have here a plan for the restructuring of the Ministry and ..." He stuttered to a halt as Harry held up one hand, his face cold.

"First things first, Albus. You've spent the last ten years of my life getting me to use the proper terms of respect for people. *Professor* Snape. *Minister* Fudge." The titles were pronounced with a sneer. "Surely you can practice what you've preached."

"My dear boy, surely there's no need. We've been working together for so long now, Harry, I think ..."

"Stop. The situation has changed. We're in a formal situation, and I have a formal title now. *Use it.*"

Dumbledore seemed to see the advisability of using Harry's formal title. After all, if he used it, it would encourage others to do so. That was probably why the boy was insisting. Very clever of him. Though he would talk to the young man about his tone, once they were in private. "Um. Yes. Of course, My Lord. I beg your pardon. May I suggest that we withdraw to discuss this..."

Harry's hand was held up again. "Hermione, would you mind taking that? You and Elizabeth should probably review it later and see if there's anything in there we can use." Hermione took the bundle from the aging Headmaster, who was doing an excellent imitation of a codfish, and stuffed it under her chair. "Thank you. Now, Albus, you've put in many hard years at Hogwarts, first as a Professor, then as Headmaster, and you've also served many of those years as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and Chairman of the International Confederation of Wizards. Not to mention defeating Grindelwald, forming and directing the Order of the Phoenix during the first reign of Voldemort, and recalling the Order and directing its actions during his comeback. I'm sure that after all that time and so many hard years of service, you're looking forward to being able to rest and relax and not have to worry about anything any more. So I'm granting you retirement. There's a nice little place in Wales – you had us hide out in it for a while last year, I'm sure you remember it. It's a bit of a fixer-upper, I'm afraid, but you can arrange things however you like. It was tight quarters for twenty of us, but for a single wizard it's fine. I've arranged for a housekeeper to do for you, and your personal things are being moved there as we speak. I'm sure no one would blame you if you wished to begin your retirement immediately."

"Harry ... you can't mean ..."

"I can, and I do. Have a nice retirement, Albus."

“But the children ... the students ...”

“Will be fine under Headmistress McGonagall. And even better once I’ve had a chance to talk to her about new educational initiatives, since it’s obvious the programs at Hogwarts need some serious revamping. But that’s not your problem now, Albus. As a matter of fact, given how badly you botched my childhood care and education, I’d go so far as to say this retirement is long overdue, and that you are the *last* person who should be allowed around an innocent child. Go, Albus. Wales awaits.”

Dumbledore made one last try. “Harry... My Lord. I understand that there are issues that haven’t been settled over the years, and I am terribly sorry, but you must understand that it was necessary to ...”

“What I understand is that if you don’t accept your retirement and go to your new residence now, I can snap your wand and send you to a nice Muggle nursing home instead, where any mention of magic will be answered with a hefty dose of tranquilizers. And I’m sure you’ll understand why it’s *necessary*.”

The old wizard visibly deflated. He had obviously taught Harry all too well. He knew the house was isolated and not on the Floo network; that was why he’d picked it as a safe house in the first place. He knew this “housekeeper” would be loyal to Harry and would be reporting on his actions. He knew his personal papers would be gone through and anything sensitive removed or copied. He knew that the terms of his own oath, the one he had not only agreed to but had helped word, meant he had to submit. “I ... thank My Lord for his gracious offer and ... beg leave to go.”

“Leave is granted. Farewell, Albus. Tonks, would you be so kind as to escort him to his new residence? I don’t want to take any chances with his safety. Thank you.”

Tonks rose and took the arm of the old man who seemed so suddenly shrunken and led him from the room. In silence, the assemblage watched the passing of the man who had been the dominating force of the Wizarding world for a generation, and wondered what the new era would bring.

As the door closed softly behind Albus Dumbledore, Harry drew a list from his pocket. “Hm. I suppose I ought to take this one out of order ... Minerva McGonagall, you are summoned!”

Her carriage erect as always, leaning as little as possible on the cane that had been her support since Dolores Umbridge’s attack on her, the Scots witch came forward, and her words showed she had obviously learned from Dumbledore’s humiliation. “My Lord, I am here.”

“Minerva ... you have been Albus Dumbledore’s deputy at Hogwarts since I can remember. Are you willing to take up the reins as Headmistress?”

“Under what conditions? How much control? Hogwarts has always been autonomous, but you mentioned educational initiatives? Am I truly to be headmistress, or just a mouthpiece for your decrees?” There was a murmur of shock, mostly from the Death Eater “side” of the room, who remembered how the old Dark Lord would have reacted to anyone questioning him.

“Fair questions, all. For the moment, the most important thing is to get the children back into classes and give them some semblance of stability – the war has disrupted their lives too much. You will have powers of school discipline as Albus did, the rights to hire and fire, all the necessary things for the day to day running of the place. We will in future discuss some educational concepts I’ve been working on – for example, the necessity of beginning training earlier, and opening schools for children who do not necessarily have the wherewithal to go to Hogwarts, but need something more than the hit-and-miss home schooling and apprenticeship programs they have now. Work with me, Minerva, and you could have a greater impact on the youth of our community than any witch since the Founders.”

“And if I choose not to?”

“Then you are free to accept your retirement as well – to go wherever you wish and to do whatever you wish. Start a school to compete with Hogwarts, if you will – the more choices the better. Or go play granny to your grandchildren. You’re free to choose. But I’m afraid I really do require an answer now.”

“Then I accept the appointment as Headmistress, with the understanding that if I do not agree with your initiatives, I will resign in favour of someone else you can work with. I look forward to our future discussions.”

“As do I. Oh, one thing ... one of Albus’ big failings was favouring one House over the others. I don’t want that happening. Heads of House may exhibit favouritism to a degree, but that is unacceptable in the Headmistress. All the children are her House. Do we agree on that?”

Minerva McGonagall smiled for the first time. “That was always one of the biggest problems I had with Albus, actually. His favouritism has done much damage over the years, a mistake I will strive to avoid.”

“We are in agreement, then.”

“May I take my leave? I have students waiting for me.”

“You have my leave, Headmistress.”

As she made her way to the door, Harry consulted his list again. “Next, next, next ... Cornelius Fudge, you are summoned!”

The Minister for Magic stepped forward, keeping his mask of bland pomposity up to cover the self-interest of his thoughts. Perhaps the sacking of Dumbledore boded well for him. There had been some speculation in Death Eater circles that the Potter boy had more darkness in him than was obvious – that there were Slytherin depths to him that had been covered by his Gryffindor persona. If that were the case, he might be able to salvage his career yet. And if he could keep his career, then it would only be a matter of time before all the side benefits he had claimed would be his again. But all depended on how well he could woo the boy ...

He bowed deeply to the new Lord, and then also to the ladies, graciously including the Mudblood and the Squib. “My Lord !: Ladies. It is my very great honour to present myself here today, and to offer my services in the reconstruction of our society. I believe you will find my credentials ...”

Harry let the pompous windbag go on for a bit before he interrupted him. “Cornelius. Please. I am well aware of your credentials, and let me assure you, you will be closely involved with the reconstruction of the Ministry. As a matter of fact, I ...” He paused and peered closely at the gold medallion on its chain around the Minister’s neck. “Is that the Ministry Seal? The original one?”

“Why, yes, I always keep it with me ... duty of the office, you know ... mustn’t let it fall into the wrong hands.”

Harry stood and stepped down off the dais. “That’s quite an impressive thing. I’ve never seen it this close up before. May I take a look at it?”

“Well ... of course ... My Lord.” Fudge was a little off balance at Potter’s approach and respectful tone. He lifted the heavy gold medallion so that the boy could take it in his hand for a closer look. He was unprepared to have the gold chain part at the back of his neck and fall away, dangling from the medallion in the boy’s hand.

“Hm. The chain seems to have broken. I think I’ll be keeping this for the moment, Cornelius. For safekeeping. It is, after all, mine now, to bestow where I will.” Fudge’s face went pale and sickly at the smug smile Potter now wore.

Harry stepped back up to his chair. When he turned to face his audience again, all traces of the innocent boy, impressed to be in the presence of the Minister and allowed to touch the Seal, were gone. “Cornelius Fudge, you have served as Minister for Magic for over ten years. In that time, you have shown such incredible incompetence that it borders on the criminal. You have taken actions, out of fear, that crossed that line into criminal. Some of those were against me personally – such as your attempt to have my wand snapped for the ‘crime’ of defending myself and my cousin against Dementors sent by your very own deputy, Dolores Umbridge. But the greater crime was against the people you claimed to represent, as your refusal to admit the return of Lord Voldemort at first prevented them from being able to take appropriate steps to defend themselves, and your later defection to the side of the Dark left them defenceless. And greater still were the crimes you perpetrated throughout that entire ten-year span – when you raided the Ministry’s treasuries for your own, and used Ministry facilities and personnel to aid and abet you in your personal perversion. Oh, yes, Cornelius, I know all about the little games you liked to play with Muggle boys before Obliviating them and returning them to their Muggle lives. Did you know that you’ve destroyed the careers of several innocent vicars in the course of your games? Some of the boys remembered a little, mainly just your dark robes. Enough to start quite a church scandal. But you don’t care. They’re just Muggles, after all.” Harry’s eyes burned green and Fudge quailed before him. “Quite a few things about our first meetings are now clear to me, Cornelius ... and I’m very glad that your tastes never extended to little *Wizard* boys ... but after all, you wouldn’t choose to prey on boys who might be able to defend themselves.”

“But ... but how ...”

“How do I know all this? Well, it seems that whatever else the former Dark Lord may have been, he was an obsessive records-keeper. In the past week, while you people have been either celebrating or trying to figure out how to save your skins, I’ve been wading through his dossiers. Very interesting reading. I know, for example, exactly how many times he used the Cruciatus, and on whom. He seemed quite interested in that one, for some reason. Oh, and for any of you thinking of claiming you were acting under Imperius, forget it. I know who he used that on, and why, and I know none of you took the Mark under it, or acted under it. It’s not going to fly this time.” There were muffled moans and mutterings of “Fuck!” from the audience. If the matter hadn’t been so serious, Harry might have grinned. Quite a few of the petitions he’d collected had claimed that as a defence, and now the petitioners knew their pleas were invalid. “Anyway, Cornelius, Voldemort had so much blackmail on you it took up an entire volume. Admittedly you never took the Dark Mark yourself, but you didn’t need to. Your soul was his already.”

“Cornelius Fudge, you are hereby stripped of the title of Minister for Magic, and any and all honours previously paid to you, including the Order of Merlin First Class you awarded to yourself. Your wand is to be snapped, and you are forbidden from ever acquiring another. The entire contents of your vault at Gringott’s, and any other assets you possess, are hereby confiscated and designated to be part of a reparations fund, to be used to repay damages to those affected by the war and to rebuild the institutions you helped demolish. The city house and country manor provided for the Minister’s use are reclaimed. You will serve twenty years of community service in whatever capacity I see fit. At the end of that time, you will be granted a Ministry pension for time served in the lowest grade then possible, and allowed to live in either Ministry subsidized housing or whatever Muggle housing you can afford. You will be subject to random inspections and interrogations by the Bureau of Magical Law Enforcement and my personal security forces for the rest of your life, to make sure you aren’t getting into any more trouble. Oh, and your interest in little boys? That’s unhealthy, Cornelius, you know it is ... so I’ll just relieve you of the urge. *Castratio!*” Most of the men in the audience flinched violently as the former Minister screamed and fell to his knees.

“Kingsley ... there’s a perfectly good dungeon going to waste in this castle. Find someplace suitable to throw this trash for the moment, and then get back up here. I may need you again soon.” The Auror, trying hard to hide his satisfaction, dragged the blubbering former Minister out of the Hall. Those seated in the front row pulled their feet back, as if his very touch would spread his disgrace.

Harry waited a few moments for the distraction to die down. Silence reigned in the Hall as his captive audience, now properly terrified, waited to find out on whose neck the axe would fall next.

“Arthur Weasley! Percival Weasley! You are summoned!” There was another stir of conversation as the father and son rose from their places – on opposite sides of the hall – and approached the dais. Arthur’s face was calm and confident, but Percy was pale and shaking. Arthur stopped directly in front of Harry, Percy slightly behind him and to the right, and both bowed deeply.

“My Lord, we are here,” said Arthur. Percy licked his lips and kept his silence, his gaze fixed on Harry’s feet.

“Arthur, you served the Order of the Phoenix well throughout both reigns of Voldemort, and risked everything on numerous occasions. You have also served for many years in the Ministry, for a number of those years putting up with ridicule and scorn and outright persecution from those inside the Ministry ... sometimes even from your own family.” Percy flushed bright red and kept his eyes down. “Percy, you have been an over-officious,

pompous git, incredibly rude to your own family, and loyal to that traitorous cur Fudge. But when he declared for Voldemort, you had the courage to break away from him, at the cost of your position in the Ministry. Though you never joined the Order officially, you did your best to counter Fudge's actions and provided much valuable intelligence. Your major offence was not learning how to think for yourself soon enough, and that's not something to punish you for."

"Arthur, I'm naming you the new Minister for Magic. Percy, you're his Deputy. I know the two of you still have disagreements, but I expect you to work together. The Ministry will need rebuilding and reorganizing. I don't want it cluttered with the sort of useless bureaucracy that paralyzed it in the last few years, though. Arthur, I know you dislike the 'system' as much as I do; I'm trusting you to clear a lot of the junk and deadwood out. Percy, you happen to have a good organizational mind and you also know where the 'system' is needed. Between the two of you, you should be able to come to a working balance. Be warned, if things start to get stuffy again, I'm going to chuck the both of you out and start all over with someone else. A lot of the problem with Fudge was that he wasn't accountable to anyone. You will be accountable to me. Got that?"

"Of course, My Lord," said Arthur, and Percy murmured his agreement. Harry stepped down from the dais again, this time to place the gold Seal around Arthur's neck.

"Congratulations, Minister, and good luck," said Harry. "You're probably going to need it. You might want to stick around and watch the rest of the show today and join me for dinner tonight. Some of the rest of your new staff will be appointed by then." There were plenty of seats in the first row – apparently nobody had wanted to draw attention to themselves by sitting there – and Arthur and Percy sat there at his gesture, together for the first time in five years.

"Amelia Bones, you are summoned!"

"Yes, My Lord?"

"This should be fast, Ms. Bones. I appreciate the fact that you were handicapped by your superior at the Ministry, and I appreciate even more your coming over to the Order, and bringing all the Aurors with you, when Fudge defected to Voldemort. That was crucial to our success. With Albus Dumbledore's retirement, the position of Supreme Warlock of the Wizengamot is now open; technically speaking, that should fall to you, and I'd love to have you head it up while we revamp the legal code to bring us at least into the nineteenth century. However, you have done superior work as the head of the Magical Law Enforcement Division, and your expertise would be useful there, too, as we'll need to bring new Aurors in and get them up to speed to replace the dead. I want the courts and the police functions to be separate from now on, though. You can have one position or the other. Not both. Which will it be?"

She thought for a moment, then said, "My Lord, I feel that the judiciary would be the best place for me now. There are others who can bring the Aurors along in my place."

"I had hoped that was what you'd choose. Thank you and welcome aboard. You'll be working closely with Elizabeth; she knows her Muggle law and can help us work out changes that will work for us without violating our own culture." He shook hands with Ms. Bones, allowed her to greet Elizabeth Martin, and then gestured that she should take a seat next to Arthur. Fortunately she didn't seem to object to having her former subordinate promoted over her.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt, you are summoned!"

"What?" said the Auror, who had just returned from depositing Fudge in whatever hole he'd located. "I mean, yes, My Lord?"

"Kingsley, you've got Magical Law Enforcement. The Aurors, Improper Use of Magic, Misuse of Muggle Artefacts, the works. Not the Wizengamot or Wizengamot Support, that's Amelia's, or the Unspeakables. They report to me. Think you can rebuild the force?"

"I'll do my best, Harry – My Lord, but ..."

"But?"

"But a *desk job*?" His horror was evident.

"Unless you can come up with someone who you can trust to do the job better. Take a couple of days to think about it. If you, Amelia and Tonks together can't come up with a better suggestion, the job's yours."

"I ... thank you, My Lord. I think."

"Next. Peter Pettigrew! You are summoned!" There was a disturbance in the very back of the Hall, as if someone was torn between coming forward and making a break for it. "Come on up, you filthy rat! You know you have no choice." Quaking and trembling and obviously fighting the compulsion of the oath, the last Marauder stumbled up the aisle and fell to his knees in front of Harry.

"My Lord ... Master ... please ..."

"I'm not your Master, Wormtail! Your Master died on the Quidditch pitch. He can't protect you any more."

"Mercy ... My Lord ... I was so afraid ... you don't know what his power was like ... I had no choice ..."

"You had choices, Peter. You could have chosen not to betray my parents. Everything flows from that. You should have died rather than betray them. Or you should not have become their Secret-Keeper in the first place. You killed innocent Muggles to fake your own death and frame Sirius Black, who spent twelve years in Azkaban for your crime. When you escaped from us seven years ago, you should have gone into hiding in the deepest dark, and not sought out Voldemort. Instead, you lured Bertha Jorkins to her death. You brought Voldemort back to England. You kept

him alive until a new body could be conjured for him. You willingly gave your flesh for his return. You killed Cedric Diggory, and you took my blood for the ritual that brought Voldemort back. You aided Voldemort through all the years that followed, and the blood of all the Wizards and Muggles who have died in this war, on both sides, stains your hands. You had choices. You made all the wrong ones, and you will pay."

The pasty-faced Wizard huddled on the floor and whimpered before Harry's wrath.

"When I considered what I should do with you," Harry continued in a more conversational tone, "I was first inclined to spare your life."

"Thank you, My Lord ..." came the muffled voice from the floor.

"I said I was first inclined. I wanted to lock you into your rat form, forever removing your magic, and toss you into the slums of London, to live out your life as best you could, in fear of cats, terriers, and children with sticks ... as the rat you truly are. Upon reconsideration, however, I realized that even in that condition, you could still be sought out by others. There would always be those willing to break my spell, or try to, anyway, and use you in Voldemort's place. I spared you once before, and you repaid my mercy with treachery. I choose not to leave the threat you present, no matter how slight it may be, at my back."

"Please ... mercy ... don't send me to Azkaban ... I'll work ... I'll serve you ..."

"I'll give you more mercy than you deserve, Peter. *Avada Kedavra!*" The lurid green light of the spell flashed, and the wasted body of Peter Pettigrew slumped to the floor. "Somebody get rid of that."

There was silence once more while Shackbolt supervised the removal of the body. Nobody dared breathe, lest it draw the attention of the deadly young man on the podium.

Harry consulted his list again. "Hermione, we have an accounting for this one." The young witch passed up a scroll, which Harry glanced at as if to refresh his recollection.

"Alexander Trowbridge, you are summoned!" A ripple of surprised comment ran through the room, fuelled in part by relief on the part of those not called.

"Trowbridge?" "Who's he?" "What did he do?" "Anybody even know what side he was on?" Necks craned so people could see as a frightened young man, perhaps twenty-five years of age, walked to the front of the Hall. He seemed to be quite unremarkable.

"My Lord, I ... I am here."

"Trowbridge, you backed the party of Lord Voldemort?"

"I ... I did, My Lord."

"May I ask why?"

"I thought ... I thought he was going to win, sir. I thought I might ... might get a Ministry position, might protect my son's heritage ..."

"You have a son?"

"He's three years old, My Lord. Please, I didn't know what Voldemort was really like. I didn't ... I never even saw him until the last duel ... I never killed anyone for him ..." Trowbridge made a visible effort to pull himself together. "My Lord," he said, his voice stronger. "I willingly accept whatever judgment you make. But please ... don't visit my mistake on my son. Don't make him pay for my error."

Harry stared down at the young man for a moment, his lips pursed in consideration. "Very well. I have here your accounting of your finances. Half of the funds in your Gringott's account are confiscated for the reparations fund. Your house and real property remain yours, subject to search by Aurors and confiscation and destruction of any Dark artefacts found therein. If you do have anything of that sort, it would be looked on favourably if you handed it over voluntarily before the Aurors have to go looking for it and tearing things up. You are sentenced to three years of community service, to aid in the reconstruction effort, wherever your talents best suit you. You shall live at home with your wife and child, and will be confined to your own property any time you're not working as directed. Your wife and child are free to come and go as they wish. If anyone harasses them, the culprit shall answer to me."

Relief swept the young wizard, who was barely older than Harry himself. "Thank you, My Lord," he said, bowing deeply. "You are far more generous than I deserve."

"Go home, Trowbridge. Go home to your family. You will be contacted about your assignment."

"Yes, My Lord. Thank you, My Lord." He bowed one more time, backed off a few paces, then turned and practically fled the Great Hall.

Harry eased the tension in his shoulders. He'd established his precedents. Punishments for those who required them. Promotion and perks, but with accountability, for those who deserved them. Mercy for those who were not truly culpable in the Dark Lord's excesses. Things would move more quickly now.

By the end of the day, he'd executed several more of Voldemort's Inner Circle, some begging and pleading and some standing defiant (Avery actually attempted to spit in his eye). He'd executed one Auror who had been working for the Order when he decided to rape the wife and daughter of a captured Death Eater and then killed the man when he had the temerity to object. A group of Hogwarts students, sixth- and seventh-year Ravenclaws and Slytherins for the most part, he sent back to school, sentencing them to "castle arrest", one year's service each when they left school, and instructions to keep their noses clean in the future. Rank-and-file Death Eaters, the young who had joined recently, who had taken part

In no atrocities, and those who had young children at home, received sentences of various periods of service and fines to be paid to the reparations fund. Most got to keep their wands. Aurors, agents, and others who had fought for the Order were rewarded. The werewolves were particularly happy when Harry overturned the laws that had kept them unemployed and impoverished, and decreed that any werewolf who wanted it would be provided with Wolfsbane potion at no cost, in memory of Remus Lupin.

Even so, the Hall was still half full at the end of the day, and those remaining were emotionally strung out from the stress of waiting in anticipation of their names being called. Harry took two scrolls from Hermione, who had been acting as keeper of the petitions for the day. "These will be the last two matters I deal with today," he announced. "Those of you whose cases have not been dealt with today must return tomorrow. You can return to your own homes, or stay the night here. A dinner buffet will be laid out, and if you choose to stay here, let one of the house elves know and rooms will be prepared for you." He unrolled the last two scrolls. "Narcissa Black Malfoy and Bellatrix Black Lestrange, you are summoned!"

Narcissa took a deep breath to steady herself, while her son's eyes widened. The young Malfoy had obviously thought she was there to support him, not because she had business of her own before the new Lord. He clutched at her arm as she stood, disentangling herself gently from his grip, and went forward. Bellatrix Lestrange, coming from her seat at the rear of the Hall, followed her younger sister, and they stood side by side before Harry.

"Interestingly enough, I received similar petitions from both of you ladies. Both of you have offered me your personal services, indeed your very bodies, for such use as I see fit, in exchange for ... well, we don't need to go into that right now. May I ask you, did the two of you come up with this little ploy together?" Narcissa shook her head, and Bellatrix glared at her sister, making it obvious there was no connivance. The flamboyant Lestrange would not have been willing to share her spotlight with anyone, even a sibling.

"I must admit, you're very striking together. I'm tempted. Seriously tempted."

A strangled cry of "Harry, no!" came from Hermione's end of the dais, and he grinned wickedly.

"As a matter of fact, I think I will. What's the point in being Lord if I can't indulge myself occasionally? For a test run, anyway. You have tonight to convince me that your services are worth what you want from me in exchange. Final judgment to be passed in the morning. Ginny, would you escort these ladies to the, the Red Chamber, I think, and make sure they're ... garbed appropriately. And have the house elves bring them some dinner if they want. I'll attend them after dinner. Oh, Tonks, would you mind keeping their wands for the evening? Thanks."

The redheaded young woman was slightly nonplussed for a moment, then, remembering her duties as Harry's chatelaine and hostess, stood to lead them out of the room, keeping her face perfectly expressionless. Tonks collected the wands and slipped them into a pocket of her robe as the older women left, obediently following Ginny. Elizabeth Martin appeared occupied with some notes she'd made of the proceedings. Hermione, on the other hand, was barely managing to contain herself, balanced on the edge of her chair.

Harry stood to address the rest of the gathering. "The rest of you are dismissed until the morning. Dinner is being served in the dining hall. Elizabeth, since Ginny's occupied, will you escort our guests?" The elegant Squib nodded and proceeded to a side door, followed by some of the guests. Draco Malfoy jumped to his feet and stormed out of the Hall, choosing not to take advantage of Harry's hospitality under the circumstances.

As Harry stepped down from the dais, Hermione leaped to confront him. "Harry, how can you do ... do ...!" He quieted her spluttering by placing a finger across her lips in warning.

"I told you, Hermione, that I'd be doing things you don't like. This is one of them. It's going to get worse before it gets better. If you can't cope with that, well ..." He shrugged. "This world has changed, Hermione. If you don't like it, you can always go back to the Muggle world. *You* have the option. But if you stay, I'll thank you not to question me in public again. Council meetings are one thing. Open court is quite another. Are we clear?" His voice was like ice.

"Quite. May I be excused, My Lord?" So was hers. He nodded, and she whirled and sought one of the other side exits from the room.

Harry shook his head, then dismissed the matter, turning to go in to dinner with his new Minister for Magic and the Chief Sorceress of the Wizengamot.