

The Price of Peace

By

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Chapter I

Saturday, December 21, 1996

The six friends were sitting together on the holiday train to London, taking a break from patrolling. Relations were still a bit strained over the peace proposed by The Movement for Pure-Bloods.

Draco Malfoy opened the door from the corridor, and stood there, smirking.

Harry sighed. "Something to say, Malfoy?"

"No, no; just enjoying the sight of one of the last Mud-bloods to attend Hogwarts."

"Unlikely," Hermione said in a bored voice.

"Improbable," agreed Ginny, in the same tone.

"Any other clever observations?" Neville added.

Malfoy scowled.

"Krum did that much better," commented Ron, keeping up the tone.

"No, Krum could do it without getting so red," Harry pointed out.

"But is that a failure on Draco's part, or an added attraction?" Luna asked.

"You'll all be the ones . . . the ones"

"Mocked?" Ginny asked.

"Ridiculed?" Hermione asked.

"Scorned?" Ron asked.

"Jeered?" Neville asked.

"Derided?" Harry asked.

"He doesn't seem to have much of a vocabulary today, does he?" Luna asked the group.

Malfoy tried to slam the door as he left, but it merely slid shut a little on the hard side.

"It was nice for Malfoy to try to keep up the tradition," Harry commented. "I almost missed it last September."

"Too bad he didn't reach for his wand," Ron said. "I really like the new tradition of hexing the little ferret."

There was a lull in the conversation. "Life will be different when we get back," Hermione finally said.

The rest of the group looked at her, puzzled.

"January Sixth is the first day of classes. Either life is going to get harder because of this peace, whatever it is, or the wizarding world will be split and in a civil war."

"Merry Christmas," Neville said, bitterly.

"Joy to the world," added Ginny.

"Peace on Earth, good will to man," Harry said with a sigh.

"And yet it does look so peaceful," Ron said, looking out at the fields they were passing. "There should be hope."

"God, bless us, every one," Hermione quoted.

"She will," Luna said, serenely. The group each smiled slightly, and again lapsed into silence.

Harry stared out the window, worried about the night.

The week before, Harry had been called into a meeting with Dumbledore, Snape, and his cousin Edward Potter, the new Runes professor at Hogwarts.

"Harry," Dumbledore started, "would you consider not going back to Potter Place for the start of the holidays?"

"You mean you want me to stay here?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"No," Snape stated, as if Harry should know better than to ask such a question, "anywhere but here or Potter Place. How about your other relatives?"

"No!" Harry stated quickly and firmly. Then he asked, puzzled, "Why?"

Snape rolled his eyes, but Edward broke in, "Come on, Severus, it's not THAT obvious!" He turned to Harry. "To be blunt, between your own growing abilities in Occlumency and the protections that are in place here and at Potter Place, there's no chance that you and Voldemort will make a mental connection."

"And that's bad?" Harry asked.

"Normally, no," Snape admitted. "At the moment, if you are willing, it could be very helpful."

"Why?"

"Because we are getting some very odd information," Dumbledore told Harry.

"As you should know," Snape took up the tale, "many of the Death Eaters were appalled to learn that Tom Riddle was the worst sort of half-blood. Reports have reached us that, in fact, rather than helping him heal, they are torturing Riddle. They would like to kill him, but are afraid that if anyone other than you kills him, he will merely be disembodied again."

"And therefore able to come back?" Harry asked.

"Exactly," Snape agreed. "The same applies if the peace is made, and Riddle is given up. You're unlikely to execute him, and wherever he is imprisoned, he will then recover and at some point, probably after you're long gone, he will be back. And next time, he will be after everyone."

"He has made several major miscalculations since his come-back," Dumbledore stated. "His young, hungry Death Eaters had found places in society and were less than enthusiastic; his Associate was a better schemer; you were more powerful. He wasted his time over the Prophecy instead of firming up his positions."

Dumbledore halted a moment, as if to ask for questions, then continued. "We do not know for certain if all this is a plot against Voldemort, or a plot by Voldemort. We could only know if you make contact with him. We do not ask this lightly, but will understand if you prefer not to."

"I'd prefer not to, but I . . . might," Harry decided. "Not at the Dursleys!"

"You would not be alone," Dumbledore told Harry. "One of us would be with you, and if there is someone you truly trust, they could travel with your mind as well. It would not be easy to arrange, but not terribly difficult, either."

"Who would you feel most comfortable with?" Edward asked. "I can be with you, but I think you would need someone else as well, one of your friends, whom you can both trust and, most importantly, whom you are willing to let see you at your vulnerable."

Harry thought a moment. "Luna, or Hermione," Harry said after a few moments more.

"Could those two work together?" Snape asked. "The more support you have, the better, Potter."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe."

Dumbledore and Edward exchanged a look. "I shall consider it," Dumbledore finally said. "Professor Snape shall prepare a set of potions which will help you and your friends easily attain the necessary mental states, and maintain your basic control."

"Thank you." Harry paused. "Does this mean the pro-peace negotiations are still going on?"

All three adults sighed. "It looks like they might actually sign something," Edward said.

"And if they do, the enemy goes underground for a while, and when they come out again, they will be more powerful and dangerous," Dumbledore said, "and our culture may be even more divided than it has been this past year."

Harry's attention came back to the present. The train was pulling into the station. Harry had never seen Platform 9 3/4 this time of year. It looked hectic in the autumn and spring, but now it looked cold and deserted. While nearly all the students were leaving for the holidays, not all the students leaving had to take the train.

The sextet walked off onto the half-deserted Platform. All six greeted Molly Weasley and Carole Potter, and then they waited for Edward, who was again one of the teachers on the train.

The crowd quickly thinned out. It was therefore easy to see Mrs. Longbottom (or at least her infamous vulture hat) coming towards the group.

"Mrs. Weasley, Mrs. Potter," Mrs. Longbottom said formally, and as always starting with those she deemed most important. "Doctor Potter, children."

Neville blushed, while the three adults greeted the matriarch. Luna clasped Harry's hand, and he could tell from her shaking that she was having a difficult time not giggling. Ron and Ginny, used to their many relatives, bore the treatment well. Harry and Hermione rolled their eyes.

"Well," Mrs. Longbottom said briskly a moment later, "no time to lose. Miss Weasley, I hope you are ready?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Ginny said eagerly. She would stay with the Longbottoms until the morning of Christmas Eve.

"Neville, you haven't forgotten anything?"

"No, Grandmother!"

The old lady eyed Neville. "Where's that toad?"

Ginny reached down and pulled Trevor, in a travel-terrarium she and Hermione had procured, out from behind her backpack. "You've raised a fine, intelligent girl there, Mrs. Weasley," Mrs. Longbottom stated. "Come, children!" The pair hurried to catch up.

Edward pulled out a long rope. "You like making portkeys out of ropes, don't you, dear?" Carole teased.

"I hadn't realized until this year how difficult they are to make," Hermione said. "I can't wait to learn!"

"Once you learn to Apparate by coordinates, it will probably come easily to you," Edward told her, making Hermione beam with pride. "Most people can't do them, but you probably can."

Carole, Edward, Hermione, Luna, and Harry took a hold of one piece of rope, and they and their possessions took off. That left Ron with Mrs. Weasley.

"I wish I knew what they were up to," Ron complained.

"They'll tell us all about it Christmas Eve, dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "They're going to visit those Dursleys, then they have a little project to do tonight and tomorrow. And no, I do NOT know what it is. Harry will be going to Luna's Monday, and Hermione will be going home. We'll all be with them Christmas Eve and morning." Everyone was to be gathered at Potter Place.

Ron was still sulking a bit. "Cheer up, dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "After all, you get to go to Hermione's Christmas night. You won't have to share her then." Ron's ears blazed red, and they exited the Platform together. They were to meet Arthur Weasley for dinner near the Ministry and then take an 8:00 portkey home.

The group portkeyed to a hotel not far from Little Whinging. Hermione went to spend the late afternoon and evening with her parents, whom Edward had convinced, with some trouble, to go along with the plan for the weekend.

Edward drove Carole, Harry, and Luna to Privet Drive (in a new American SUV, not the sports car). Harry dropped off a package at Mrs. Figg's (catnip toys for her many cats), and then they went on to Privet Drive.

Harry had forgotten how sterile Christmas was at the Dursleys. There was a small 'tasteful' wreath on the door, and no other decoration. As it was after dark, the curtains, of whatever Petunia had determined were the current 'correct' shade and style according to the women's magazines, were already closed over the sheer drapes that shielded the interior from prying eyes during the daylight. Near the electrified fireplace would be the small artificial tree, carefully reassembled from the previous years. A 'special angel' lit the top, and one new long strand of tiny unblinking blue lights and one of gold would have been wound around the tree (new each year, so that there would not be any dead lights, or, equally bad to Petunia, slightly mis-matched ones). The 48 ornaments would have been placed exactly where they had been every year, unless Dudley had again broken one last year. Then, a new 'heirloom' would have been purchased.

Harry wondered, resentfully, how Petunia dealt with breakage of any sort, now that he wasn't there to blame. "Probably blames me anyway," Harry muttered.

Luna silently took off her gloves and held Harry's cold hand. His Muggle relatives were the one subject Harry never wanted to talk about in all the times they talked together. When alone in the collapsed tunnel Harry had converted into their den, Harry would talk about anything else Luna was interested in: his fears; his fights with Voldemort; his feelings about his friends and teachers. He had cried in her arms over the death of Sirius more than once. She had cuddled him when the responsibilities he potentially had concerning the ridding of the world of Tom Riddle threatened to over-power him.

But not one word on the Dursleys, other than a few asides when dealing with other matters (summers with the Weasleys and Edward, primarily). Luna had resolutely gotten some of the story from Ginny and Carole. Ginny had then gotten more of the story from Ron and Hagrid

to pass on to Luna. Finally, Hermione interceded before any of the males could get suspicious, and told Luna and Ginny everything she knew and surmised as well.

Hermione did not feel she could ever feel totally comfortable with someone like Luna, but she was good for Harry. That was enough for her.

Luna therefore had some idea what the Dursleys were like, although she still had a difficult time believing it. Like many people who had been raised by loving parents, Luna had problems understanding how parents (biological or surrogate) could be out-right abusive. She could understand distant parents, ineffectual parents, overly-indulgent parents (like her own father, after the death of her mother), smotheringly affectionate/concerned parents (the Weasleys' mother sometimes sounded like that, from Ginny's descriptions), even childish parents (like Harry's late godfather). Luna knew parents could just plain bring up children badly (Draco Malfoy seemed to be an example of that, to her mind). She could even understand parents who hurt their child by not understanding what the child needed, or who hurt their child by not loving it enough.

But the emotional abuse she'd been told about was far beyond Luna's comprehension.

The Dursley's hatred of magic made sense only because that possible attitude had been drilled into her as a typical Muggle reaction. She still could not reconcile that with their out-right abuse.

In any event, Luna understood and shared Harry's apprehension. She was half-tempted to shock the Muggles -- to wear her charmed owl earrings, which would blink and hoot, or her mother's old snake bracelet, which would writhe around her wrist. These Muggles knew about magic, after all, and so she could show off, if she had wanted to.

Luna had refrained, however. She was dressed in a plain black and gray outfit, with her mother's heavy winter dark green cloak. Harry took a deep breath, managed to hold himself back from knocking, and opened the door.

"Aunt Petunia," he called in warning, "I'm home!" He took everyone to the sitting room, where the Dursleys were waiting. "Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon, Dudley, this is my girlfriend Luna Lovegood, and Edward's wife Carole Potter."

"Well," Carole said just after they left nearly two hours later, "that was . . . interesting."

"They were almost pleasant," Harry said. "Aunt Petunia actually made a good effort, for her."

Carole shuddered delicately. "Your uncle wasn't very pleased to see me, was he?" she asked.

"I'm sure he'd like to see the entire wizarding world on birth control," Edward said.

"Hate, as opposed to dislike, is so difficult to related to, unless you share the particular bias," Luna said. "Mrs. Dursley dislikes us because she could not share in our world. She was jealous, and then picked up her husband's biases." Luna knew that the Evans' had been descended from squibs.

"Dudley is also understandable. He grew up in that household, and he's not very bright." She shook her head. "I don't understand Mister Dursley, though; why he has such hatred of our world. Is he from a squib family, too?"

"No," Edward said, "his family has been amazingly well-researched. The Dursleys are a totally-Muggle family as far as we can tell. They became an upper-middle class family, from obscure origins, in the late Eighteenth-century. Over the last three generations, they've dropped into the true middle of the middle class, even though the family has died out and that should have helped concentrate the wealth, even with the Muggle taxation policies." He shrugged. "I doubt if it will survive beyond Dudley."

"But nothing to suggest why he hates me so much?" Harry asked.

"No, not a thing."

Harry, Edward, Carole, Luna, and Hermione gathered in Harry's hotel room around 10:10. "How does this work?" Luna asked, nervously. Harry had retreated into the bathroom.

"The potions open your minds to a degree," Edward explained, "and, with Harry as your focus, you will see what he sees but will not be able to come directly into the vision unless both he and I will it. We cannot invade your minds, nor can you invade mine. Harry will sense your upper-most thoughts -- you will have to really 'speak' with your mind for him to hear you. If you concentrate, however, he will feel your emotions. Remember, you are not here to judge; you have agreed to be here to support Harry."

Both teens nodded.

"It's possible that you will feel the backwash of Harry's emotions," Edward went on. "Well, you should be able to imagine what Harry might feel confronting Voldemort: anger; angst; terror; helplessness; any number of things. That's why Harry picked you two, and not Ron."

Luna and Hermione looked at each other, understanding. "We're ready," Luna said. Hermione nodded her agreement.

"Then take the potions; they take at least fifteen minutes to work, and will last about five to six hours. If we can't make contact tonight, we can't repeat the experiment for at least two weeks."

All three nodded, and the girls drank the first of three potions. Harry finally came out of the bathroom, looking very pale.

"I'll be watching all four of you for signs of stress," Carole told them. She turned to the girls. "I can pull either of you out if I have to without breaking the over-all charm. So, if that happens, try not to struggle."

Harry followed the trail of magic connecting him to Voldemort. It was hard to find at first, but once found, the path was clear. It led him to a dingy room, from which he retreated quickly. Harry retreated until he felt the others: Edward's power; Hermione's intelligence; Luna's peacefulness.

"What's happened?" Edward asked.

"Bellatrix Lestrange was . . . hitting Voldemort with the Cruciatius," Harry explained. "It was hard to tell, but it looked like she'd been at it for quite a while."

"Then we'll wait a bit; whenever she's done, he'll need to rest," Edward said simply. "Unless you want to stop? We have the basic information."

Harry hesitated. There was a lot he could try to do. "No; I'll try for more."

Harry retraced his path just over an hour later.

"I was wondering if you would try and make contact," the familiar hissing voice stated into Harry's mind.

"What?" the voice went on a moment later, "nothing to say to me, Potter?"

"No, no not really. I have most of the information I came for. Is there anything you want to say to us?"

"Us?" There was a pause. Harry really couldn't totally focus in on images yet, but he felt in control of himself. "Ah, I sense your cousin behind you. He is indeed powerful, and you have been well-trained. I wondered why I could not penetrate your defenses."

"You're being tortured, and all you can think of is attacking me?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Yes!" Voldemort hissed. "I will find a way to survive my betrayal!"

"How?" Harry demanded. "You tried to lead a group who only believe in blood, when you don't really have what they care about."

"I have made errors," Voldemort conceded. "Those people weakened while I was gone. I should have killed them all and started over! And I should have killed that little bastard for real!"

"What do you mean, for real . . . you mean your Associate!"

"That was another mistake," Voldemort acknowledged. "I pretended to kill him, and sent him to America to set up an organization for me. After I . . . encountered you a few months later, he started thinking himself independent. I should have secured Britain first, then moved across the Atlantic."

"Who . . . who is he?"

"You know who the bastard is, Potter! That driven little twerp! Always in the shadows, brilliant but always looking up to the stronger! He was almost as bad as Wormtail."

"Who!" Harry commanded.

"Regulus Black."

Chapter II

Harry tried to absorb the news. He could feel the surprise from his three supporters as well. "So, Potter, do you intend to try and kill me?" Voldemort mocked, "Or just look upon me with awe?"

Harry rallied. "Why do you still want to live? Tortured like this!"

Voldemort snorted. "Everyone is frightened of killing me, Potter. My ex-followers will turn me over to the Ministries, and they will trap me underground in some old platinum mine, where I cannot Disapparate. Sooner or later, you will die, and I, in this body or disembodied and looking for a new one, will return."

"And who will follow you? The Pure-bloods will reject you. Are you going to raise an army of Muggle-borns and Half-bloods, with your record?" Harry was glad Hermione and Edward had talked about Voldemort's options.

Harry could feel Voldemort's anger. "I told you before, Potter, there is no real good or evil, just power! There will always be those who want power, and I am powerful! I will rely on them, not these fools with their own agendas!"

"Then one will stab you in the back, just like Bellatrix and Regulus!" Harry could feel Voldemort's anger grow, but there was an underlying fear, and a feeling of desperation, that were growing even faster. Harry's anger was also growing, almost matching his opponent's. "You're afraid to die, and I sometimes don't know if you should; maybe you should live for thousands of years, tens of thousands of years, rejected by every generation. People can point at you, and say 'See children, that deformed creature is evil. As long as you DON'T act or think like THAT thing, you're probably not evil.'"

Voldemort roared incoherently at Harry. Harry yelled back. **"You've accomplished nothing in your existence except death and destruction! Even by your own sick standards, you've failed, time and time again!"**

Voldemort's mind again tried to attack Harry's mind and spirit, using all Voldemort's power, and this time Harry felt the attack and fought back. Rather than finding himself inside Harry's mind where he could attack, however, Voldemort found his spirit surrounded by Harry's mind instead. Voldemort realized his last mistakes -- he had forgotten Harry was not alone and that Harry had obviously been trained in this form of magic. They were not fused, like they had been for those moments the previous June; instead Harry was all around him, squeezing the life force that Tom Riddle had mutated time and time again. He could tell Harry was being supported by at least two other minds, and one of them, Edward's, was nearly as accomplished in mental attacks as Voldemort was himself -- and together, the minds were much more powerful.

Harry's anger was focused by Edward's power, and Voldemort found himself, for the first time, in a far weaker position in a mental battle. Harry could also draw on Edward's raw power as well as his own, and Luna's Second Sight allowed Harry to find every chink in Voldemort's defenses, and slip through them.

Harry's anger was also supported by love: the love Harry had had for Sirius and the love Harry wished he could have shared with his parents; Harry's love for Edward, Carole, and the

baby; Harry's romantic love for Luna and his platonic love for Hermione. Harry's affection for Ron, Ginny, Neville, Remus, Hagrid, and a host of others fed his power, and the love Edward, Luna, and Hermione felt for Harry fed it even more.

Voldemort could touch Harry physically after being recreated in part by Harry's blood, but the love Harry contained burned Voldemort's spirit even more than it had burned the Voldemort/Quirrel hybrid's body four and a half years earlier. It burned Voldemort's spirit now more than it had six months before at the Ministry, when Harry had driven Voldemort from his mind with the force of his emotions. And this time, Voldemort could not escape.

Sunday, December 22, 1996

Harry woke up with a headache and unable to move. The light was streaming into his hotel room, hitting him right in the face.

After a moment's reflection, the previous night's battle came back to him, making him feel sick to his stomach. Then, the reason he was unable to move became apparent, distracting him. He had been exhausted, and had fallen instantly into a deep, healing sleep. Luna must have as well, as Harry felt arms circle around his neck and hug his face to a firm chest, while hair covered his head.

All dark thoughts fled. Harry leaned forward and stretched up past the breasts, and kissed lips softer than he remembered. The pair adjusted slightly, and the sunlight must have hit the girl's eyes. "Busy old fool, unruly sun. . . ." the girl murmured through the kiss before kissing Harry more deeply than he had ever been kissed before.

Harry's eyes flew open, although his lips were still engaged. "E'mione!" he was almost able to say.

Hermione's eyes flew open, and their lips unlocked. "Harry!" she gasped. Harry removed his hand from its intimate placement.

"My goodness," Luna said, coming in from the bathroom, "I leave you two alone for three minutes. . . ."

Harry and Hermione separated from each other guiltily. Luna knelt on the bed and kissed Hermione on the forehead and gathered the pair into a hug. She kissed Harry lightly on the lips. "Now I was just teasing! Don't go feeling guilty or anything. After what happened last night, we just collapsed here. We're all very respectably dressed, and Harry thought you were me, and I assume you thought Harry was Ron."

Hermione nodded, almost as red in the face as Ron would have been in a similar situation. "Now, since I'm sure you two don't want to carry on," both Harry and Hermione shook their heads, "and it's still somewhat early, maybe we should talk about last night?"

Harry's blush disappeared as he went very pale. "I did it, didn't I? I killed Voldemort."

"We killed him," Hermione said. "You supplied the focus, but you couldn't have done it without our active support and cooperation." Hermione's lower lip trembled. "We actually . . ."

killed someone. We murdered someone in cold blood. As evil as he was . . . we still executed him." Hermione started to cry.

Luna and Harry brought Hermione back into a group hug. "I feel . . . awful," Harry said a few minutes later, when all three had stopped crying. Harry was now laying on his back, a girl cradled in each arm, lying against his chest. "I feel awful," he repeated, "but I don't think I feel like a murderer."

"I never thought I could kill someone," Luna said thoughtfully. "And, having done it, I can't see how some people can kill so . . . casually. Even the quick death of such an awful person was awful to just witness, let alone . . . participate in. I can understand how we can feel justified, but how can some enjoy it?" She shuddered at the memories.

"It was justified, wasn't it?" Hermione asked. "I mean, if someone didn't . . . execute him, he would have just kept on coming back, killing more innocent people, right?"

"Right," Harry said. He did not know what made him feel worse: having destroyed the spirit of Voldemort, or having divided the responsibility with two of the most important people in his life, two lovely women he cared so much for. Still, "He would have killed again and again. And, at least according to that damn Prophecy, only I could have done it. I knew I might have to do it last night! I'm sorry you two had to help. . . ."

"Don't think that way, Harry," Hermione told him.

"I don't like that you had to do that," Luna stated, "but you did have to. And, since you had to, then I'm glad I helped you. You always have to remember, you didn't do it alone, my love."

"We're with you, always," Hermione said. The two kissed Harry's cheeks, then Hermione got off the bed. "I guess I should go back to my room and get changed. I have to meet Mum and Dad for breakfast at Nine."

"See you Christmas Eve, Hermione," Harry said. After a few more goodbyes, Hermione left.

Luna looked at the clock. "I guess we should shower and get ready for breakfast, too." She walked over to the door which connected her room to Harry's. "If you'd care to join me, you can find out how to distinguish my body from Hermione's."

Harry blushed, but went to join her, his hormones washing away his feelings of guilt, at least for the moment -- which was Luna's intention. They had never done anything similar before.

Ron Weasley was bored and angry. Bored, because there was little to do at the Burrow. He and his mother were home alone. Mr. Weasley was putting in overtime now, to insure himself time off for Christmas. Bill and Fleur had just set up housekeeping together, and were almost never seen by anyone outside of work. Percy was involved with the negotiations with the Pure-Bloods, and had still not said anything to any member of the family since the revelations of the previous June, except that he now nodded a greeting to his father at work. Charlie was back in Romania; the twins were living over their shop. Ginny was at Neville's. Worst of all, Hermione was with Harry.

Ron was angry because he had been excluded from whatever Harry was up to. Harry had told him it was not a matter of trust, but a matter of who he needed to help him. That did not make Ron feel much better.

Ron was not sure what Hermione could do that he could not, and was not sure he wanted to find out. He tried not to begrudge her whatever task she was doing, even if Harry was supposed to be his best mate. He knew he loved Hermione; he just missed being with her.

Still, the sextet would be together in the early afternoon of Christmas Eve, and hopefully he would find things out then. Until then, Ron had to pack up the Christmas presents that were going to Potter Place.

Ron would not have been quite so envious of Ginny if he could have seen her. Neville was, as always, very sweet towards her. Still, except for Neville himself, visiting the Longbottoms was like visiting Molly Weasley's stuffiest relatives. There was no yelling and no laughing at Longbottom Hall. There were few Longbottoms, but Grandmother Longbottom had a large family. Ginny had decided that Neville must be closely related to every stuffy, well-off wizarding family that was not closely related to the Blacks and Malfoys and the other darker Wizarding families, and in that, she was not far from wrong. Had Ginny been familiar with Victorian house parties, she would have made the comparison.

There were people coming and going all day every day, but there were never less than nine guests (besides Ginny) at any given time, and there were always sixteen at dinner (although who the sixteen were partially changed every evening). Breakfast was a huge buffet from 7:30 - 8:30; there was a three-course lunch (soup, salad, meat-and-veggie) at noon; high tea was at 4:30; and there was a six course dinner (soup, fish, meat-potato-hot veggie, salad, desert, cheese plate) at 8:00.

At least all that food gave Ginny and Neville lots of excuses to go walking between being stuffed with food. Neville's relatives seemed a bit confused -- obviously their opinion of him had gone up dramatically over the previous six months, but they still were not used to it. His having a guest present, for the first time, apparently made them even more respectful.

Ginny knew she really liked Neville, but she was not sure how far the relationship might go, or how long it might last. Neville obviously either was deeply in love with her, or thought he was. Between the politeness needed for the visit, her affection for Neville, and yet not wanting to give Neville too much encouragement, Ginny was starting to feel the stress of the visit by Monday evening.

Hermione Granger left the hotel with her parents late that Sunday morning in a very quiet mood. Up until the middle of the previous summer, she had been very open with her parents about the events in the wizarding world. Since then, she had heavily censored the information she'd given them.

She certainly had to censor what had happened the night before.

She had told them earlier that month about the proposed attempt at apartheid the Pure-Bloods were after, and so had no qualms about telling them about the appalling discovery of who was behind it. (Hermione felt that Harry still had not processed that bit of information.) However, the death of the Dark Lord had to be disguised. It was up to Dumbledore and Edward to work out what should be done about that bomb-shell. Hermione decided to put that all aside until Christmas Eve.

She and her parents would be spending Christmas Eve and Christmas morning at Potter Place. Hermione decided she had best prepare them for the shedding of their blood for the protection of the House of Potter.

Hermione sighed. She rather expected them to either refuse to go, or show up with a box of sterilized lancets, for the proper drawing of blood.

"What's wrong, dear?" her mother asked.

"Missing Ron already?" her father teased.

The Lovegood's cottage, on the opposite side of Ottery St. Catchpole from the Weasleys, was still not quite restored from the Death Eater attack of the previous summer. Harry therefore spent Sunday afternoon, Monday, and Tuesday morning at the Lovegood's flat in Diagon Alley.

For the most part, being with Luna kept Harry from brooding too much on the death of Voldemort and the revelation of his Associate. At least, it kept him from brooding until he went to bed in the small guest room. Harry stayed awake until well after midnight that first night. That was when Luna slipped into the room that night and then the next one, and let Harry fall asleep in her arms, comforting him as he basically cried himself to sleep.

Because the Peace negotiations were very active (although so secret Dumbledore's spies could get nothing from the Ministry, nor could Snape get any information from his spies within the enemy), even the original terms being negotiated had not been revealed. However, the truce until January 6th had been well-publicized for over a week. Under the circumstances, The Truth could not come right out in opposition. The editors of The Daily Prophet had perhaps learned their lesson, and it too was somewhat cautious, although not to the degree of The Truth.

Still, Diagon Alley was a fairly festive place, as most denizens hoped there would be peace. Harry dug deep into one of the piles of gold in his Gringotts vault, and also made three trips into Muggle London. He was determined to make up for his lack of presents over the previous years, where only Ron and Hermione received presents of any real consideration. Luna went with him on most of his trips, both to make certain he did not go too far over-board and to make certain she did not buy her much, either.

Like herself, Luna could see Harry was putting off thinking about what had happened Saturday night, despite Harry's crying himself to sleep every night in her arms. By Christmas Eve, she hoped, they should be able to talk about it as a group, and Edward might have found out more information.

Edward, meanwhile, spent all day Sunday through Monday morning conferring with Dumbledore and Snape.

Edward had sent word to Dumbledore right after midnight, just as soon as he had determined the three teens had indeed suffered no physical damage. Carole had left with him, which is how Luna and Hermione ended up putting Harry to bed, and wound up falling asleep there as well.

Dumbledore had hurried off to confer with Fudge early the next morning, and gotten little satisfaction for his trouble.

Tuesday, December 24, 1996

Harry, Luna, and Mister Lovegood arrived at Potter Place at 10:00 am. Unlike the previous summer, when guests had arrived near the back-bridge, this winter they would arrive at the front bridge. They still had to arrive by portkey, of course, but the front bridge was set up for that. Guests could arrive in a mid-gothic-era reception hall, and pledge their friendliness there. The larger front-stone bridge was covered, although it was still over sixty yards from the end of the bridge to the main entrance to the castle. The house elves would move any heavy luggage.

Harry stayed in the reception hall, to await the other guests.

Ron and Molly were the next to arrive. Ron showed his mother around parts of the castle he knew, deposited the presents he was carrying under the huge tree in the solarium, and then escorted his mother to the fifth floor corridor that had some of the guest rooms.

Ron found Edward waiting for him as he took his rucksack into 'Harry's turret.' "What?" Ron asked, startled.

"We need to talk a little, Ron," Edward said.

"About Saturday night?" Edward nodded. "Well, it's about time!"

"Tell me," Edward asked, "if you were going to go into danger, what two friends would you want with you?"

"Harry," Ron said promptly. "I guess Hermione would be the other person; she usually is." Ron was not very pleased about the idea of Hermione going into danger anymore.

"How about if there was no physical danger, but there would be the need for fast thinking and intelligence."

"Hermione, of course," Ron answered. "And Harry, or maybe Ginny."

"What if there was a chance your mask would be stripped off?" Seeing that confused Ron, Edward tried to explain. "We all wear a mask; our personalities help hide our deepest emotions and secrets. Think about that aspect of yourself, Ron."

Ron looked very uncomfortable. "Tell me, who would you trust to see the most vulnerable parts of you?" Edward asked.

"I guess Hermione, and maybe Ginny." This wasn't something Ron thought he could easily share with anyone. But Hermione and Ginny might be more . . . accepting his weaknesses. "That's why Harry wanted Luna and Hermione with him Saturday night?"

"Exactly. Most of us males don't like showing our most vulnerable sides to other males, even our best mates. Now, as things turned out, we could have had you there, but we didn't know that before hand. Harry and I will explain things tonight, but in case it isn't clear, that's why he asked Luna and Hermione, his girlfriend and the girl who acts like his older sister."

"Thanks," Ron said, "I was wondering what was up." Edward smiled, but Ron stopped him. "Who all is coming, by the way?" He had been too upset about being left out to ask.

"A large number of Weasleys besides you," Edward answered. "Your Uncle Jacob; his son, wife, and two daughters, although of course they won't be staying here tonight; your parents; the twins; Bill and his girlfriend Fleur; Hermione and her parents; Ginny and Neville; Luna and her father, and Tonks. Add in three Potters, that's twenty-three for dinner tonight, eighteen staying sleeping here tonight. We could hold more."

"Not Professor Lupin?" Ron asked.

"It's a full moon tonight, Ron," Edward reminded him.

"Oh," Ron replied, feeling rather silly, "right."

"If he's up to it, he'll be here for breakfast, as will a number of others," Edward went on. "Everyone will probably be gone by noon on Boxing Day, except for Luna and her father. They'll be leaving in a few days."

"So fairly full," Ron said, for lack of anything else to say.

"Yes; a real family Christmas," Edward said, his voice sounding sad. Ron then remembered that the Potter family, while never the size of the Weasleys, had been a fairly substantial family before the massacre in 1978. "Come down to the breakfast room any time for lunch." Despite the name, Ron knew that was the smaller of the two dining rooms in the castle.

Ron decided that would be a good place to wait for everyone to show up.

Chapter III

"So . . . he's . . . dead?" Neville was the first of the three teens who managed to say anything. Ginny and Ron were clearly speechless. Luna, Harry, and Hermione, who were seated together on a love seat facing their friends, each nodded.

Harry had said little to the group, as they met in the early-afternoon of Christmas Eve. Edward had done most of the talking. "Yes, he's dead," Edward told the group again. "Dumbledore got confirmation of that yesterday. The Ministry and the Pure-Bloods are still trying to figure out how that affects their negotiations, so it's not being released at the moment. There's a good chance our participation will never be formally acknowledged, although The Truth will say something Friday if the news hasn't been released by then. Now, for some information which no one but myself, Carole, and Dumbledore has, as far as I know."

If it were possible to have closer attention than he had had before, Edward now had it.

"While Harry was distracting Voldemort, I managed to extract some information. The so-called Associate is Regulus Black, just as he said, and I managed to get a very general idea that he's still very involved with some wizarding crime families in North America. The Pure-Bloods plan to split into two associated groups. Black and Malfoy will lead the political group, who will condemn violence while funneling money, partially from Black's criminal operations, to support it. The three Lestranges will lead the terrorist side of the group, publicly calling the political group traitors. Right now, there are only about a dozen committed to the terrorist side, but they think that will grow."

"Sounds like the old IRA," Hermione said, although only Edward and Harry really understood the reference.

"Exactly. Any one on the political side that goes over the line will be killed by the terror side. Black, Malfoy and their group will be under some sort of probation, and under some restrictions as to employment and political activity. The hope is, the actions of the terror side won't anger people in general, but show that the political side are really moderates."

"Are people that stupid?" Ginny asked.

"Well, most Muggles fall for it," Hermione admitted. "Why not us, too?"

"But what about The Truth?" Luna asked.

"If you mean the newsletter, we have to go slowly. Printing the whole situation as we see it would merely make most people think we're the war-mongers."

"That sucks," Ginny said.

"It does. War is nasty, but at least you usually know who the enemy is. In this type of situation, everything looks gray to most people."

"What about the dementors and zombies?" Ron asked. Black had accumulated a zombie attack force and helped win the dementors over to Voldemort's side the year before.

"Half the zombies have already been turned over and destroyed," Edward said. "Malfoy is already using the pretended potential split to drive a harder bargain. The Lestranges will no doubt be keeping at least a few of them. As for the dementors," Edward shrugged. "Who can tell if they'll keep their alliance or not?"

"Why doesn't Fudge believe you about the split?" Hermione asked.

"Because all I could report is what Voldemort thought. It's not necessarily the truth, is it?" Edward answered.

"But how could he have been lying?" Luna asked.

"He couldn't have been lying," Edward explained, "but he could have been wrong. It's not like I could shift through his mind and find all the evidence. He was far too powerful for that, even with his entire mind fighting Harry." He shrugged. "It's even possible Voldemort was wrong, although I doubt it."

"So are things better or worse?" Neville asked.

"Voldemort was an amazingly powerful and evil wizard," Edward said. "Probably only Dumbledore, Harry, and myself had any real chance of surviving an encounter with him. In that respect, we're better off with him gone. However, he couldn't get a grasp on the current realities, about his followers even more so than about us. Black seems to be better suited for current realities, and in that respect we're worse off than we were last summer, when Voldemort was doing the planning."

"But that would have been true even with Voldemort still alive," Hermione pointed out.

"Very true," Edward agreed. "If Voldemort had been surrendered, then sometime in the future, he would have somehow struck again. If not in our lifetimes, then whenever this generation was gone and he could find people willing to do anything for power."

"I'm glad I didn't murder him for nothing," Harry muttered.

"We killed him," Hermione reminded Harry.

"So please don't blame your self," Luna added.

"Quite right, we all had a hand in it." Edward stood up. "Please dress for dinner. Come to the solarium at Six. Dinner will be at Seven."

The six teens were quiet for a long, agonizingly-silent few minutes after Edward left. The only movement was Luna putting her arm around Harry, resting the hand on Hermione's shoulder with a reassuring grip.

Finally, Neville stood up, and pulled Ginny up with him. They went over to Harry. Ginny knelt between Harry and Hermione, putting her head on Hermione's lap and her arms around Hermione and Harry's waists. Neville went behind them, and put his hands on Luna and Harry's shoulders.

"I imagine it's a hard thing to live with," Neville said. "Thank you, for doing it."

"We still care about you three," Ginny added, hugging Hermione and Harry.

Ron got up and stood behind Hermione. "Come on. We can't ignore what happened, but we can't let it rule our lives. Cynthia and Louise will be here for a holiday dinner. We should do something special for them."

"Cynthia and Louise?" Hermione asked.

"Uncle Jacob's granddaughters," Ginny said.

"The war already hit them," Ron reminded the group. "Cindy is going to be eleven soon; she'll be at Hogwarts next year. Lou is even younger. Harry, you always said how much bad Christmases hurt you before you came to Hogwarts. Let's make it nice for them."

"If we can't make the world better, we can at least make the world around us better?" Luna asked.

"Exactly," Hermione stated firmly.

Luna raised an eyebrow at Hermione. "I never figured you for a follower of Zeno the Stoic any more than I really am."

Hermione shrugged. "It's still good advice."

"And you have two girls to tell the legend of the Crumple-Horned Snorkack to!" Ginny teased Luna.

Luna smiled, which made Harry smile as well. "Oh, by the way," Harry said. "I rearranged the rooms."

"Rearranged?" Ron asked.

It was Harry who now shrugged. "There are a couple of configurations possible. By taking out one of the WC's, two bedrooms can be joined as a suite. That one is for Hermione and you, that one is for Ginny and Neville."

"Now wait a minute. . . ." Ron protested.

"Luna has the bedroom next to me upstairs," Harry went on, cutting Ron off. "While Edward can override any command, no one else can come in to this area without my permission, and only Luna and I can get upstairs, once the doors are shut. I think we all need naps to face tonight."

Harry rang a small bell, and a house elf appeared. "Harry Potter rang?"

The elf was dressed in a Santa hat, mis-matched wild red and green socks, green shorts, and what looked like a miniature maroon Weasley jumper. "Dobby!" Hermione said in surprise.

"I arranged to hire Dobby for the holiday," Harry told them. "While the elves here assured me they could easily handle the workload, they accepted Dobby's coming to help as my Yule

present to them." Harry turned to Dobby. "It's Two-ten. Dobby, could you please wake us all up between Four-thirty and Four-forty-five?"

"Of course, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby bowed and disappeared.

"The WC's between the rooms now have showers; you only need to use the bathroom if you want a bath." Harry stood and held his hand out to Luna. The others disentangled themselves, and Harry led Luna up the stairs. Ron looked ready to lecture Ginny and threaten Neville, but Hermione yanked on the back of his jeans and Ron followed her into one of their bedrooms.

Ginny smiled. "Your room, or mine?" she asked.

Neville turned bright red and gulped. "Oh, Neville," Ginny said, "it's just a nap. Honestly!"

"I'll follow you anywhere," Neville said.

Dobby woke the nappers, or at least reminded them of the time, since none were actually asleep at the time. At 5:50, Harry and Luna walked down to the open area where the other four were staying. Everyone was ready, and all six were in their dress robes.

"We look good," Ginny stated.

"So we do," Luna agreed. She linked her arm to Harry's. "Shall we proceed?" Ginny took Neville's arm, and Ron took Hermione's. Harry grinned, and they marched out of the area.

Harry led the procession to the floor below, where the twins, Bill, and Fleur had rooms in the turret. Seeing the six teens linked in pairs arm-in-arm, Fred and George linked arms and fell in line. Laughing, Bill and Fleur did the same.

The procession exited the turret and went along the main corridor. The Weasleys and Grangers all smiled and joined the procession, and Mr. Lovegood escorted Tonks (who sported light-orange hair to match her flaming red-and-orange robes). Although not in robes, Mr. Granger's dinner jacket seemed to fit right in, as did Mrs. Granger's formal gown.

It was not a solemn procession by any means (not that many could be, with Fred and George in it). Harry dimmed the torches by a word of command, and they sent different colored sparks from their wands. George conjured up a pair of long-lasting sparklers for the Grangers, so they wouldn't feel left out.

The other Weasleys were waiting just outside the solarium, talking to Edward and Carole. The two little girls burst into 'oo's and ah's' when they saw the procession. Edward and Carole, poking their heads around the door, smiled and laughed.

There were more presents under the tree than anyone had ever seen in one home before. While no one knew what the future might bring, at least they would try and make this a happy Christmas to remember.

Dinner was a huge success. Edward escorted the Weasleys who were leaving to the reception hall at the end of the front bridge. Since it was a full moon, they would portkey back to their cottage to avoid Lupin. They would return for breakfast at 8:00, and to open presents immediately thereafter. (Breakfast was set for 8:00 to allow them to finish their early farm chores.)

While Fred and George made a few rude comments to the sextet and Bill and Fleur, they were ignored. Ron did give Neville a few nasty looks, but since Neville only had eyes for Ginny, they made no impact.

Dobby would knock on their doors between 7:15 - 7:30 the next morning.

Ron woke up at little after 6:00. Although he was never an early riser by inclination, Christmas was the one day of the year he always tried to make an exception for. He leaned over and kissed Hermione awake.

"Brush your teeth and go back to sleep," Hermione murmured. She rolled over.

Ron brushed his hand over Hermione's bare thigh. "Ron, we're not ready to go farther," Hermione growled.

"I know," he said. "But I like to touch."

Hermione sighed. She knew that Ron would likely grow up to be the type of parent who would wake up the children if they slept too long on Christmas morning. She sat up and stretched, and Ron reveled in the sight of her lush, compact nude body. Potter Place had good heating charms for the bedrooms.

Hermione stood and held out her hand. "Come on, we might as well face the crowd squeaky clean." Ron grinned and shot out of bed.

Harry and Luna slowly woke up in each other's arms. Harry had not slept well for years, although his worst nightmares had slowly receded the previous summer. He rarely woke up feeling refreshed. He did that morning, and so did Luna.

Like Hermione, Harry and Luna did not feel ready to make love. Unlike Hermione, however, they had discovered nearly as satisfying substitutes. Like Ron and Hermione, they also took a shower, although a much quicker one than Hermione and Ron were indulging in. Then, they went back to bed to give each other pleasure.

Neville and Ginny woke up with fewer qualms than the other two couples, having made love for the first time the night before. They woke up early, made love for the second time, and got out of the shower just in time to answer Dobby's knock on the door.

It was in many ways Harry's most memorable Christmas, one that he would always think back to in the years ahead. The Christmases he had spent with the Dursleys had been uniformly awful. The previous Christmas had been over-shadowed by his fears about being possessed. His Christmases spent at Hogwarts had had their own difficulties, some great and some small (his first had the mystery of the cloak and the Mirror, the second the polyjuice potion and Hermione's transformation into part-cat, the third the joy then grief and anger over the Firebolt, the fourth by the Christmas Ball). This year, while the shadow of Sirius' death still haunted Harry, while the death of Voldemort and the worry over the negotiations with the Pure-Bloods hung over the students and the adults in the know, it was still the happiest Christmas Harry could remember to date.

Dumbledore, Moody, and a very tired Remus Lupin came to the breakfast, and stayed for the opening of presents. Dumbledore received a dozen books, plus a pair of socks from his brother Aberforth. The Headmaster really did look very pleased with the socks. Harry wondered what he would have looked like had Harry given Dumbledore a pair anything like the ones he had given Dobby.

Mrs. Weasley was not crying this year. Percy had not returned the jumper she had nervously sent him, and Percy had even sent his parents a small Christmas card. Arthur Weasley especially liked the set of Muggle DIY books Harry, Hermione, and Edward had given him, although Molly Weasley looked worried he might actually try to Do It himself.

Luna loved the amber scrying necklace she had admired the previous August in Diagon Alley. She was even happier that Harry had remembered how much she liked it, and that the rest of his presents to her were the 'junk' jewelry she loved. Her father had given her the crystal ball she had wanted as well.

Harry was pleased that all his presents were well-received. He of course liked getting presents (his favorite was from Edward and Dumbledore, who had given him the pensieve he had seen the previous August; his second favorite was the Wizard Wireless Luna gave him), but liked giving them more.

Hermione had, unsurprisingly, given books to her school friends (N.E.W.T.s are Nearer than you Wish for Harry, Ron, and Neville; Last Minute O.W.L. Studies for Luna and Ginny) and the others she gave gifts to. Most people gave her books in return.

Ron and Neville's minds worked in similar ways. Both had given their girlfriends silver rings. The four present Weasley brothers then started giving Neville such looks that he was beginning to get very nervous by the time the presents were finished.

Most of all, everyone liked watching the two young girls opening their presents. There was no doubt that Cynthia would be accepted to Hogwarts; her magical ability was well-marked. She received gift certificates for most of what she would need to equip her for Hogwarts: books; wand; clothes; and even her trunk. Louise got more childish presents, but seemed at least as happy with them. They would remember this Christmas as one of the best of their lives.

Jacob and his family left around 10:00 am. At that point, the gathering turned serious. Dumbledore stood and addressed the group. "The Ministry has announced the death of Voldemort. Wizarding Radio will be announcing it in the Eleven o'clock news cast. The official cause of death will be the injuries he sustained in his attack on Hogwarts."

"So Harry will get all the credit, or blame," Hermione said.

"Exactly," Dumbledore agreed. "The will also announce that the negotiations with the Pure-Bloods are likely to bear fruit, perhaps as early as New Year's Day." He shrugged. "Fudge has assured me that the conditions will be much more favorable than those originally proposed, but gave me few details. Before anyone may be pardoned, however, they must confess to their crimes. If there is a known crime they do not confess to within a set time-limit, they may be charged with it. It is therefore unlikely that people like Lucius Malfoy will ever regain all their old influence, but I dare say they will regain some, perhaps most, of it."

"Furthermore," Dumbledore continued, "Fudge acknowledged that some of the group are likely to remain a serious danger. Therefore, precautions will not be lessened. He does not believe that the two branches are working together, however."

"Man's a jackass," Moody muttered loudly. He snuggled into his new winter cloak, a present from Harry and Edward.

"I doubt anyone in this room would argue with you, Alastor," Dumbledore assured him. "We have no idea if the terror wing will attack soon, or if they will try to lull us to sleep. The Lestranges and their associates may take their pardon, then attack, or they may attack before the agreement goes fully into affect, to highlight the so-called split."

"What can we do?" Tonks demanded. "What can we do to these people without proof? We aren't being allowed to hunt them down while the negotiations are this active."

"What?" Harry demanded. "I mean, I can almost understand not arresting them, but you should be able to locate them, just in case they don't ask for a pardon!"

"You're right, but that's not the order," Tonks said. "The most we can do is to try to prevent any attacks. We're of course going to keep looking for them, justifying it by saying we're trying to prevent attacks."

"Speaking of which," Moody said standing, "I have a stake-out to return to. Despite the conditions out there, I want to thank you all for making this the warmest Christmas I have had for many a year. I wish you all well."

"I also must leave," Dumbledore said, standing as well. "Aberforth is joining me for a very light luncheon, and of course I must prepare for Christmas dinner at Hogwarts." He walked over to the Grangers. "The battle within the wizarding world will likely continue, but I believe there shall be much fewer attacks on Muggles and even the Muggle-born. We have won a battle, and the war is shifting to other fields." Dumbledore and Moody left.

Tonks stood, and changed her red-and-green spiked hair to long blondish gray, matching Remus Lupin's. "I have the day off," she told Lupin, eyes looking shyly down.

"And I promised to show you the grounds," Remus agreed, also standing.

"You'll both be here for supper at Eight?" Edward asked.

"Oh, yes," Remus said, blushing slightly. "We have Christmas dinner already covered." Fred leaned over and whispered something to George, which made them both snort, and Remus, with his excellent hearing, to blush more. The pair wished the group a 'happy Christmas' and also left.

Edward stood just as they were almost out the room. "Christmas dinner is at One-thirty. I suggest we take our hauls back to our rooms."

Ron would be spending the remaining vacation with Hermione's family, and so he and Ginny's situations were reversed (Neville had left after supper Christmas night, while Ginny went home with her parents the next morning).

The Grangers left after dinner Christmas night, and Ron went with them. On Boxing Day, the rest of the house party broke up. Mr. Lovegood was going back to the office to work on The Truth. Luna would stay until New Year's Day, and then spend the remaining few days of the vacation with her father. Harry would spend some of his free time filling his pensieve, and sharing his memories with Luna, despite that being a mostly-painful process.

The efforts of the Movement for Pure-Bloods still over-shadowed the holidays, but it was still the best Christmas season Harry had experienced so far.

Chapter IV

The agreement with the Pure-Bloods was announced January 1. The Daily Prophet reprinted the original demands as well as the new agreement.

From the Movement for Pure-Bloods issued 9 December, 1996

The Movement for Pure-Bloods make the following demands, and the following offers and compromises:

1) Definitions:

A Muggle-born will be legally defined as anyone with magical powers sufficient to be classed as a witch or wizard, who did NOT have both parents classed as both witch and wizard. Magical children of a pair of squibs are judged to be Muggle-born for these criteria. A Mixed-blood is the child of a witch or wizard whose other parent is a squib or a Muggle. 'Full-blood' is defined as any witch or wizard who has both witch and wizard for parents. The term 'Pure-blood' shall be reserved for those with Full-blooded ancestors for at least three generations.

Other mixed-wizards (magical parent mated with a Veela, giant, etc.) shall be treated as Muggle-born. Werewolves, vampires, etc. should be considered reduced one step (ie a Full-blooded werewolf would be under the restrictions of a Mixed-blood while in human form).

2) Schools:

No Muggle-born may be allowed to attend Hogwarts, Durmstrang, or the Ysgol, starting in the autumn of 1998; no one of Muggle or Mixed-blood may be hired to teach at those institutions after the current 1996-1997 academic year. No Mixed-Blood shall be made a prefect, Head Boy or Girl, or the equivalents at those institutions, starting in the 1998-1999 school year. No Mixed-blood may be selected to head one of those institutions after the 1996-1997 academic year.

Muggle-borns may be allowed to attend any other school of witchcraft and/or wizardry. Mixed-bloods and even the Muggle-born may teach at or even head any other institution.

The subject known as 'Muggle Studies' must cease at Hogwarts and the Ysgol, and may not be introduced at Durmstrang.

All Muggle and Mixed-blood students must take, and pass, a two year course on wizarding culture and traditions before being eligible for the O.W.L.s. This requirement would start for those entering schools in the autumn of 1998.

All students and teachers who do not meet the above criteria may stay in school or continue to be employed by that school if they are attending or employed for the entire 1997-1998 school year. Any Muggle-born not attending before that date who has a full sibling currently attending may also attend that school.

3) Government:

No Muggle-born may work for any Ministry of Magic, the International, or any associated agencies, other than charity or medical groups. Only Pure-bloods will be eligible to be any Minister of Magic. No Muggle-born or Mixed-Blood may rise above the level of Sorcerer Or Warlock.

4) Amnesty:

A full amnesty will be given to all members of the Movement for Pure-Bloods for any crimes, real or perceived, committed prior to noon, GMT, 6 January, 1997, or prior to the agreement of all parties to the terms in this document, whichever occurs first.

If these terms are agreed to before noon, GMT, 6 January, 1997, the Movement will surrender the Mixed-blood Tom Marvolo Riddle, who called himself Lord Voldemort. We understand that, according to a Prophecy, only a certain Full-blood has the power to execute Riddle. We will not stop him from doing so at any time. If our conditions are not met, Riddle will remain under our protection, and has agreed to work for our goals. While we wish to end the violence, we will do so only if this agreement is made.

We further agree that all current legislation concerning the protection of Muggles and Muggle society may stay in place, subject to the normal discussion and political processes, which may weaken, or even strengthen, such legislation.

The Members of the Movement agree to renounce violence, including the overthrow of current Ministries, and in the undermining of Muggle society in exchange for this agreement. Any violence perpetrated after the above terms are agreed to may be subject to punishment.

The Movement further states it will not engage in violence, except in defense, until noon, GMT, 6 January, 1997.

The Servant of the Pure-Bloods

An Agreement between the so-called Movement for Pure-Bloods and the British Ministry of Magic on behalf of the Wizarding World

issued 1 January, 1997

1) Definitions:

A Muggle-born is legally defined as anyone with magical powers sufficient to be classed as a witch or wizard, who did NOT have both parents classed as both witch and wizard. Magical children of a pair of squibs are judged to be Muggle-born for these criteria. A Mixed-blood will be defined as the child of a witch or wizard whose other parent is a squib or a Muggle. 'Full-blood' is defined as any witch or wizard who has both witch and wizard for parents. The term 'Pure-blood' shall be reserved for those with Full-blooded ancestors for at least three generations.

Other mixed-wizards (magical parent mated with a Veela, giant, etc.) shall be treated as Muggle-born. Werewolves, vampires, etc. should be considered reduced one step (ie a Full-blooded werewolf would be under these restrictions have the rights of a Mixed-blood while in human form).

2) Schools:

The subject known as 'Muggle Studies' may not be taken by the Muggle-born, or those who were Muggle-raised no matter their parentage, starting with those students who entered during the 1995-1996 academic year. Half-bloods may not take the subject if they were even partially Muggle-raised. All students taking the subject in the current (1996-1997) year may continue.

All Muggle, Muggle-raised, and Mixed-blood students must take, and pass, a two year course on wizarding culture and traditions before being eligible for the O.W.L.s. This requirement will start for those entering schools in the autumn of 1998, and apply to all schools certified by any national ministry. These Muggle-born, Muggle-raised, and Mixed-blood students may continue Magical Culture as both an O.W.L. and a N.E.W.T. subject.

No Muggle-born, Muggle-raised, or Mixed-Blood student may be a Sixth or Seventh year Prefect of any type or Head Boy or Girl at Hogwarts who has not achieved an O.W.L. in Magical Culture after the 2002-2003 academic year.

3) Government:

As of June 2005

no Muggle-born may be hired for any Ministry of Magic, the International, or any associated agencies, other than charity or medical groups, unless they have achieved the O.W.L. in Magical Culture;

no Muggle-born or Mixed-Blood may rise above the level of Sorcerer or Warlock, -- or may advance to the level of department head of any Ministry of Magic, the International, or any associated agencies, other than charity or medical groups, if hired after June, 2005 -- unless they have achieved an 'E' O.W.L. or any level N.E.W.T. in Magical Culture;

any Pure-blood, when applying for a position in any Ministry, shall be deemed to have the O.W.L. in Magical Culture;

only Full- or Pure-bloods will be eligible to be any Minister of Magic.

4) Amnesty:

A full amnesty will be given to all members of the Movement for Pure-Bloods for any crimes, real or perceived, committed prior to noon, GMT, 1 January, 1997. A complete list of members asking for amnesty shall be provided and published by 1 February, 1997.

Members have until 28 February, 1997, to provide complete confessions of all crimes committed prior to 1 January, 1997. Any crime not confessed to may be prosecuted. Any class 1 crime committed subsequent to the amnesty may invalidate the amnesty for that individual.

The original members of the Movement for Pure-Bloods will not be eligible for employment with the Ministries if they have confessed or have previously been convicted of class 1 or 2 crimes. However, the Council of the British Ministry and the Council of the International Confederation will have an official representative of the Movement for Pure-Bloods who will be selected by the Movement, irrespective of their past.

5) The Movement for Pure-Bloods

Any Pure-Blood wizard or witch is eligible to apply for membership in the Movement for Pure-Bloods after 1 March, 1997. While the Movement agrees that all current legislation concerning the protection of Muggles and Muggle society may stay in place, it is subject to the normal discussion and political processes, which may weaken, or even strengthen, such legislation. The Movement for Pure-Bloods wish to strengthen the divide between Wizard and Muggle societies, even if it now accepts that Muggle-borns and Mixed Bloods should have the right to earn acceptance in the Wizarding World.

Any current member of the Movement for Pure-Bloods who has not confessed or been convicted of a class 1 or 2 crime, and any future member of the Movement, retains full rights within the Wizarding community.

The Members of the Movement agree to renounce violence, including the overthrow of current Ministries, and in the undermining of Muggle society in exchange for this agreement. Any violence perpetrated after 1 January may be subject to punishment.

For the British Ministry of Magic & International Confederation
Cornelius O. Fudge, Minister of Magic
Percy I. Weasley, Negotiator

For The Movement for Pure-Bloods
Regulus Black
Lucius Malfoy

While Hermione Granger was relieved the terms were not as bad as they had been, she still saw the potential pitfalls. For a Muggle-born of her age, who would have no opportunity to earn the soon-to-be required O.W.L. in Magical Culture, there would always be the suspicion that she was not quite qualified for advancement in government or educational work. For those who came later, having to take Magical Culture would mean there would be some other, important subject they could no longer fit in. Again, that would mean they were not as well-qualified as some Full- and Pure-Blooded wizards.

Hermione did not miss the phrase 'Muggle-borns and Mixed Bloods should have the right to earn acceptance in the Wizarding World.' At least in theory, all witches and wizards currently

had that acceptance, Muggle-born or no. Now, Muggle-borns would not have those rights until they 'earned' them.

Hermione went through the terms and ripped them to shreds. Ron listened to her, and agreed with her, but mentally he had some reservations. Perhaps, he thought, being a wizard should mean just a little bit more than having abilities Muggles did not have. Maybe being a wizard should have some cultural meaning as well. He knew enough not to say that to Hermione.

Where he did fully agree with Hermione was that Black and Malfoy would be back in positions of influence, as they would no doubt be the Movement's representatives, which meant that Draco would be more obnoxious than usual. There was also the likelihood that the violence was far from over to worry about. While Hermione spent that day and the next writing an attack on the terms of the agreement for The Truth, Ron quietly read his potions text. He had a feeling Aurors would still be needed.

The Daily Prophet ran Regulus Black and Lucius Malfoy's confessions the next day. The Ministry had not wanted them released, but Dumbledore insisted that all the confessions be made public. Since anything not confessed to could be prosecuted, the confessions, Dumbledore believed, must be made public. And, of course, crimes publically confessed to would be better remembered.

The Daily Prophet, knowing that if they did not run the confessions The Truth would find some way to do it, also put pressure on the Ministry. When Fudge still refused, the International authorized the release of the material.

Regulus Black would be the Movement for Pure-Bloods' representative to the International and Lucius Malfoy would be the representative to the British Ministry once the agreement went into full effect on March 1. These appointments came as a surprise to no one who knew the inside story, in the Movement, the Ministries, or the Order of the Phoenix.

Edward, Carole, Harry, and Luna read and re-read the article and the accompanying stories. Harry snorted when he saw that Percy would be awarded the Order of Merlin (3rd Class) for his part in the negotiations. Buried near the very end of the articles praising the agreement, there was a small (two paragraph) warning that not all members of the Movement were likely to agree to renounce violence and take the amnesty.

"Hermione was right," Luna said, as Harry walked her to the reception area of the front bridge.

"She usually is," Harry admitted. "What was she right about this time?"

"That when we restart classes, we'll be under a new threat." Luna stopped and hugged Harry. He returned it and sighed.

"I'll see you in just over two days," Luna said. Harry going to come to Diagon Alley Friday. From there, he and Luna would be going to the station to take the train back to Hogwarts on Saturday. Classes would restart the following Monday.

"I can still miss you, even for forty-nine hours, can't I?" Harry asked.

"Of course!" Luna disengaged herself. "I love you, too!" She pulled her wand out, exchanged a final kiss with Harry, and touched the piece of paper Edward had used to make her a one-way portkey. Harry sighed. It would be a long forty-nine hours.

Saturday, January 4, 1997

The students on the train were fairly subdued. "It's always quiet," Luna told Harry, when he remarked on the mood. "Probably because it's not as special as most of the other trips. It's even quieter coming back from the Easter break."

"Luna might be right," Ron said, sitting down. He had just come back from a patrol of the train. "You know what I noticed, though?" he asked, as he struggled with a cup of tea and a handful of chocolate frogs.

"No, I'll buy it, what have you noticed?" Harry asked.

"Malfoy is not on board, and neither are the Slytherins we thought might still be leaning in his direction." All six exchanged glances.

"None of them?" Hermione asked.

"Not a one," Ron answered. "I might have missed one or two, I guess, but not Malfoy or Pansy."

Harry and Ginny looked at Hermione. "What?" she asked.

"You have the best eye," Ginny told her.

"You know everyone," Harry agreed.

"Well, you know she's practicing to be Head Girl next year," Ron teased.

"Prat!" Hermione said, standing. She kissed Ron on the cheek to take the sting out of her comment.

As soon as Hermione left, Harry stood as well. "Neville, while Hermione is patrolling in one direction, why don't I go in the other. You go in Hermione's in say . . . three minutes?"

Neville stood. "A nice, slow stroll, I take it?"

Harry smiled. "No need to catch up to her," he agreed. Harry just wanted to make certain there were extra prefects out.

As Harry left, he heard Luna ask, "Shall I read your tea leaves, Ron?"

"No," Ron mumbled though the remains of yet another chocolate frog, "I swore last year never to do it, or have that done for me, again."

Part way to the back of the train, Harry ran into Blaise Zabini. Harry asked him about Ron's observation.

"Every one of the bastards is missing," Blaise confirmed. "I just finished checking. Somehow, I doubt it means a mass transfer to Durmstrang, and I know at least three of the five others are still Malfoy's people."

"I wonder how many DA folk are on board," Harry mused.

Blaise shrugged. "I don't know. Should we alert the DA and other older students?"

Harry looked at his watch. "We don't arrive for two hours. Do you think an attack is most likely on the way to the castle, at the station, or over the next two hours?"

"Your cousin is the only member of the faculty on board," Blaise pointed out. "The faculty tends to wait near the entrance and great halls. They would be quick to respond to any attack on the carriages."

"That leaves the station or the rest of the trip," Harry said, agreeing with Blaise's analysis. He thought a few more moments. "I think, if there's to be an attack by the remaining Death Eaters and such, it would be most likely at the station."

"Sounds reasonable," Blaise mused. "It might be difficult for them to stop the train. The Dementors seemed to have done it a few years ago, though."

"That leaves one other possibility, since most of the zombies are supposed to have been destroyed," Harry pointed out.

"Yeah," Blaise agreed, "like I said, the Dementors."

"Exactly."

Hermione came up to them, Neville right behind her. "No suspect Slytherins up-front," she said. "Neville was kind enough to come along," she added dryly. Neville blushed.

"Blaise says there aren't any, either," Harry said, ignoring her sarcasm. "That likely means an attack, primarily by Dementors, before we arrive; or an attack, primarily by the Lestranges and all their followers at the station, possibly with the Dementors as well."

"The Dementors must be hungry by now," Hermione said.

"And there's the fact that Draco and friends aren't here," Harry added thoughtfully. "In a big attack from the Lestranges and their associates, Draco and company could get caught in a cross-fire but would more likely be useful in setting that cross-fire up. But in a Dementor attack, who can tell who they might Kiss in a feeding frenzy?"

"And if we go on alert, and nothing happens?" Blaise asked.

"Then I look silly," Harry said with a shrug. "If we don't make too big a deal of it, we'll be ready and I won't look too stupid."

"Come on, Longbottom," Blaise said. "We'll work our way back while these two go forward."

It was only fifteen minutes from the Hogsmeade station when the attack came. The first sign was the lurch of the train as the breaks were engaged.

As soon as the train stopped, the students came off the front and back ends of the train, as Harry had told them, heading for the middle. In a Dementor attack, being alone meant a greater possibility of being attacked.

Harry and Hermione had stayed near the front of the train, while Edward covered the rear. As soon as Harry made it outside, he saw the figures gliding over the surrounding hills. He would go with most of the students, while Edward, Hermione, and a few volunteers covered the other side of the train.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry yelled, thinking of his first kiss with Luna. The huge stag came from Harry's wand, and drove the whole crowd of Dementors back. As they did so, Harry heard Hermione invoke the spell on the other side of the train, followed by Cho Chang. In less than three minutes from the time the train had halted, all the students had massed on one side of the train, again with a few of the older students and Edward on the other to prevent an attack from the potential blind side.

Harry's Patronus was by far the most powerful on his side of the train, but it was far from the only one. All the DA, and the non-DA Seventh years, could at least project the silvery mist, which gave some protection. It would be needed, as over a hundred Dementors glided towards the students again. Harry's Patronus again drove them back, and then the others' kept them at bay for the moment.

As soon as the parameter was secure, Harry took a deep breath and tried a spell Edward and Remus had taught him, but which he had never really tried. "HELIOS!" A near-blinding light came from Harry's wand and struck a Dementor. It blew up in a momentary flame, which quickly disintegrated it.

"Don't anyone else try that!" Harry called. "It usually isn't strong enough to stop them! Keep them in a group!"

Harry picked off three more Dementors, before he had to send his Patronus out again; the others' were weakening slightly. "Keep up your concentration!" Harry called over the students' calling out the spell. "Use a new thought if you have to!"

The Dementors started to retreat. Harry destroyed two more, and the rest retreated more quickly, to Harry's right. The students stopped invoking their Patronus.

From a distance, the group heard "Avada Kedavra!" A Fifth year Hufflepuff girl standing just to Harry's left fell.

Harry looked in the direction of the curse, and saw the three Lestranges. Bellatrix had missed Harry with her curse.

All three Lestranges raised their wands. Luna, Neville, and several other students all yelled, "Duck!" or "Take cover!"

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Chapter V

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Four Unforgivable Death curses were flung at nearly the same moment. Rastaban Lestrage's affected the most students. It flew over the backs of eight different students who had 'hit the dirt,' the backwash of the spell affecting three of them, especially Neville (who was lying on top of Ginny and partially covering a few other students as well), before slamming into a Fourth year Ravenclaw.

Bellatrix's second killing curse was coming almost straight at Harry and Ron, although Harry, trying to get off his own, was not really paying attention. Ron knocked Harry out of the way, so that the curse went past them, over a number of students without being close enough to affect them, and then hit two Second years, who had been too shocked to move.

Harry's spell, although he had tried to aim at Bellatrix, slammed into Rastaban because Ron had started pushing him just as he'd said it. Unfortunately, by knocking Harry out of the way of Bellatrix's spell, Ron was hit by Rodolphus'.

Shocked silence descended on both sides of the battle field. Suddenly there was a loud 'thump' from the top of the train. Trapped under Ron, Harry could not see that Edward had landed atop of the train carriage just behind him. Harry could barely hear Edward yell something he could not make out. Harry could just see Rodolphus' head fall off, just like the Death Eaters' had the previous summer.

Bellatrix had Disappeared before her husband's head hit the ground.

The students near the train were still silent, except for some soft sobbing.

"Got off me, Ron," Harry said. "Ron, get off!" Harry rolled over -- and Ron slid off his back.

"Ron? Ron!"

More cries went up, as the students realized that at least five students had been directly hit by the killing curse. Ginny was crying out for help: Neville was breathing, but it was shallow and irregular. The two other students' who had been grazed by the effects just as Neville had were also having difficulties breathing.

Harry was in shock. Ron was looking back at Harry, but he was not blinking, he was not breathing.

Ron Weasley was dead.

So were four other students, but Harry could not begin to register that yet, just as Ginny did not yet realize what had happened to anyone other than Neville.

From the top of the rail carriage, Edward surveyed the scene. He was horrified. He and the small group of advanced students had driven away half of the attacking dementors. Edward had even managed to destroy nine of the dementors. The slight thrill of triumph he had felt now made him feel ill.

From where he stood, Edward could see there were no longer any dementors visible on either side of the train, and apparently the three Lestranges had been the only ones directing the attack. He could see Hermione and Cho Chang returning from the engine, where they had gone to check on the crew.

Fortunately, they were not returning on the side where the bodies were.

'Bodies,' Edward thought, 'we should have realized an attack on the train was possible. We failed the students.'

Some of the Sixth and Seventh year students who were taking basic medical skills were seeing to the three seriously injured students, the students injured when the students fell to the ground to avoid the curses, and the just plain upset or even hysterical.

Some thirty yards away lay two more bodies. Rastaban's body bothered Edward nearly as much as the students'. Edward kicked himself mentally. He should have taught Harry the severing charm, if not some other way to kill. Anything other than Avada Kedavra.

Edward summoned Zabini and Chang to the top of the train, after telling Hermione to keep watch over the students on her side of the train. A few words were enough to put the two students in the picture.

Edward left the stunned pair to their feelings of shock, and Disapparated to Hogsmeade. "Dobby!" he cried out as soon as he appeared. Edward knew that some of the house elves would be present to move any luggage, and that Dobby would always try to be any place Harry was likely to show up.

Remus had been given platform duty, and he approached Edward just as Dobby appeared. "Dobby, I need you to take a message to the Headmaster," Edward commanded. Dobby nodded his head eagerly. "Dementors and Lestranges attacked the train, near the mouth of the valley some fifteen minutes from here. At least seven or eight students are seriously injured; two or more might be dead. The train crew are dead. The Lestrangle brothers are also dead; I killed one, Harry the other."

Dobby's ears drooped, and his eyes and mouth opened wide from shock.

"Go on, Dobby," Edward said. "Remus and I are going back. The Headmaster must send help from the school and the village, as soon as he can organize it."

"Yes, Doctor Potter, sir!" Dobby blinked out of existence.

"Dead?" Remus said, as stunned as Dobby had been.

"I think Ron Weasley is dead," Edward said, panic in his voice. "Come on. We need to go."

Ginny looked up from her unconscious boyfriend, wondering where Ron, Harry, and Hermione were. She could not believe they would not be here for Neville.

At first glance, she could not see any of the trio, which she attributed to the milling crowd. Then, Ginny remembered Hermione was with the group on the other side of the train. A second glance still did not reveal Harry or Ron, but Ginny did at least finally see Luna, and knew that where Luna was, Harry was likely to be.

There was now too much crying and yelling for Ginny to try to shout to Luna. A Seventh year Ravenclaw came up and examined Neville, distracting Ginny for the moment. "He's got a fairly strong pulse, but his breathing isn't good," she said. She pulled her wand from her robe. "May I?"

Ginny nodded. The witch used a spell to help Neville breath. "How . . . how's Harry?" Ginny asked. She knew Harry would be at the center of this.

"Ah . . . Potter's fine, Weasley." The witch moved off to examine another injured student.

Ginny sighed in relief for a moment. Then she realized what the implications of the witch's statement might be. Ginny tried to look, and for a moment the shifting group of students moved and showed the tableaux. Luna was now kneeling, massaging Harry's shoulders and seemed to be whispering words of support or comfort in his ear. Harry was crying -- Harry, crying! in public! -- over a body.

Ginny no longer had a crush on Harry, but she had spent over four years thinking about him, and three years watching him very closely. She knew there were only three or four people at most whom Harry would allow himself to cry over in public, and there was only one in this situation who was likely.

Ginny started to hyperventilate. She somehow managed to lay Neville's head gently on the ground and tried to stand up. She was dizzy. Her vision tunnelled, and Ginny finally stood straight and staggered towards Luna and Harry.

She could not bear to focus on the . . . body.

Luna looked up and saw her childhood friend coming. She gave Harry's shaking shoulders a final squeeze, and stood to intercept Ginny.

Ginny did not really see Luna. She did not feel Luna grab hold of her; did not notice that while her feet were still moving, she was not moving closer.

"Ginny!" Luna said for the fourth time, finally snapping Ginny from her hazy fugue. Ginny finally looked at Luna, her eyes wide with terror.

"Oh, Ginny!" Luna cried, pulling Ginny into a hug.

Somewhere deep in her mind, Ginny realized that Luna, nearly as reserved as Harry, would only act like this if someone very close to them was . . . gone.

"Ronnie?" Ginny asked, in a very frightened little-girl voice.

"Yes, Ginny," Luna said gently, "Ron is gone."

Ginny fell fully into Luna's embrace, sobbing.

Edward and Remus apparated on the carriage roof.

"Oh, hell!" Remus growled. The first thing that hit his brain was a crying Harry rocking Ron's body in his arms and next to them, Ginny crying in Luna's.

"There are more bodies than just Ron's," Edward reminded his friend. "Do you want to deal with them, or do you want to break the news to the group of students behind us, including Hermione?"

"Now that's a pair of choices I don't like," Remus acknowledged. "I guess I'll see who else was . . . hit." Remus moved to get down from the top of the carriage.

Edward turned to Cho and Blaise. "You two keep watch up here. The Headmaster should be sending help soon, but there's always a chance Bellatrix might hit us again. So, keep alert."

The two students nodded. Edward took a deep breath, and climbed down the other side of the carriage.

The ten students looked up as Edward climbed down and then approached them. Edward could not bring himself to look directly at Hermione.

"The students on the other side drove off the dementors," Edward told them. "However, three Death Eaters, the Lestranges, were directing the attack. They threw the Killing curse at least two or three times, maybe more."

The students gasped. "I killed one of the Lestrangle brothers, Harry Potter killed the other." Hermione and another student shivered at that.

"Now, I know you're all worried about who was hurt, or killed. But I need most of you to stay here until the Headmaster sends us help, just in case they come back."

The stricken students nodded. Only Hermione noticed Edward's qualifying 'most.'

"I couldn't see exactly who was hurt, with one exception." Edward sighed, and then finally looked at Hermione. She blanched. "Hermione, I need you to come with me."

"Harry?" she asked softly.

Edward shook his head. "Harry's . . . well, he's not injured, but. . . ."

"Luna?" Edward shook his head. "Ginny? Neville?"

Edward shook his head. "Neville's hurt, I think, but he's not . . . that is, he's alive."

Hermione did not fully faint, but she did swoon a bit. Edward caught her. After a moment, Hermione asked in a whisper, "Ron?"

"Yes, Hermione; I'm afraid Ron was hit by the Killing curse."

After a moment, Hermione opened her eyes and stood up straight, her jaw set. Hermione Granger came from a regular middle class Muggle family, and not part of the old Muggle gentry. But the traditions of the British middle classes were much much more than what Muggles like Vernon Dursley represented. Hermione, at that moment, represented the active virtues of her kind, the kind that might not have conquered or even created the greatest empire in world history (that was for the most part younger sons of the upper classes), but the kind that actually made the ramshackle series of conquests and acquisitions function as the largest empire ever for well over a century. She was the heir of the British citizens who had defied Napoleon and Hitler, and faced down all the problems in between.

"I must go to them," Hermione said calmly, although with a quivering lip.

Edward smiled grimly as he saw her upper lip actually stiffen. He had always admired the 'phlegm' of many British Muggles, and was impressed at Hermione's possession of it.

Edward escorted Hermione through the train and out the other side. He knew that, while she seemed fully in possession of her faculties, it was a very difficult illusion for her to maintain. Edward cleared Hermione's way through the milling students, and then a smaller circle of students.

Hermione walked over to Ron's body, which was still being cradled by the rocking, still-sobbing Harry. She looked at the scene for a few seconds, for she had never really seen Harry cry, and then turned and touched Luna on the shoulder. Hermione patted Ginny, and turned the sobbing girl over to Dennis and Colin. "Take her over to Neville," she commanded. "Stay with them."

Hermione took Luna and then knelt on the ground by Harry. "Harry. Harry!"

Harry looked at her blankly. "You've done everything you can, Harry" she said softly. "Let go." Hermione drew Harry into a partial hug.

Harry managed to blink a little. "Harry, dear," Hermione said lovingly, sounding a little like Mrs. Weasley, "let go. He's gone."

Harry stopped crying, but started shaking. He looked at Ron, and then back up at Hermione. "You did everything anyone could do, Harry," Hermione said even more lovingly, stroking his hair. She knew only he could understand her own grief, just as she knew he would understand hers, when she allowed it to take over from her duty. "Let him go, Harry. We have to move Ron."

Harry somehow managed to stand, still holding Ron in his arms. "Where?" he managed to croak.

Hermione conjured a stretcher, and Harry laid Ron on it. At that moment Dumbledore and Snape walked up to them. "What's Weasley managed to do to himself this. . . ." Snape started, then stopped, as he saw Ron's body. "Oh, God!" he whispered. No one noticed the tears spring into both professors' eyes.

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore said gently, "space as been cleared in the second baggage car."

Hermione walked towards the train, bringing Ron's body with her.

Harry walked up to Dumbledore and Snape. "We guessed there might be a dementor attack," he forced himself to report. "We were right. We drove off the dementors that attacked this side of the train. Then Bellatrix Lestrange shot a Killing curse. Then all three Lestranges each shot off a Killing curse, and I felt I had to shoot one back." Dumbledore and Snape closed their eyes in pain. "Ron knocked me over just as I shot it off, so I missed Bellatrix and hit one of the Lestrange brothers instead. Ron knocked me away from at least one of the curses, but one hit him."

"We should never have listened to the sources that said that any attack would come in several months," Dumbledore said, opening his eyes and looking at Snape.

Snape was so surprised, he spoke openly. "My sources said they didn't know!"

"Ministry sources," Dumbledore spat. "Percy Weasley, to be precise."

Twenty minutes later, the train continued its journey to Hogsmeade. Luna and Harry were alone in their compartment.

"Harry!" Luna spoke sharply to get Harry's attention. Harry looked up.

"Harry, do I love you?"

"I hope you still can," Harry said, "but I don't deserve it."

"Harry, the death of Ron and the others, well, I know you feel responsible for their deaths. It will take you a long time to accept that it wasn't your fault in any way. I love you, Killing curse or no. I hope you still love me, even if I never foresaw the attack." She now wished she had insisted on reading Ron's tea leaves.

"You can't foresee most things, let alone everything!"

"I know; this wasn't my fault anymore than it was yours." Harry almost looked convinced. "I need you to listen to me, my love. I love you, and I trust you. We both know we're life partners. But Hermione will really need you over the next few days or even weeks, and you need her. Be there for her, no matter what she needs. Don't feel you're hurting me or us by comforting Hermione. She might cling to you for the next few weeks; let her. We will still find ways of being together. Both of us will comfort you."

"What about Ginny?"

"Ginny has Neville. She will help him recover, and that will help her recover. Hermione has spent over five years caring for you and Ron; loving you and Ron, in different ways. Except for her parents, you two have been her life. Only you two have lived in her heart. Ron is gone. Only you can help her now."

Harry hugged Luna tightly. "I killed someone. Again."

"I know, my love."

"Edward was right; when the Killing curse takes a life, you feel a surge of power, righteousness, and. . . ." he paused to think of the right word, "euphoria. I can see why it's addictive."

"As we learn more, we'll learn better ways to deal with situations like these," Luna said serenely. "We did the best we could. It wasn't good enough, but even if we have much to regret, we have nothing to feel ashamed or guilty about."

Luna's voice calmed Harry as always. His trust in her was absolute. The stress inside him since they had guessed the attack might come left him, even if the over-powering grief remained. It felt even worse than Sirius' death had, which Harry wouldn't have believed possible. Luna hugged Harry tightly.

The train finally pulled into the station, 45 minutes late.

Luna helped Harry move to the last train carriages. The injured were moved quickly by volunteer residents of Hogsmeade, alerted by the staff. An informal guard of honor started forming around the five dead students.

Ginny hesitated between the two groups. Luna went and spoke to her, and Ginny went with Neville in the first group of Hogwarts carriages. Luna next spoke for a moment with Dobby, who then went on to help get the injured back to Hogwarts.

Harry stood off to the side for a moment, unsure what to do.

Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley were conferring with each other, and then talked with Dumbledore. The Headmaster agreed with whatever their proposal was. The two boys split up and talked to the other students gathered around the bodies.

Justin then approached Harry. It took a few attempts to fully engage Harry's attention. "Yes, Justin?" Harry finally asked.

"We're going to be walking the, well, the victims to the castle. Would you please lead us, Harry?"

"Why?"

"Harry," Justin said slowly, "I can't imagine how you feel right now. I feel awful, and I just knew these five students as acquaintances at best. And I might not know you terribly well, but I do know you well enough to know that even if the worst someone had come out of this with was a scrapped knee, you'd still feel responsible, and of course this is a lot worse."

"It certainly is," Harry acknowledged.

"So, you feel hurt, angry, and responsible. That's how good leaders feel. I know you hate being our leader, but you are, Harry. We'd like you and Dumbledore to lead us. If you don't want to be too far from Ron, we'll send him up first. But we need you with us, and ahead of us."

"Alright, if Hermione doesn't mind," Harry said.

"She doesn't; she suggested it to Ernie."

Harry took a deep breath and buried his feelings and did his duty. Although he would never know it, at that moment he was less an heir of the magical Potters than he was the true great great-nephew of a squib captain named Evans, about to lead his few remaining men back from having gone 'over-the-top' of the trenches in World War I. Justin's great-grandfather had done much the same, as had his grandfather in the Battle of Britain and his great great-grandfather in the Sudan. Justin recognized and honored the trait in Harry. Justin knew it was not difficult to lead when times were easy; it was when the world had crashed around you that you needed true leadership. Justin, and many of the others, knew there was just one person whom they could trust to lead them in the times ahead.

And it was not Albus Dumbledore or Edward Potter, let alone someone like Cornelius Fudge.

Harry walked over to the others gathered around the bodies. "We're going to march to the castle with our friends. If anyone wants or needs to go ahead, go on. Otherwise, let's divide up fairly evenly, okay?"

Harry knew four other students had died. Now he saw they had been a Fifth and Second year Hufflepuff, a Fourth year Ravenclaw, and Ron and a Second year Gryffindor -- Ron's favorite 'midget' in fact. While many of the students had left, there were enough for five students to surround each body, with three left over. Ron would be the only one totally surrounded by his House year.

Harry asked Cho and Blaise to end the procession and to make certain everyone kept up. The cortege started its way on the nearly two mile walk to the castle.

It took some 50 minutes, and went in total silence.

As they approached, Harry could see a silent crowd gathered around the great front doors, torches burning. He didn't look to see who they were as they got close. Harry was afraid that if Draco Malfoy was one of the crowd, he could not refrain from making some snide comment.

And Harry knew, as badly as he felt about killing Lestrage, he still would not be able to stop himself from killing Draco Malfoy if the ferret said the wrong thing. Fortunately, Draco had not yet returned to the castle.

Harry was not certain where they would take Ron and the others, but it was immediately clear that Dumbledore knew. Instead of turning right into the corridor leading to the great hall, a matching door appeared on the left, which Harry had never seen. The door swung open, and they were soon in a smaller version of the great hall, right down to the enchanted ceiling.

Dumbledore waved his wand, and five small raised platforms appeared. The students set the stretchers down, and they were transformed into biers. Another wave, and the biers were decorated with House colors. The four House ghosts appeared, followed by a wizard and a witch dressed in black.

"I know some of you may wish to stay with your friends," Dumbledore said, "but there are certain necessities which must be performed tonight, to ready the bodies. I will take care of all the notifications that are necessary. Please wait and send any personal owls tomorrow morning."

"I also know that you all feel you cannot possibly eat or sleep this night. The house elves have never-the-less prepared some easily digested food, and placed it in your common rooms, should you prefer not to eat in the great hall tonight."

The students slowly started to move away from the bodies. Luna took Harry's hand. "I'll keep my diary open, if you need to talk. I'll see you in the morning." Harry had given her one of a pair of enchanted diaries the previous August. They could write to each other, without anyone seeing them pass letters back and forth, or bothering with owls.

Harry nodded. Luna left, leaving just Harry and Hermione.

Nick glided up to them. "I'm sorry, children, but the undertakers have their sad duty to perform."

Hermione, still looking quiet and calm, nodded. Harry followed her out, and the Bloody Baron shut the door behind them, leaving only the two undertakers as the living in the hall.

Chapter VI

Seamus and Dean walked Harry back to their room in Gryffindor Tower, just as Lavender and Parvati walked Hermione back to theirs. Harry changed into his pajamas and robe, and sat on his bed. He seemed unable to do anything more than that on his own.

"Harry," Dean said, sitting down next to him, "it's not going to do anyone any good if you just sit here and stare at Ron's bed."

Seamus had gone out while Harry changed. He now walked back in carrying three mugs. He held one out to Harry. "Drink some soup, Harry. The next few days are going to be difficult to get through, and you'll need your strength."

Harry took one mug of cream of chicken soup, and drank a little of it, and then drank half of it off, more because he was so thirsty rather than from hunger. Dean took another mug.

"Thanks, guys," Harry said. He finished drinking the soup and sat the mug on the nightstand between his and Ron's bed. "I never thought Ron would, well, you know, be the one. I always thought that if anyone one of us was . . . killed, it would be me."

Dean put his free hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry, are you a better man than me?"

"What?" Harry asked, startled. "No!"

"Are you a better man than Seamus, or Neville, or Ron?"

"No, of course I'm not!" Harry gave his room mates a sad twisted smile. "If anyone knows I'm nothing special, it should be you two."

"Harry, mate," Seamus asked, "tell me in all honesty. Would you risk your life to save me?"

Harry looked up, startled.

"You know you would," Dean said. "You'd risk your life for any one at Hogwarts, right down to the house elves, including Snape."

"Probably not Malfoy, though," Seamus added.

"Malfoy knew," Harry stated.

"Knew what?" Seamus asked.

"He and the remnant of the pro-Death Eaters were all missing from the train," Harry told them. "Ron and Blaise both noticed it. That's why we decided to go on alert. Draco must have known something was going to happen, even if he didn't know exactly what."

"I'll kill the bloody little shite!" Seamus pledged.

"No, you won't," Harry told him. "I don't want to kill the little ferret, either. But try and help to keep him away from Hermione and me. If he mouths off, I might just kill him."

Seamus patted Harry's shoulder. Dean, however, went back to the point he and Seamus had been trying to make. "Harry, you're right, for now we'll forget the little ferret. The point is, you would have tried saving Ron if you'd been standing behind him. Ron did what you would have done, what Neville would have done, what I hope Seamus or I would have done, for each other or for anyone else. He did what he felt he had to do, and he just miscalculated how to do it to save you both. He didn't mean to sacrifice himself, he just thought it was worth the risk to save you as well as himself. There's no reason for you to feel guilty."

"Be as angry at the bitch that led the attack as you want," Seamus agreed, "grieve as much as you want, but don't feel guilty."

"You look hungry and thirsty," Dean said. "Take our soup, drink what you can. Seamus and I will try to make sure the little ones are getting ready for bed."

"Write Luna a note and lay down after you drink the soup," Seamus added.

"Thanks, guys," Harry said, with great sincerity. He decided he really was hungry and thirsty after all, and so did what they told him to do. He fell asleep less than fifteen minutes later, a loving message from Luna giving him a little comfort.

Since Harry had fallen asleep a little after 9:00, he was not very surprised to find himself wide awake at 4:30 am. Harry did not want to stay in the dorm room, looking at Ron's bed. He got up and got dressed, being careful not to wake Dean or Seamus.

Harry considered taking the cloak and map, but he knew there was only one place he would end up, and he was not ready to face the hall where Ron was. After a visit to the toilet, he went down to the common room, where he might be able to brood in peace until 6:30 or so.

A wave of his wand set the dead fire going. Harry went to sit down in one of the chairs, but saw Hermione lying on the sofa nearest the fireplace, looking back at him.

"Couldn't sleep either?" Hermione asked. She sat up and patted the sofa next to her. Harry had never seen her hair this frizzy or wild, which was saying something.

"Actually, I fell asleep a little after Nine," Harry admitted as he sat next to her. "Maybe Seamus drugged the cream of chicken soup."

"Duggins' Sleeping Draught For Children was designed to go into creamy dishes," Hermione reminded Harry. "It's pretty mild, so you wouldn't sleep too long or feel bad when you woke up, no matter how much you consumed. He might have slipped some in at that." (Actually, Luna had asked Dobby to provide the potion and the soup; Seamus then added it at Dobby's request.)

"Have you been awake all night?" Harry asked.

Hermione nodded. "I think so. I might have cat-napped a few minutes here and there, but I don't think so." She sighed. "I just can't believe Ron is gone."

"I know. You'd think there'd be some sort of acceptable magic that could bring him back. I mean," Harry added quickly, to make certain Hermione did not start listing all the reasons why black magic should not be used to restore life, "Ron just died! It wasn't like he was sick, or was beheaded, or anything . . . physical. Magic whisked his life away, and there should be some way of putting it back, without his being some zombie or worse."

"There should be," Hermione agreed, "but there isn't." Her eyes fell away from Harry. "I was always afraid he'd get killed like this."

"Saving me, you mean?" Harry asked grimly.

"No, Harry," Hermione assured him, and her red-rimmed eyes seemed to plead that he understand. "I know in those situations you can't stop and think, but Ron, well, you know how I feel, err, felt about him."

"I know you're not bad-mouthing Ron," Harry assured her. If anyone other than Hermione, Ginny, or Luna dared question Ron's perfection at the moment, Harry might hex them, but Harry knew those three could not be malicious towards Ron, especially under the circumstances.

"Ron sometimes acted not only before he could think things through, but even before his instincts could do anything except react," Hermione said sadly. "He wanted to save you, but from what people were saying, if he'd just dropped to the ground and dragged you with him, it would have saved both of you."

"You're right," Harry said. "I don't even know for sure that either hex would have hit me if Ron hadn't moved. The one he was making me dodge might have hit either one or both of us, or might have missed." Harry looked to the fire. "That doesn't make me feel any better, though."

"I know." Hermione put her hand on Harry's shoulder. "I'm sorry you had to kill Rodolphus Lestrange."

"Rastaban, I think, not that it makes any difference. And I guess I am, too," Harry said. He put his arm around his surviving best friend's shoulders, and hugged her. Hermione laid her head on his shoulder, and sighed deeply.

"Lay down," Harry said. "Rest at least." He summonsed a pouf so he could put his feet up.

Hermione did just that, placing her head on his lap and staring at the ceiling. "You know I don't blame you in any way, I hope," Hermione said.

"Thanks," Harry replied. "I hope Mrs. Weasley and Ginny feel the same."

"They will," Hermione assured him. "Ginny didn't come back, by the way. She's still with Neville."

"That should be good for both of them," Harry said.

Hermione gave a wan smile. "That sounds more like Luna than you."

"It was," Harry admitted.

"I didn't like her very much," Hermione told him, yawning. "Not until last September. I've really come to appreciate her, especially these last two months or so. She's sweet, if a little weird."

"What made you change your mind?"

"She's very good for you, and very good to you," Hermione said simply. "You matter a lot to me, Harry."

"You matter a lot to me, too," Harry said. "I guess that's why Rita Skeeter printed those things about us."

"I guess." Hermione paused. "I did fancy you a little, you know, right at the start of our Fourth year," Hermione confessed.

"Really?" Harry looked at her a little sheepishly. "I always thought you were attractive, even before you changed your teeth. Why didn't we do anything about it, I wonder?"

"Inexperience, I guess. You've been as much the brother I never had as my best friend, you know." Hermione's voice was fading. "I love you, Harry."

"I know, and I love you, too." He thought a moment. "Ron was the first friend I ever really had, but I've always needed, well, need, you, too."

"Is there anything you regret not having done, or said, to Ron?" Hermione asked softly, after a few moments of silence.

"No, not really," Harry answered. "I mean, I was looking forward to making a speech at your wedding," he teased.

Hermione smiled wistfully. "I wish we had made love," she said very quietly. "We slept together at your place, but we didn't, well, we just didn't."

"The same for me and Luna," Harry acknowledged. "Even if we both think we're right for each other, we just weren't ready to go quite that far."

Hermione shuddered, seeming to wake up completely again.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Do you know what my Mum's family business is?"

Harry thought a moment. "I don't think you ever said, why?"

"Well, one of my cousins calls himself a 'funeral furnisher' now," she said, "but they've been funeral directors for like seven generations."

"Undertakers?" Harry asked.

She nodded. "They've been 'Middlesex Funerals' since two brothers got back from serving at Waterloo. I know a fair amount about what they do to Muggles when they prepare them for a funeral. None of it is anything but ugly." She paused, and her voice became very small, and sounded very young. "I wonder what they're doing to Ron and Jaime and the others."

Harry remembered reading an article in one of Dudley's many discarded (never opened for that matter) books. He knew how right Hermione was. "I'm sure it's nowhere near as bad."

Hermione was silent, and Harry saw she was asleep at last.

Harry sat quietly, just thinking, until a few minutes after 6:00. The first student down to join them was Parvati.

"I wondered where she'd gotten herself to," Parvati said quietly. "Did you sleep at all?"

"I slept from just after Nine to around Five. I came down, and she was awake. She fell asleep about an hour ago."

"I'll be right back!" Parvati ran lightly up the stairs, and came back a minute later. "Just wanted to let Lav know. We were worried when we woke up and she wasn't with us." She knelt next to Harry. "I promise you, Harry, we'll watch out for her."

"Thanks, Parvati," Harry said. He sighed and laid his head back on the sofa. "This is going to be the hardest few days of my life. Even worse than last June."

"You're not totally alone, Harry. We'll make certain we all get through this." She paused, then said, "And thanks, Harry."

"For what?" Harry was puzzled.

"If you hadn't been there, we would have been over-whelmed by the dementors on our side. That was very clear, there were too many, and we were too weak. If Doctor Potter hadn't been there, the other side would have been, too. Five nice people were killed yesterday, but without you and your cousin, we'd all be dead, living corpses, or tortured hostages." She stood. "Thank you for saving us, Harry. Never think you've failed. We didn't do as well as we wish we had, by any means, but we all would have been a lot worse off without you."

Harry managed a slight smile. "Thanks."

Hermione opened her eyes. "Harry? Parvati? I fell asleep?"

"It's only about a quarter past Six," Harry told her. "You should sleep some more."

"No," Hermione said. She sat up. "No, I'll have a quick brush-up and be back in fifteen minutes." She went up the stairs.

"She can't go on like this forever," Parvati said, worried.

"I know. We'll have to catch her when she collapses."

"We will, Harry. I promise we won't let you down."

Colin Creevy came down the stairs. "Harry!" He stopped and blushed. "Ah, hi!"

Harry and Parvati avoided rolling their eyes. "Colin, can you and Dennis do me a favor?" Harry asked. He'd done a lot of thinking in the past hour, and had come up with some ideas.

Colin straightened up to 'attention,' and Parvati stifled a giggle. "Anything," he said seriously.

"There are a couple of people who are likely to be, well, unsympathetic over what happened."

Colin nodded. "Malfoy and company." He paused, and then said, "Wait! None of them were on the return train!" Harry was glad Colin had figured that out on his own.

"That's right," Harry agreed. "They probably didn't know what was going to happen, but it would be a huge coincidence if they didn't know something was going to happen. Sooner or later, unless Draco shows more brains than he's ever shown before, he's going to say something to Hermione or me, and failing that, to someone else."

"So we need to set things up so that no one is alone with that bunch?" Colin asked.

"Right," Harry said, walking over to a desk and jotting a few things down. "We also need to punish them in such a way no one gets into trouble. I need you and Dennis to get with your friends in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. Spread the word. I want Draco and his friends totally ignored. I don't want anyone to acknowledge they exist, unless it's necessary in a class situation. That also means being nice to the other Slytherins." He handed Colin a list. "If you have friends in Slytherin, assure them we don't hate them, we just can't trust Draco, Pansy, and company. I'll talk to Zabini about it, too."

"You had better tell Bulstrode," Parvati said. "She could rally the Slytherin girls more easily."

"I will," Harry assured her. "It's time all the students band together. We need to support the Slytherins that don't go to the extremes of Malfoy."

"You mean like the old-fashioned shunning Binns told us about in First year?" Colin asked.

"Exactly like that," Harry agreed.

Hermione came down the stairs. "Come on," Hermione said. She looked dead tired, but had managed to put her self back together.

Harry and Hermione left together, while Parvati ran upstairs to get dressed and Colin went to get Dennis.

Once in the entrance hall, Harry and Hermione's eyes strayed to the now-revealed door where Ron and the others were. The door was shut, and Hermione and Harry, after a moment of mutual hesitation, went towards the great hall.

There was only one student sitting in the hall. Luna stood and came over to them. She hugged them both, and kissed them on their cheeks.

Professor McGonagall was the only professor present. She stood and came over to the trio as well.

"Mister Potter?"

"Yes, Professor?" Harry asked. Luna let the pair out of her hug, and went to stand behind them.

"You need to meet with representatives of the Ministry between Nine and Nine-thirty, I'm afraid."

"Another hearing?" he asked, slightly bitter.

"You did cast an Unforgivable," McGonagall reminded him. "Your cousin will be present for questioning as well. We collected statements from all of the student witnesses here or in their common rooms last night. They all agree: Bella Lestrangle cast the first Unforgivable, and then the three Lestranges cast the Killing curse just before you retaliated. Still, a hearing is required."

"Is anyone checking on why certain Slytherins happened to miss the train?" Harry asked.

"They will all claim mere coincidence, I'm sure, once they return today," McGonagall said drily. "We cannot disprove it, at least not yet. If we ever can, that will be help put them in their place. Until then, no retaliation."

"And when Malfoy pulls his usual attacks when professors aren't around?"

"I would suggest you keep your tempers, but I saw how well that worked last year," she answered with some snip in her voice. "Make certain anything you do is at worst proportional; try to keep things low-keyed."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said, fervently. She gave him a suspicious look, but said nothing more on the subject.

"Professor," Hermione said, "when can we see Ron?"

McGonagall bit her lip. Harry and Hermione finally noticed what Luna had already seen; the stoic professor had obviously been crying, and had probably gotten little more sleep than Hermione had. "The Weasleys will be down here around Eight; they arrived in the night, but are with Ginny right now. You may wait for them in the entrance hall. I know you both well enough to know you will not intrude if they are not yet ready to talk with you. If they don't signal, you will wait until they leave."

The students agreed.

"All right," Luna demanded as they sat, "what do you have planned for Draco?"

"A shunning," Harry said.

The two girls stared at him.

"You mean, like we read about in History of Magic?" Luna finally squeaked.

"Exactly, if we can organize it."

Luna looked over Harry's shoulder and waved her hand. Harry and Hermione looked up, and saw Blaise Zabini, his girlfriend (a Fourth year Slytherin), and Millicent Bulstrode.

"Harry has a plan he'd like to talk over with you three," Luna said when they came close enough to speak to easily.

"A plan for what?" Blaise asked.

"How to deal with Malfoy and his remaining stooges," Hermione said.

"They knew," Blaise agreed bitterly. "He didn't say anything directly, but he and three of the five others were almost bragging to some of the other Fourth years that something was coming a few days ago when they saw them in Diagon Alley." He was bitter because they had not told him until after the attack. He, and the students, were ashamed. Had they said something earlier, they might have had more help.

"Draco, the two Parkinsons, and who?" Harry asked.

"Martin Meliflua, Fourth year and Draco's bum boy since Crabbe and Goyle were killed," Blaise said. "I don't think the other two were told, but that might be because they were already planning to come back this morning. Draco and his crew will be back late this afternoon."

"The Cole cousins told some of us long before they left," Blaise's girlfriend said. "Some big family expedition to Switzerland. Like Blaise said, they should be back this morning." She looked at Harry beseechingly. "I really don't think they knew."

"Okay then, just Malfoy, the Parkinsons, and Meliflua, if most of the rest of the Slytherins will go along," Hermione said.

"For what?" Millicent demanded.

"A shunning," Harry said. A community deciding some members were not welcome, and so are shunned, ignored. Totally.

"H'mmm," Blaise mused.

"It's time all the rest of us put aside our differences. I doubt if any of us like the agreement the Ministry made with the Pure-Bloods. Some of us think it went too easy on them, and are too hard on non-Pure-bloods, some of you might think the exact opposite. Still, that's the new reality. Fine. Let's come together and agree to work within the system." The three Slytherins looked thoughtful.

"At the same time," Harry went on, "there's a group still dedicated to violence. We need to freeze-out their supporters here."

"So you trust the ones who made the agreement?" Millicent asked.

Harry gave her an honest answer. "No; I think Black and Malfoy are going to use it as a cover to support the terrorist group. But I do know there are plenty of people who hate the violence who will still support the agreement. I don't agree with them, but if we fight it out politically, I can live with it."

"In that case, since I know you're a man of your word, I'll support the shunning of Draco and his friends," Millicent said. She turned to Hermione. "We'll fight out our differences like Potter said, politically. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Hermione said. They shook hands.

Chapter VII

While Millicent and Blaise's girlfriend went back to Slytherin, Blaise and Luna ate breakfast with Harry and Hermione at the Gryffindor table.

"I never thought I'd be eating at this table," Blaise admitted.

"If the other students, especially your fellow Slytherins, agree, we should make this more common," Hermione said. "We owe it to the victims to work together."

"No offense, but Weasley never struck me as the type to be in favor of inter-house friendships, especially with Slytherins," Blaise pointed out.

"True," Hermione admitted, to Harry's surprise. "But I'm not going to allow any of their deaths to count for nothing. We're going to make Hogwarts a better place, by bringing as many of the students together as we can."

"And exactly how will shunning Draco help bring us together?" Luna asked, "By giving us a common enemy?"

"No, Draco is only 'the enemy' if he wants to be," Hermione insisted. "Remember what we learned back in First year history. . . ."

"Back before we always fell asleep in that class," Blaise muttered.

"Shunning could end if the shunned admitted their errors," Hermione pressed on, ignoring the comment. "Draco has made himself an accessory to violence, even if he could never be convicted of it."

"To bad we can't convict him of something," Blaise said, in a somewhat wishful tone.

"Draco hasn't named a member of the Pure-bloods yet," Harry said. "If he doesn't appear on the final list in a few months, with a full confession, there are a few things we can get him on. His father hasn't confessed to everything yet, either."

"Really?" Blaise asked.

"Really," Harry answered. The three students looked at Harry, and each came to the same conclusion -- it was better they did not know what Harry knew. If Draco Malfoy could be convicted on some legitimate charge, there would be few at Hogwarts that Sunday morning who would complain about it.

"I wonder why Mister Malfoy didn't totally confess?" Hermione mused. "I mean, he confessed to a lot of horrendous things."

"In part because some would show how important he was while Voldemort was disembodied, and in part because some were crimes committed against fellow Death Eaters on his own," Harry answered. "The first would hurt him in general, and the second would hurt him with his own followers."

"We can't mention this again," Blaise said. "Maybe their own arrogance will get them caught!"

Luna raised her glass of juice. "To a better future!"

The other three agreed.

By now, there were a few other students, all First and Second year Slytherins, hesitatingly coming into the great hall, as if partially in shock from the previous day's events, and partially unsure of their welcome. Blaise went over to talk with them. When Dennis Creevy stuck his head into the hall a moment later, Harry waved him over and filled him in on the slight change of plan. Dennis nodded his understanding, made himself a bacon and banger sandwich, and went back to work spreading the word.

At 7:45, Harry, Hermione, and Luna went out to the entrance hall to wait for the Weasleys. Luna stood on Harry's right, Hermione on his left. They hugged Harry tightly; Harry put his arms around Luna and Hermione's shoulders, and hugged them back. Part of him felt embarrassed to be embracing two attractive women in public, even out of mutual support and need. However, Harry decided comforting his best friend and his girl was worth any feelings of embarrassment.

A few minutes later, Professors Snape and Sinistra came into the entrance hall. Sinistra gave the trio a sympathetic smile; Snape a mere nod, which was more than Harry had expected from him. They were followed by Professors McGonagall, Lupin, and Potter. Remus and Edward made as if to hug Harry, but both decided Harry was well-supported as things were. The faculty trio stood near the student trio to wait.

They heard Mrs. Weasley's sniffing first. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley came into the entrance hall supported by Bill, Charlie, and the twins. Ginny was missing, and more glaringly, Percy was missing as well.

Molly Weasley glanced up, and broke away from her family, throwing herself on Harry and Hermione and nearly knocking Luna over. "My darling children," she cried hugging them tightly. "Thank God, you're both safe!"

"I'm so sorry," Harry told her when he could get enough breath to talk.

"It wasn't your fault," Molly told him firmly, taking his shoulders with both her hands. Hermione hugged her sides, taking in deep breaths, while Molly went on. "If you think we blame you, think again. Sirius was right, I do think of you both as my children."

"Molly," Arthur said gently as he put his hands on her upper-arms, "you can stay out here with the children if you. . . ."

Molly shook herself loose from everyone. "No; no I have to do this. Boys!" she summonsed the twins with a glance. They came and supported their mother on either side.

Harry noticed that Dumbledore had been standing behind the Weasleys. He now came forward, and opened the doors.

The ceiling no longer showed the outside sky. The great hall had shown the actual outside sky was overcast, and threatening to snow. Here, the sky was a brilliant blue, with a few scattered clouds. The five biers were each highlighted with streaming sunlight. The five students were lying, dressed in freshly-laundered Hogwarts robes. Sunlight glanced off Ron's prefect badge. Unlike Muggle corpses, who often looked at much like wax-works figures as they did the person they had formally been, these figures did look merely asleep.

Nick, the Grey Lady, and the Friar were present, guarding the bodies. The Baron stood off to the side, as if to make certain all who came in behaved themselves.

Two more crying couples came in, with Professor Sprout. They were obviously the parents of the two Hufflepuffs killed. A few moments later, Professor Flitwick escorted the parents of the Fourth year Ravenclaw student, along with one of their grandmothers. Hagrid escorted another pair of parents in, took one look at Ron's body, and fled.

Harry was burying his feelings very deeply, and so managed to notice that all the mourning families were in robes. The so-called Pure-Bloods had killed five students who at the least fulfilled their requirements for being Full-bloods. Harry knew that the two students affected besides Neville had been Slytherins, although they were too young for him to know personally.

It had been a totally indiscriminate attack. The Lestranges had miscalculated if they thought their attack would do anything for their cause.

Harry's attention was brought back to the one place he did not want it by the movement around him. To Ron's body. All the Weasleys and Hermione were already crying.

Harry gave up and did the same.

At 8:55, Edward came up and told Harry softly, "It's time to get ready for our preliminary hearing, Harry. The new time is Nine."

"Back to the Ministry, Ted?" Harry nearly spat.

"No, it's not a formal trial," Edward said. "This time, there will only be a trial if the hearing goes against either of us."

"Why would Harry be in trouble?" Molly demanded.

"I killed Rastaban Lestrangle. He might have flung the Avada curse that killed Ron; it certainly killed someone. I flung one back, and it hit him," Harry said flatly.

"Harry, I wish you hadn't had to have done that," Molly said. "Are there enough witnesses to show they did it first?"

"More than enough," Dumbledore said. By now, the other families of the victims had gathered together.

"Who killed our children," one of them asked. "Do you know exactly who? The message just said 'former Death Eaters'."

"We believe Peter Pettigrew strangled the engine crew," Dumbledore told them. "Then, the three Lestranges sent dementors to attack the train from two directions. Doctor Potter and some ten or twelve advanced students protected on one side of the train, the other advanced students protected the other students on the opposite side. They drove the dementors away, Doctor Potter destroying nine, Harry Potter here destroying six."

"Bellatrix Lestrange then used the Killing curse indiscriminately at the crowd of students. It hit Miss Dinsdale. Several students then yelled for everyone to lay on the ground. At that moment, as many were trying to do so, all three Lestranges sent Killing curses at the students. Mister Potter sent one back at the Lestranges. Bellatrix' hit Misters Pooty and Parrot, and injured three other students. Rodolphus' hit Mister Weasley. Rastaban's hit Mister St. John-Pole; Harry's hit Rastaban. Doctor Potter then entered the battle on that side of the train, and killed Rodolphus. Bellatrix escaped."

"Are those four members of that Pure-Blood group that's being pardoned?" Mrs. Dinsdale demanded.

"Yes, although those four had not yet applied for amnesty," Dumbledore answered.

"Was Doctor Potter the only teacher on the train?" St. John-Pole's maternal great-grandmother demanded.

"Teachers usually do not ride the train, Sara," Dumbledore told her. "Several others volunteered, but the Minister held a mandatory meeting yesterday afternoon, concerning the Pure-Bloods demand for the courses on Wizarding culture."

Dumbledore turned to Edward. "I believe the Minister intends to officially reprimand you for missing the meeting, Edward."

"Let'em try," Edward growled.

"I'm Sara Truheart," the elderly woman said to Harry and Edward. "That's my youngest great grandchild on that bier. I'm as pure-blooded as any witch in these isles, but I've put up with this nonsense for too long." She turned back to Dumbledore. "I want these people and their associates put in their place once and for all, and I intend to tell people so!"

Mrs. St. John-Pole tried to say something, but was shushed. "I'm a hundred and eight. I've lived long enough to know what's right and what's weakness! That boy Fudge has been wrong too many times." Sara Truheart turned to Harry. "You're Harry Potter?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She cupped his face. "Now boy, don't you be using those nasty Unforgivables again."

"No, ma'am; I'll do my best."

She almost smiled. "From what I hear, you always try to do just that. Why are you here? Feeling guilty, or was one of these children a friend of yours?"

"Ron . . . Ron Weasley was my best mate," Harry said simply. If he hadn't been cried out, he would have started crying again. One of the twins suddenly turned away, and was embraced by the other.

"Then I know you know how we all feel. You make mistakes, just like all of us do, boy. I've got at least ninety years on you, and Dumbledore will tell you I was not a fool when I was your age. And I still have made some mistakes that far surpass yours yesterday. Learn from them, and don't repeat them." She let go of Harry. "I don't know about you lot, but I'm giving Fudge a piece of my mind. He certain doesn't have one of his own!"

Molly started to follow the old lady. "Mum," Charlie started.

"I lost one son yesterday," Molly stated firmly, "I'm not letting anything happen to another, and as far as I'm concerned, Harry is as much my son as Ron, no matter what anyone on earth says, even if he isn't my flesh-and-blood!"

"Mum," Bill said gently, "if Fudge is here, well. . . ."

Molly's eyes blazed. "If Percy is at Hogwarts, and did not have the decency to join us, then I'll be telling off someone other than Cornelius Fudge!" All the males present, even Dumbledore, shivered a little at her tone. Dame Truheart smiled approvingly.

As the group moved out into the entrance hall, they saw a group of elderly witches, all dressed in white flowing robes near the door, and quite a crowd of students and strangers beyond them. Neville's grandmother was by far the youngest member of the witches in white.

"Ah," said the oldest, far older than anyone Harry or Hermione had ever seen, "Mistress Truheart! We searched for thee. Does this mean thou hath a descendent amongst the victims?"

Mrs. Truheart stopped, and bowed as deeply as she could. "I do, Mistress Trowbridge."

"Mistress Longbottom called us to meet on this matter. Please join the Coven." The twelve witches moved off.

"Who are they?" Hermione asked softly, impressed.

"The Coven of White Witches," Edward answered. "There are a lot of small groups and organizations within the Wizarding world. The Coven are all matriarchs of old families, married into old families, and dedicated to preserving old customs. They exert a fair amount of influence in many of the families, except the very darkest ones. You have to be powerful and at least eighty to be considered, and they're usually much older. They're strict and even haughty, but they loathe the Darkness more than anything else." He smiled slightly. "They really hated Sirius and Severus' mothers and grandmother, for example."

"One of them is the Minister's grandmother," Arthur Weasley murmured from the other side. "She's not likely to be gentle with him."

The twelve elderly ladies, Mrs. Truheart now also dressed in white, came back just as the doors to the great hall reopened. Percy Weasley stood there, staring at the group.

"Only the Potters may enter," Percy declared, magisterially.

"Nonsense, boy," one of the Coven members declared. They moved past him, as did all the others, including most of the students. Harry was actually almost the last person to enter. While Fudge might have wanted only the two Potters, the great hall had been transformed into an auditorium, with rows of chairs.

"What is the meaning of this?" a surprised Minister Fudge shouted from the dais. Then he saw who had entered. "Grandmother?"

"Sit down, boy!" one of the Coven members commanded. "We're here to see justice is done properly.

"We all are!" Molly Weasley declared.

"Mother!" Percy remonstrated.

"Don't 'Mother' me!" Molly declared. "Why are you here?"

"This is my job, Mother!"

"This might be your job," Molly told him, "but in these circumstances, your duty was to be with your family! That's your baby brother laying in there!" The Coven all gave Percy very disapproving glances.

Percy's eyes went wide. "Ron!" He stumbled back into a chair, pale. He obviously had not known.

Dumbledore, the Coven, and a number of other old witches and wizards moved to the front of the room, where Fudge and a middle-aged man in a scarlet cloak sat. All the faculty, except Hagrid and the Divination teachers, were present, as were most of the students.

"We know you need to hold this inquiry," a wizard who looked as old as many of the O.W.L. examiners had the previous June said to the man in the scarlet cloak, "but then we are turning this into a Public Inquest on the Minister."

Hermione took a startled breath. "That's Sherringford Disney!" she said softly.

"Who?" Harry asked.

"Minister of Magic from 1942 through 1970," Luna said. "He organized the fight against Grindelwald, and brought the Headmaster officially into the fight."

"He was forced out by a progressive rheumatism, then came back as Acting Minister from 1980 through 1982," Hermione added. "A Public Inquest can force a Minister out, and can only be called by senior members of the community."

"Like a former Minister, or the White Coven," Luna explained. "These are some very influential old folks!"

The man in the cloak rapped his knuckles sharply on the faculty table. "I am Arthur James Cosby, Senior Under-secretary to the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. This opens a hearing into the actions of Harry James Potter and Edward Harold Potter on the afternoon of Four January, 1996. Recording for the Hearing is Percy Ignatius Wesley. Also present is the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Oswald Fudge." Cosby held up a thick stack of parchment. "We have been supplied with eye-witness testimony of the many students present. Doctor Potter, could you please tell us your actions, in detail, from the time you boarded the train until you apparated atop of the carriage for the first time?"

Edward took them through the events of the train ride, with only one interruption -- Fudge tried to override Edward's concerns about the missing Slytherins. Cosby allowed that 'to pass by for the moment.' Harry was glad he had spotted Rita Skeeter in the crowd. She would have to report this accurately.

Edward then went on to describe the rest of his actions, from going to Hogsmeade through his escorting Hermione to Ron's body.

Cosby thanked Edward and had him sit down, and then turned to Harry. "Mister Potter, please tell us your version of events, after the late Mister Weasley returned from his patrol." Harry waited a moment for Percy, who had been taking the minutes but had to stop a moment to wipe his eyes.

When it came time for Harry to explain his rationale for calling an alert, Fudge again tried to down-play the absence of the Slytherins. Cosby turned to Percy. "Mister Weasley, what was your evidence for assuring the Headmaster there was no reason for the teachers to ride the train, and that it was in fact safe enough for all the staff to attend the Minister's meeting here at Hogwarts instead?"

Percy swallowed nervously, and looked at Fudge, who objected to the questioning.

"Minister," Cosby said severely, "I may not question you formally, but neither can you interfere with an Inquiry. Answer the question, Mister Weasley."

"Mister Black and Mister Malfoy assured both the Minister and myself that while the Lestranges and some others might not go along in the end, they were still debating the issue," Percy said.

"At whose suggestion was yesterday's meeting?" Cosby demanded.

"I don't know," Percy answered.

"I see." He turned back to Harry. "Mister Potter, we have a good deal of eye-witness testimony for what happened from that point on. Tell me, why did you use the Killing curse, instead of, say, 'stupefy'?"

Harry had wondered about that as well, and had come up with what he thought was the answer early that morning, as Hermione slept on his lap. "Very few curses are unblockable," Harry answered. "I felt I had to defend my fellow students, and to do that, I had to make the

Lestranges stop, and leave. Sending a curse that they could block might signal the other students to do the same, and that might force them to leave, but not before they killed more students. I wish there had been a better way, but if there was, I couldn't think of one in the time I had."

"That's twice in less than a month that you struck at wizards, using illegal methods," Fudge pointed out.

"Yes, sir, that's twice I had to use extreme measures to stop murderers from killing more people," Harry retorted.

"Sit down, Mister Potter," Cosby said. Harry sat.

"Doctor Potter, you are cleared of any possible charges. Mister Potter, I do understand you have been presented with some very unusual situations in your young life. I cannot condemn any one action that you have taken. However," Cosby warned, "you are walking a very narrow path these days. I advise you to think about your actions more carefully before acting, and to try and find more acceptable solutions when possible. You are also officially cleared of any possible charges. However, considering your methods, I must refuse to sign off on a suggestion that you be awarded the Order of Merlin for your actions."

"When I return to London, I shall have arrest warrants issued for Peter Pettigrew and Bellatrix Lestrangle. I find it odd that an official notice of the late Sirius Black's innocence has been delayed, considering I now find Mister Pettigrew listed on the membership roles of the Pure-Bloods," Cosby paused and gave Fudge a dirty look, "and I shall look into that, too. I shall also interview Misters Black and Malfoy, about their associates. I may be needing Mister Draco Malfoy, and his three friends, to answer questions as well."

Cosby turned to Fudge. "This hearing is closed. Now, Mister Disney and the White Coven have requested an open Public Inquest. This is one of the few orders I am allowed to give to the Minister of Magic -- Minister Fudge, there will be a Public Inquest this afternoon at One-thirty. I am delaying the demand until then, so that a notice may be posted in Hogsmeade. Failure to attend amounts to a resignation." Cosby stood and walked off the dais.

Chapter VIII

Minister Fudge looked lost after the hearing was over. Dumbledore went up to the dais, followed by the Heads of House. The crowd immediately went quiet.

"I must remind our guests that Hogwarts is in bereavement," Dumbledore stated. The already-quiet crowd went totally silent. "Those who wish to pay their respects to the deceased may do so from Ten-fifteen up until Eleven-thirty and again after lunch, from One until Four. The parents of all the students have decided that a public funeral will be held here in the great hall tomorrow afternoon at Two. At that time, private internment times will be announced."

"Classes are canceled for tomorrow and Tuesday. I presume Mister Cosby and Minister Fudge will provide adequate security for the funerals?" Cosby merely nodded his head, while Fudge did so with a scowl.

"It is a few minutes before Ten, should the families wish to be with their children in private a few more minutes," Dumbledore concluded.

The crowd settled down to discuss the events of the morning, leaving the families to go back to the viewing hall. Harry made no effort to move; he was watching Percy.

"Come along, Weasley!" Fudge called, but Percy did not move. Dumbledore also stopped to watch, but made no move to interfere.

"Weasley!"

"Minister, I . . ."

"Come on, Weasley! We need to work on my speech for this afternoon."

Percy stood up tall. "I shall have to catch up with you, Minister. I must go to my brother."

Fudge looked at Percy as if he was insane. "Weasley," Fudge then told him seriously, "public officials do not have the privilege of allowing their private grief to interfere with their service to that public. You know where my room is; I suggest you be there by Eleven." Fudge left the room.

As Dumbledore went up to Percy, Harry felt a hand on his shoulder. Looking up, he saw it was George. Bill, meanwhile, was going to Percy and Dumbledore. "Harry," George said, "Mum sent me to collect you."

"Why?" Harry said, blankly.

George almost smiled. "Hasn't it sunk through that thick skull of yours yet? If Mum could have figured out a way to change that hair of yours eternally red, and make you have freckles, you would have been Harry Weasley before you left the house that summer before our fourth year." George put his arm firmly around Harry's shoulder and turned him around. "Now, let's grab your girl and do our duty."

Harry turned and saw that Fred had already collected Hermione. Luna was immediately at Harry's other side as they moved towards the exit. The crowd parted for them all, and soon Harry was back in the entrance hall. The Weasleys were moving off to one side, and Harry saw their destination was Ginny, who was standing next to Neville. Neville was in a hovering, magical version of a Bath-chair, looking very tired. Ginny threw herself into her mother's arms.

Harry and Luna went up to Neville. "How are you feeling?" Harry asked.

Neville shrugged. "About as well as can be expected, I guess," Neville said sadly. He looked at Harry. "No offense, Harry, but you look worse than I feel."

Harry shrugged in turn. "It wasn't your fault the Lestranges attacked," Neville said.

"So everyone keeps telling me," Harry replied. "I know it wasn't my fault, but I still wish I'd been able to do more."

"I know," Neville agreed. "I think we all do." Neville's eyes went wide as he looked past Harry. "The Coven!" he said softly.

"They seem to be after Fudge's blood," Harry told him.

"Then he's in a lot of trouble," Neville said, feeling a mixture of pity and satisfaction.

Neville's Grandmother came over. "Neville," she greeted him. "Mister Potter, Miss Lovegood." She laid a hand on her grandson's shoulder. "I don't know if you intended on protecting those younger students or if you did so by accident, but you did a good job of doing so in any event. By all accounts, you did very well. In fact, you all did." She nodded at the teens and went back to the Coven.

"It's nice to hear," Neville said, "but it really doesn't help, does it?" He looked over at Ginny, now going into the viewing hall with her family.

"No," Harry agreed as he started to push Neville into the hall as well, "it doesn't."

Harry and his friends did not go to the Inquest that afternoon. Molly, Bill, and George Weasley did go, however, as did some of the dead students' family, including Mrs. Truheart.

Harry could not bring himself to care. He stood near Ron the entire time, taking just a few minutes for lunch, watching as the students, and some people from Hogsmeade, continued to come in to pay their respects to the families while others went to the Inquest. Some merely glanced at the bodies; others seemed drawn to them, as if seeing them for the first time, rather than for almost the last time.

After a while, Harry left Luna and Hermione to keep watch, and he approached Nick.

"Young Harry," Sir Nicholas said, with a courtly bow.

"Sir Nick," Harry replied.

"What can I do for you, my friend?" Nick asked.

"Can you tell if they've all . . . moved on?" Harry asked.

"Yes; so far as I know, no one has ever become a ghost when hit by the Killing curse," Nick answered. "We all feared death a little, and we either knew when it was coming, like I and the Friar did, or had some over-whelming need to fulfill. The Lady wished to watch over her lover, even if he had been unfaithful; the Baron and Myrtle wanted revenge of sorts on those who had harmed them. But the Killing curse rips you from your body and throws your soul into the Beyond."

"Thanks, Nick. While it might have been nice for Ron to be here as a ghost, I was a bit worried that one of them might be wandering alone in that valley." Harry's chin wavered a moment, before he steeled himself. "Ron always hated being alone."

"So he did," Nick agreed. "He was a good lad, if not as polite as some in his family." Nick frowned. "I see one overly-polite Weasley finally decided to do his duty."

"Percy? I suppose so." Harry shrugged his shoulders slightly. "It's a shame it took this to shock him out of being an ambitious git."

"He was always thus," Sir Nick observed. "While he was always polite to me -- no one has been politer to me in over a hundred years -- it was never well-meaning. You and Miss Granger have been much nicer, and have really meant it." He thought a moment. "I always thought Percy might have been better sorted into Slytherin, but the Baron always assured me that someone that sanctimonious would have fared poorly. This is a tragedy for the School without recent parallel; we can only hope some small measure of good comes from all this."

"He can never admit he was wrong," Harry observed.

"A true character flaw of major proportions, but one shared by many people."

Something in Nick's voice made Harry look at him sharply. "Let me guess, Sirius and my father."

"Not to the degree of Percy," Nick answered calmly. "I was also much the same while in life, as was the Baron for that matter. Some manage to rise about such flaws. Your father did so in the last year and a half he was here."

"Is that how he became Head Boy without being a prefect?" Harry asked.

"Oh, he was a prefect," Nick answered. "Once young Lupin was revealed to have been a werewolf, he was stripped of the position by the Ministry. Your father was his replacement."

Nick hastened to assure Harry, "Lupin was quite . . . unangry about that aspect of the situation. It took him some time to forgive Sirius Black, but was very grateful to your father for preventing Snape from being bitten."

"Did you know Sirius' younger brother?"

Nick was surprised by the change of subject, but answered. "Regulus Black? Slightly; he was a Slytherin, as most Blacks were." Nick signaled to the Baron, who came over.

"Potter," the Baron said with a nod.

"Harry was asking about Regulus Black. I thought you might have a few words to say of him, my lord."

The Baron sneered. "It is a sad fact, but a fact never-the-less, that many of the Darker students these last six decades or seven have been associated with Slytherin. When I was at school, most were in Ravenclaw."

"That's true," Nick agreed. "There was quite a knot of them in Hufflepuff and even Gryffindor when I was a student. It was a fellow Gryffindor who betrayed me to the Muggle king, and who helped keep me imprisoned until my execution."

"So, I will answer your question," the Baron said, ignoring Nick's aside, "as you've proven yourself a man of force and integrity. Regulus Black should have been the most brilliant student in several decades, had he attended at almost any other time these last two hundred years, but he was over-shown by his brother's class."

"That was the most brilliant class I've seen at Hogwarts in almost three hundred years," Nick agreed.

"Your father and mother, Black's brother, Lupin, Snape, and a few others," the Baron said, "made everyone else look . . . amateurish. And then, coming along three years behind him, your cousin, the most brilliant charms student any of us have ever witnessed."

"And while Regulus Black was an excellent student, he was a poor Quidditch player," Nick said. "Embarrassed himself every year by trying out for the team and failing miserably."

"Aye, he was an easy recruit for the Dark Lord," the Baron said. "He's a very clever man; very smart, too. Powerful, if nowhere in your league; about the same as your late friend, but more wily than any student I have seen in many decades. He's found himself a place, even I have little doubt he had to do every dirty thing to get there. Don't try and trap him, Potter, he would be vicious if truly cornered. My advice to you is either steer well clear of him, or if you are able, show him a trap, and make what you want him to do seem easier than killing you."

"Thank you," Harry said. "Thank you both!" Harry moved off.

"I understand what you see in him," the Baron said. "He's worth more than a dozen of those Malfoys and such."

"You have a good boy in Zabini," Nick said. "And this shunning will put Malfoy in his place."

The Baron grinned. "I promise there will be one being who does not ignore Malfoy's presence when the boy returns."

"And who is that?"

"Peeves," the Baron said with relish.

The Public Inquest went badly for Fudge, but it would take more than that to force him out of office. Mostly, it would take a viable candidate to force him out, and Dumbledore again made it clear he was not one.

It was in those circumstances that Rita Skeeter found Harry and asked him his opinion just before dinner.

"I don't think anyone cares who I think could replace Mister Fudge," Harry answered carefully, knowing Rita would have to report his exact quote since she was in Edward's pay. "I know of several members of the Ministry who have been held back by the current regime. I think someone like Amos Diggory or Arthur Weasley would do very well if they were finally promoted. Madam Bones would do well, too."

Rita removed her quill from the parchment. "Good answer," she said with an acidic smile. "Weasley is seen as a bit eccentric, but Diggory has a chance and Bones an even better one."

That evening, Draco Malfoy got his first taste of being shunned. He and his three companions had shown up at the castle just before dinner started. They had not noticed anything different at first, as they were all hungry and in a hurry to change for dinner.

Once in the great hall, they immediately noticed that their customary seats were filled. Instead, four seats at the bottom of the table, isolated by several missing chairs, were all that were vacant.

"What's the meaning of this!" Draco demanded. "McCloud! Zabini! I asked you the meaning of this!"

With just a little effort, everyone managed to pretend Draco didn't exist. Draco quickly went from surprised and upset to angry and then outraged as everyone at the student tables ignored him. Pansy meanwhile went into hysterics and the two younger boys merely stood there in shock.

Professor Snape strode over to investigate the disturbance. "Draco! What are you shouting about!"

"It appears," Draco stated, in his most snobbish voice, "that my Housemates have decided to move me and my friends to the end of the table as some sort of joke! They will not explain!"

Snape surveyed the scene without moving his head. "Mister McCloud, do you have an explanation for this?"

McCloud looked at Zabini. "Very well," Snape said, "Mister Zabini?"

"Yes, sir?" Blaise asked in an innocent voice.

"An explanation for this treatment, so that we may cease making a spectacle of the House and we may all resume our dinner?"

"The students of Hogwarts, including the members of Slytherin House, have decided that the actions of a certain person, and his associates, have brought disgrace upon Hogwarts in general and Slytherin House in particular. They are shunned, outside the classroom."

"They are what?" Snape demanded, incredulous.

"Shunned, sir."

"You can't ignore me!" Draco yelled.

"Be quiet!" Snape ordered. "Mister Malfoy, you and your friends eat your dinner tonight where there are seats." Draco started to protest, but Snape ordered him to "Sit down and eat! Mister McCloud, Mister Zabini, we will meet with the Headmaster after dinner."

Snape moved to the Gryffindor table. "I presume you know something about this action, Mister Potter, Miss Granger?"

Harry looked Snape right in the eye. "I believe you will find every student is fully aware of this action, sir, and is in agreement with it."

Snape almost growled in frustration. "Very well. The two of you will attend me at the Headmaster's office after dinner." He stalked off.

"I don't think the Headmaster will like this," Katie Bell commented.

"I'm sure you're right," Harry said. "I doubt if we can make it stick to the end of term. I intend to get it to stick as long as possible, however."

A small crowd of students were waiting to meet with Harry and his allies after their meeting with the Headmaster.

"Well?" Millicent Bulstrode demanded.

"There will be a formal shunning of the four students allowed until dinner, Easter Sunday," Head Boy McCloud told them. "After that, it's up to each student." He looked at the Slytherins present. "I rather suspect Professor Snape will have words with any member of our House who continues the practice after that time."

"Mal, err, the leader denies any foreknowledge of yesterday's events," Zabini said. "We pointed out the reasons why we disbelieve him, and why this was just part of a long sequence of events that has separated him and his friends from the general student body."

"Remember," Harry told the group, "and tell everyone else, no harassment of these people. As far as we're concerned, they are objects to avoid running into, nothing more. Obviously, we must all make certain we are not alone with any of these four. One in particular is likely to try

and pick a fight. Everyone, keep an eye out for the younger students in general, and for the younger Slytherins in particular. We're all in this together. We're in different Houses, but we are one school."

The group agreed, and went to spread the news.

"Do you really think it will teach Draco anything?" Blaise asked just before he left.

"I hope it at least teaches him that there's a limit to what his family's money and influence can buy for him," Harry answered.

"We can but hope," Zabini said.

Harry went off with Luna as the rest of the group left. He had created a private retreat for the pair of them just inside the entrance a secret tunnel to Hogsmeade that had collapsed several years before.

They merely sat on the sofa for several minutes. Finally, Luna said, "You looked stressed." She turned, and started massaging his neck with one hand while massaging his forehead with the other. Harry's head started dropping, closer and closer to Luna's shoulder, and then even lower.

Harry sighed, finally resting his head against Luna's small breasts. "Why do I feel so calm, so relaxed, when I'm with you?" Harry asked in wonderment.

Luna stroked his hair. "It could be the way our auras meld, to form such relaxing colors," she answered, "or it could just be that we love and trust each other." She kissed the top of his head, and wriggled them around on the large sofa. Harry's head ended up back on her breasts, but he was lying atop of her. "Rest now, my darling. You've had a stressful day, and you might still have a hard night. I'll wake you up before curfew." She stroked his hair with one hand, while rubbing his back lightly with the other.

Harry gave a contented sigh, and fell asleep.

When Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room just before 10:00, he was well-rested (if emotionally still exhausted) and feeling as good as he could under the circumstances. He and Luna had had a long talk, and a longer session of what Harry often teasingly called 'tempting the nargles.'

He was therefore a bit startled at his reception. "What?" he asked the assembled group of eleven girls.

"It's Hermione," Lavender told him.

"She's just pacing up and back, down and forth," a third year whom Harry believed would soon be thought of as the next Loony informed him, "her dressing gown flapping like Snape's robes in a monsoon."

"She wanted to spend the night with Ron, but McGonagall and Ginny got her up here at Nine," Parvati went on. "Then Ginny went back to the Infirmary."

"You're the only person, besides Ginny, she's likely to calm down for," Lavender said bluntly. "Like this morning."

"How did Luna know?" Harry wondered. This had been one topic they had covered. "Let her pace a while longer," Harry said. "I'm going up to shower and change. Once the common room clears out, send her down, and I'll try to talk her into relaxing."

"Sounds like a plan," two of the girls said.

A very drawn, fevered-looking Hermione came into the common room fifty minutes later. "You wanted to see me, Harry?"

"What are you planning to do tonight?" Harry asked bluntly.

"What do you mean?"

"Someone tried to get into my trunk. Were you after my cloak and map?"

Hermione hung her head.

"Hermione, wherever Ron is, he's not down in the viewing hall," Harry said, gently cupping her chin and making her look at him.

"The last time I will ever see him is tomorrow, Harry," Hermione said sadly. "What am I going to do without him?"

"I know you loved him, as well as thought of him as your friend," Harry told her, "but you still have your other friends, even if we can't replace him."

Hermione started the frenzied pacing that the third year had mentioned. "Harry, I know you care for me, and you know I care for you, but you have Luna, and Ginny has Neville. And yes, Luna and Neville are both sweet, but. . . ."

Harry walked over and placed his hands on Hermione's shoulders, making her stop. "Do you know how tired you are? You're running on pure adrenaline and what little sugar you still have in your blood." Harry put his left arm around Hermione, to make certain she didn't get away. He waved his wand, and the sofa near the fire was moved out of the way and replaced by an odd-looking double-recliner.

Just before Christmas, they had learned how to make copies of inanimate objects in Transfiguration. He had seen this in a Muggle store, and bought it for his study at Potter Place. He had practiced copying it over the holidays, so that he could reproduce it in the tunnel room.

Harry took off Hermione's robe, sat Hermione down, and handed her a mug from a nearby table. "I asked Dobby for some more cream of chicken soup. It doesn't have any sleeping potions, but you hardly ate anything at dinner. Drink up, you need it."

Hermione did as she was told, while Harry eased her part of the recliner back to the first position. Harry covered her with a quilt, took off the fuzzy pink bunny slippers Luna had given her for Christmas, and built up the fire a bit.

Harry took off his glasses and slippers, and sat in the other half of the recliner, pulling a blanket over him. He fully reclined. "Now, you know how much you mean to me. I am never going to abandon you, Hermione Granger." He thought a moment. "Nick told me last June that only those afraid to die come back as ghosts, but today he said those with unfinished business do as well. At least I think that's what he meant. I promise, I will do my best to look out for you and Luna, no matter what, even if I have to come back."

Hermione finished drinking her soup and leaned the rest of the way back. "You love her, don't you?"

"I do," Harry said, "but never think I don't love you, too." He wrapped his arm around Hermione's shoulders, and with a wave extinguished all the lights except the fire. "She cares for you, too."

"Even if it means sleeping with me tonight?" Hermione managed to tease.

"It was partially her idea."

"I don't think she means to share you, Harry. You're lucky it's me you're talking to. There are a number of other girls very interested in you, you know."

"First of all, we all just lost Ron. I know you need me, and I need you. Luna isn't the jealous type. Just close your eyes and rest."

"I'll try," Hermione said, her voice slowing down a tad. "What else is on your mind?"

"Plots and plans, my dear, plots and plans." Harry sighed. "Edward and I have some ideas yet. We'll do our best to get through this mess. And Ron won't go unavenged, I promise."

"Just don't go and get yourself killed," Hermione told him. "A ghostly arm wouldn't be nearly as comforting, and I doubt Luna would like it any more than I do."

Harry kissed the top of her head, just as Luna had done for him hours earlier. Hermione snuggled next to Harry, and fell asleep. Despite his earlier nap, Harry fell asleep a few minutes later.

Chapter IX

Monday, January 6, 1997

Harry woke up a little after 6:00, before anyone had come down to the common room. This was fortunate, since he and Hermione were tangled together in what most would think was a 'compromising position.'

Harry untangled himself, waking Hermione up in the process. As Hermione rearranged her night clothes, she tried to apologize to Harry.

"Don't worry about it," Harry told her, vanishing the double-recliner now that they were out of it. "Let's get dressed and go down stairs." He sighed. "It's not going to be an easy day."

Luna was again waiting for them just outside the great hall. She came and hugged them both, kissing Hermione on the cheek and Harry lightly on the lips. The trio held the hug for several moments.

"Hem hem," came a voice behind them, making all three jump.

All three were relieved to see it was the Bloody Baron. "Your lordship," Hermione greeted.

"Sir Nicholas suggested I find you two Gryffindors. If either of you would care to see your friend's clay in private, now might be a good time to do so." He paused. "The funeral this afternoon will be a bit public for any private words."

"Is he there to hear them?" Hermione asked.

The ghost shrugged. "There is no way to know. Despite our situation and experience, we know no more of these matters than the living. If those beyond the veil can hear us, proximity to their remains may help."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, and Luna gave them a slight push. The trio approached the door, which opened for them.

The three other house ghosts were still present. Harry and Hermione approached Ron's body, hand-in-hand, with Luna trailing behind them. Hermione went the last few yards alone. She leaned forward and brushed Ron's hair, and murmured what were obviously words of affection. She then kissed Ron's forehead, and came back to hug Luna. The pair watched Harry.

Harry took a deep breath, and walked up to Ron. "Thanks for being my friend," Harry said. "I hope I didn't cause this; and if I did, I'm sorry. I hope you forgive me for anything I ever did to hurt you. I'll look out for Hermione and Ginny, I promise. Say 'hi' to Sirius and my folks, if you can." Harry noticed something then, and looked carefully. He then lifted the hem of Ron's robes, and smiled.

"What?" Hermione asked when Harry walked back towards them.

"He's got his Chudley Cannon shirt and socks on," Harry said.

"A true fan for eternity," Hermione agreed.

The rest of the day was a blur to both Harry and Hermione. Neither ever remembered more than snippets. The five deceased students were well-honored by the fellow students as well as their families. A small plaque with their names was added to the trophy room, commemorating their sacrifice.

For most of the students, it had been a horrifying, even traumatic experience. However, it was one they would soon recover from, even if most could never forget it. For other students, the trauma went deeper.

Harry and Hermione went back to their normal dorms that night, and almost every night thereafter. On those nights when they couldn't sleep, and they sat in the common room late at night, they came on separate nights, and so sat alone.

Neville and the two Slytherin students were recovered by the end of the week.

Despite how some people had felt on the day of the attack, life did go on. There were repercussions; many lives had changed. But everyday affairs kept flowing at its normal, if irregular, pace.

For example, Cornelius Fudge did not recover politically that week. He went down fighting, but he went down never-the-less. Amelia Bones took over as the new Minister of Magic and Arthur Cosby moved in to her position as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Amos Diggory took over for Cosby as the number two man in that Department. Arthur Weasley was promoted to be the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. Percy Weasley was moved to Arthur's old department, as the junior member.

On Saturday (January 12), the Quidditch players (minus Malfoy and Melflua, who was a Slytherin chaser) met to talk about the rest of the season. Ron and St. John-Pole had been team members, (St. John-Pole had also played chaser) and the two Slytherins were banned. Ginny was the only player closely related to any of the students killed, and Harry was one of just four players who had been close friends to one of the victims.

"So," Katie asked, "what do we want to do? Hold try-outs for the four missing players, or cancel the rest of the season? If we do hold try-outs, should we go with the current schedule, or delay the first two games?"

Everyone looked at Harry. "I'm willing to play, if you all want to," Harry said. "I don't know how St. John-Pole felt about Quidditch, but I do know Ron would have wanted the season to go on." He shrugged. "That's not a great reason for it to go on, but it's all I have to say."

"I'll play, too," Ginny piped up. "I don't know how well I'll play, but I will play."

"Ravenclaw is the least-affected team," Cho said. "I think we should go along with whatever the rest of you decide."

Millicent Bulstrode, now playing beater, agreed. "We lost two players because they're on the wrong side. We'll go along, too." She smiled. "Besides, without . . . that certain person playing seeker, we might have a better team, anyway."

Everyone looked at the Hufflepuff team. "We play for the House," one of them said. "We go on."

And so it was decided.

The school went back to its usual rhythm. Seventh and Fifth year students were harried, Fourth and Six year students looked at the students a year ahead of them and worried about the coming year.

Harry, Ginny, Neville, Luna, Parvati, and Lavender all tried hard to get Hermione out of the library as much as possible, and she allowed them to do so.

The faculty was busy with meetings, both amongst themselves and with various other schools and ministries across the world, trying to figure out what the courses, O.W.L.s, and N.E.W.T.s in Magical Culture would consist of.

Most of the meetings took place at Hogwarts, in part because of its reputation as the leading school of witchcraft and wizardry, but more because of Dumbledore and Edward Potter's reputations as experts in the field. Carole Potter had also published two articles in the field, and had been the first person named to a position to teach the field when it started (Hogwarts' classes in the field would start the following year).

Hermione organized a student committee to add student opinion to the creation of the classes. She was careful to include Full-and-Pure bloods, as well as Muggle-born and Mixed-bloods, and to include students from each House. By the end of May, she had chapters in twelve other schools.

Grumbling, but still in the pay of Edward Potter, Rita Skeeter gave Hermione's **Inter-House Student Committee For Cultural Input** wide publicity. It made the point that while the basic courses would no doubt be useful, there were plenty of Muggle-born and Mixed-blood students ready and able to contribute to the wizarding world. (Of course, that did not please all the Pure-bloods, who were secretly worried about exactly that.) Hermione was also determined to have some way that Muggle-borns such as herself, who completed Hogwarts and other schools before the new requirements went into effect, would have the chance to earn an O.W.L. equivalency.

Spurred on by these ideas in January, Hermione reformed S.P.E.W. as E.L.F. (Elf Liberation Front) and formed R.A.W.W. (Rights for Afflicted Witches & Wizards, for werewolves and vampires) in early February. (Hermione had taken E.L.F. from a suggestion once made by Ron; Luna had suggested R.A.W.W. Hermione, however, named the I-H.S.C.F.C.I.)

Skeeter reluctantly gave those publicity as well. With all the educators and coming through Hogwarts meeting with her, Hermione would have chapters of E.L.F. and/or R.A.W.W. set up at nine other schools by the end of the term (8 E.L.F. chapters and 4 R.A.W.W. chapters). To

her surprise, Skeeter's stories on Hermione gave her more positive feed-back than she had ever gotten before in her career. It started her rethinking her career choices.

Hermione and Luna also organized a research group, listing and cross-listing the crimes admitted to by the former Death Eaters and members of the Pure-Bloods. They were looking for any inconsistencies. They also had a list of crimes and perpetrators secretly supplied by Severus Snape and by the other members of the Order of the Phoenix to cross-check against the confessions. It was work the Ministry should have been doing, but Fudge-like members were still holding up the work.

The leaders of the Order were meeting throughout January and February, trying to decide what to do about the up-coming peace. Bella Lestrage and her small band of terrorists had mostly laid low, but all the intelligence pointed to their just waiting for the 'peace' to go into effect before they started a new set of attacks. That would give the Pure-Bloods someone to denounce, and to make the group look good.

There was no right answer to the problems. The research group turned up enough discrepancies to bring most of the Pure-Bloods into gray-areas at worst. The problem was, that would leave the terror group free to do what they wanted. The only check on them was the group's political leadership.

After much debate throughout February, the leaders of the Order slowly moved towards a compromise that they hoped they could live with.

Thursday, February 27, 1998

Regulus Black, leader of the Movement for Pure-Bloods walked up to the main entrance to Hogwarts castle. He had been nowhere near the School since he left (11 N.E.W.T.'s) in June of 1979. It was a chilly night, and he was not totally certain why he had obeyed the summons. Black gathered his cloak around him and stood before the doors.

The doors swung open. "Edward," Regulus said, sketching a slight bow.

"Regulus," Edward returned. "Come along."

Black followed Potter into the deserted great hall. Dinner was long over, and there were no students studying there this night. Edward escorted Regulus to the room off to the side of the dais, and gestured him into it.

"I'm not meeting with you?" Regulus asked, surprised. He knew he was not meeting with Dumbledore, and had figured Edward as the most likely contact person.

"No," Edward answered. "I'll be right out here, however. We thought you'd prefer just talking to one person, so that there isn't an extra witness. If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

Curious, Regulus swept into the small room. The only light was from the fire and one candle. The only furniture was a small library table and two chairs. Standing beside the further chair was a slightly-built teen wizard of at best average height for his age.

Regulus of course recognized him. "Mister Potter," he said. "Well, while I expected to meet with a Potter, it seems I anticipated the wrong one. What can I do for you?"

Harry sat and looked at Sirius Black's brother. They did not look very dissimilar, but not in any way totally alike. Harry waited until Regulus sat down opposite him.

"My friends and I seem to be in a dilemma," Harry started off.

"And they leave it to you to solve?" The mockery and disbelief were apparent. "I take it your friends include Albus Dumbledore, the most qualified wizard of the last several hundred years, and your cousin Edward, perhaps the most powerful wizard of the same period, and probably others, like that snaky traitor Severus Snape. And yet they allow you to speak for them? Why?"

"Because I killed Voldemort, and I hold most of the threads," Harry said.

"Yes, Riddle died of the charmed gunshot wounds you inflicted," Regulus started, but Harry shook his head.

"No, I killed Voldemort directly, on the Twenty-first of December, a few moments before midnight, about an hour after Bellatrix Lestrage finished crucio-ing him to keep him weak."

Regulus' eyes widened. Few outside of a few members of the Order, and fewer members of the Ministry, had known that. Obviously, this was one secret that had been kept.

"I was connected to him, because of his curse on me and this." Harry pointed at the famous scar, now slowly fading. "For a few months, he could influence me, but I then became quite adapt at Occlumency. After the battle at the Ministry, he couldn't touch me while I was here or at Potter Place. But that night, I wasn't in either place. Our minds touched, and I killed him. I destroyed the spirit in that fake body."

Regulus could say nothing to that, but this calm recitation made him very nervous.

"I learned a number of things that night," Harry went on. "Such as your unconfessed connections to the American Magical Mafia." It had actually been Edward who had uncovered that information, while Harry and Voldemort struggled, but it had been decided to let Harry run with this.

After all, the Pure-bloods had only gotten the nerve to turn on Voldemort because of Harry's injuring him and Harry's revelation of his half-blood status. Had not both occurred, they would have stayed his slaves. Even proudly Pure-blood and powerful followers like Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrage, and Regulus himself had to admit to themselves that they could never have stood up to an uninjured Voldemort.

Harry had not only stood up to Voldemort more than once, Harry had killed him -- not with a sneak attack as they had thought, but in a battle of pure power. Harry had also driven away half their former dementor allies, destroying six in the process, something they knew they could not do. Harry had even killed one of the Lestrage brothers, noted for their survival skills and ruthless use of terror. Harry was obviously someone to be wary of, teen or not.

Regulus pulled his wand, but Harry already had him covered. "Don't try it," Harry said with a deadly calm that did not show how nervous he really was. "I already have it all written down, in case you're thinking of trying to modify my memory. And even if you manage to do something to me, Edward would kill you." Harry smiled. "And you know that he could, and would."

Regulus slowly put his wand away.

Harry went on. "Something else you haven't confessed to; after Crabbe and Goyle -- the sons, that is -- were captured, Lucius Malfoy asked that you arrange their murders, and you did. And, of course, you haven't confessed that you're still in charge of all the former Death Eaters, including Wormtail and Bellatrix Lestrange, but then, that would end your amnesty, wouldn't it?" The attack on the train had come after the period for new crimes to be pardoned.

Regulus looked at Harry, but Harry didn't give an inch. Black was reminded of playing poker with members of the American Wizarding community. Potter had a 'poker face.'

"You wouldn't tell me this, if you thought you could prove any of it," Regulus finally said.

"Or, unless letting you off would give us something we want more than your head," Harry answered.

"I find it difficult to believe you, and I mean any of you, would do anything like that!"

"Thanks for the compliment, although I doubt it was meant as one," Harry retorted.

"Then why?" Regulus demanded.

"Because even if we get rid of you and Malfoy, and discredit your bigoted movement," Harry answered with slight anger in his voice, "that still leaves the terrorist group untouched. Our best intelligence says there are currently only nine of them at most, but they're all as crazy as Wormtail and your cousin Bellatrix!"

Regulus nodded. "They are a bit . . . unbalanced."

"So, we know that you know where they are," Harry said. "You should also have the evidence that can put the seven who weren't directly involved in the train attack away. Above all, you can put Bellatrix and Wormtail away." The hate in Harry's voice startled even Black as he said, "I want them both taken out!"

Harry stopped and composed himself before going on. "Confess to helping Malfoy get Crabbe and Goyle executed by tomorrow midnight, without letting him know so he doesn't confess as well, and we both get rid of him. You know perfectly well that, sooner or later, he'll turn on you. Do it now, and make certain everyone knows about Draco. That won't be enough to put the little ferret away for long, but it will disqualify him from politics, too." Harry was obviously looking forward to that as well.

"And you'll just ignore my alleged connections to the Magical Mafia?" Regulus asked, disbelieving. "And ignore your mistaken notion that I knew they were going to attack the train?"

"If you connect the Malfoys to that, you could make any evidence look like it only applied to them," Harry answered. "It's up to you to avoid any evidence Malfoy can throw back at you." Regulus looked thoughtful.

"I'm hoping to become an Auror," Harry went on. "If you've kept up your criminal associations after five or six more years, then I might happen to investigate you. But you're planning to be the leader of a small but solid part of the wizarding community. I'm hoping Sirius' brother has the sense to have at least cut out any active involvement by then." Harry was very glad Edward, Snape, and even Dumbledore had coached him in likely scenarios. "As for this Pure-blood nonsense, I think we can at least hold back things getting worse. I'm willing to fight that out politically. Are you?"

Regulus sat back, surprised to say the least. "I never liked your father, Potter," he said at last. "But except for looks, you don't remind me much of him at all. You're much more like your mother and your cousin Harold, Edward's older brother."

Harry said nothing. Regulus looked at him some more. "I'll need Snape to be willing to testify, if I'm to 'get' Malfoy."

Harry got up and went to the fireplace. He tossed in some powder. "Professor Snape!" he called.

Snape's head appeared in the fire. "Yes, Potter?" He looked around. "Ah, Black." Harry was glad to hear even more loathing in Snape's voice for Regulus than there had ever been for Sirius.

"Am I to understand you will be willing to testify against Lucius Malfoy, in regards to the murder of Crabbe and Goyle?" Regulus asked.

"Yes," Snape almost hissed.

"Thank you, Severus," Regulus said with a sneer. Snape disappeared without another word. Regulus turned to Harry. "I think we have a deal."

"Fine," Harry said, a little ill now that he might have succeeded. He hoped getting rid of the terrorist cell and Lucius Malfoy was worth leaving this man active. It had been well-argued out, but they could have been wrong.

"Tell me, do you know if will I be able to reclaim my family's house?" Regulus asked. "It seems to be missing."

"Since you were legally dead, it went to your cousin Tonks," Harry answered. "There's nothing left there you would want, anyway."

"Ah," Regulus said, standing. "I take it we do not need to shake hands?"

"I don't think either of us would like that very much," Harry retorted.

Regulus went over and opened the door. "Ah," he said again, now with a twisted smile, "another old acquaintance. Hello, Remus."

"Regulus," Remus answered.

"That's all you have to say?" Regulus asked. "No curse for being on the wrong side? No thanks, for improving the legal status for werewolves?" Both questions seemed sincere. "Believe it or not, I was thinking of you. You're the only one of Sirius' friends and acquaintances I ever liked. Except under the full moon, you now have all the rights a Full-blood deserves."

"Thank you," Remus said in a deadly voice.

Regulus gave the pair a twisted smile. "I assume one of you will wish to see me out?"

Remus gestured, and the pair left. Edward went in to see Harry.

Harry was still seated, his head in his hands. Edward put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "It was a dirty deal, in many ways," Edward told his cousin. "In a perfect world, it would not be needed."

"But no one sane person could claim this was a perfect world," Harry answered in a sad voice, "could they?"

"I understand a few Muggle philosophers once claimed this was the best of all possible worlds," a voice said from the doorway. Harry looked up and saw Luna. As always, just knowing Luna was near brought Harry a lot of comfort. "I always thought they must have had very limited imaginations," she continued. Harry managed a slight smile.

"We did a necessary thing, Harry," Edward assured him. "Let's hope it's the last time you have to do something like this, at least for a long time." Edward left the young couple together, knowing Luna could comfort Harry the most.

Harry hoped so. He, Luna, and Hermione all worried that while this might end the legacy of Voldemort, it would just start something nearly as bad.

Chapter X

Epilogue
From The Daily Prophet
Sunday, March 2, 1997

The Department of Magical Law Enforcement Services announced two groups of multiple arrests yesterday evening. The first group includes nine former Death Eaters who had not applied for amnesty, and at least two of whom were involved in the deadly attack on the student train last January. These were Bellatrix Lestrangle, Peter Pettigrew, Walden Macnair, H.D.T. Macnair, Manning Flint, Michael Meliflua, David Moriarity, Mary Sue Cummings, and Montgomery Bode.

In addition, six former followers of Tom M. Riddle, Jr. who had applied for amnesty were arrested on various serious charges they had not previously confessed to, including murder, attempted murder and conspiracy to commit murder, and possession of illegal magical items. Most surprisingly, this group included Lucius Malfoy, along with Justin Avery, Jennifer Vole, Murray Meliflua, Austin Stuart, and Marietta Jones. Arrest warrants on related, although more minor, charges for twelve others have been issued. Up to two dozen additional warrants may be issued.

"Interesting," Harry said with an some-what satisfied air, looking up from a plate of bacon and eggs.

"Who do you think the others are, Harry?" Colin asked from down the table.

"Why don't we watch and find out?" Hermione said, with much more satisfaction than Harry had expressed.

The Gryffindors looked over in the direction Hermione's attention now indicated. Mad-Eye Moody was heading straight for the Slytherin table, leading seven aurors led by Kingsley Shacklebolt and brought up by Tonks. Seeing the procession, Dumbledore and Snape stood and quickly moved to intercept them. Three of the four out-cast Slytherins were very pale, while Pansy Parkinson looked rather green.

A few exchanged words, and Shacklebolt went the rest of the way to the table. Malfoy and Meliflua were escorted from the hall. Draco flashed a dirty look at Harry, but Meliflua broke down crying. Draco was cursing his young cousin as they left.

Snape walked over to the Gryffindor table. "Satisfied, Potter?"

"No, sir," Harry answered politely.

"Why not?" Snape demanded.

Harry answered politely, but he looked Snape straight in the eye when he said, "Because Ron wasn't here to see it."

"Ah," Snape said, flushing slightly. "Understandable. Other than that?"

"I hope he gets everything that he deserves, but nothing worse."

"And the two Parkinsons?"

Harry knew what he meant, but chose to pretend otherwise. "If they weren't arrested, then I hope it was because they've been cleared of criminal intent, rather than just not being enough evidence," Harry said simply.

"I meant about their shunning!"

Harry shrugged. "Care to make it a secret ballot? If so, I'll even vote to end it."

"I'll arrange it for tomorrow, Severus," Dumbledore said, coming up to them. "This is a time for the community to start to heal. We must never forget those lost in the fight, nor the ones who were wrong."

That evening, in their secret hideaway in the collapsed tunnel, Harry Potter laid in Luna Lovegood's arms. He was crying. Crying in a way he had never cried before. It was not from hurt, grief, or anger.

It was from relief.

He felt as if an enormous weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He had done everything required of him, and more. He had defeated, even killed, the man who had killed his parents. In helping to craft the peace, he had at least made certain that the woman who had killed his beloved godfather and who had led the attack which had killed his best friend had been arrested and would likely be executed. He had made certain the man who had betrayed his parents and his godfather had been arrested and would also likely be executed. He had made certain that the man who had led the remains of the Death Eaters, who had slipped Riddle's diary into Ginny Weasley's possessions, causing so much harm, and who had also abused Dobby so badly, would be in jail for at least 60 years. And now, the least of those enemies, but the one that had pestered them all the most directly, had been arrested. Malfoy would not be in jail long, 2 to 5 years were the terms being bandied about, but some small measure of retribution was at hand.

Harry had done what was needed from him.

The rest of his life was his own.

It was a thought that he had never dared do more than vaguely hope for, even after the execution of Voldemort. He felt lost and empowered at the same time.

Luna stroked his hair, and knew in her heart that he would be strong enough to take control of his life. And she would be with him, to help him and to be helped.

Friday, June 27, 1997

Hermione Granger was making a final patrol aboard the Hogwarts Express as it neared King's Cross station. Rather than going on to the compartment she was sharing with Harry, Luna, Ginny, and Neville, she stayed standing between two of the carriages.

In one sense, it had been a satisfactory end to the school year. There had been no disasters after the arrest of the Malfoys and their allies, either at school or within the Magical community. For once, nothing interfered with the end-of-term exams. The Leaving Feast was a bit subdued, but it was happier than the previous three years'. For once, the Defense Against the Arts teacher had completed the year, and Remus Lupin would almost certainly be back the next year. Ravenclaw had tied Gryffindor for the Quidditch Cup, and had just beat Gryffindor for the House Cup. Hermione could live with these small set-backs. It was nice to know those were the worst things they had had to endure over since the arrests.

The look on Draco Malfoy's face had brought back many memories, all bad, or at least badly tinged (like Ron's trying to curse Malfoy for her, but throwing up slugs instead).

But the worst memory now resurfaced. Valentine's Day. Her first without Ron.

Hermione could not bear watching all the happy couples in the great hall for breakfast. She had accepted Harry's Valentine's tribute of an orange rose and sisterly kisses from Ginny and Luna, slipping away from breakfast early. She was wandering slowly towards the Potions dungeon, early for her first class.

"Well, what have we here?" came the familiar cold sneer, "a lone Mud-blood."

Hermione saw the four out-castes blocking her way.

"Missing the Weasel, you Mud-blooded bitch? Missing the only Pure-blood low enough to shag your ugly arse?" Malfoy took a step forward, and Hermione pulled her wand and stood with her back to the wall, so they could not slip behind her.

"Missing the shagging, aren't you, you dirty, muddy slut?" Malfoy hissed.

"Go to hell!"

"Oo," Pansy sneered, "it can see us. How novel!"

"I wouldn't touch your ugly body myself," Malfoy went on, "but maybe Parkinson and Meliflua would like a practice rut, before moving on to real women." The two Fourth-year boys leered and giggled evilly.

At that moment, voices came down the corridor: Harry and the other N.E.W.T. potion students. The four out-castes noisily fled down the corridor.

Hermione felt herself being lifted from the floor; she had not even noticed she had collapsed. She realized it was Harry and Blaise.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked. When she did not answer, Harry asked more urgently, "Hermione, are you hurt?"

Hermione shook her head, and managed to whisper, "Okay, Harry." The pure venom of Malfoy had shocked her.

She grabbed Harry, who looked like he was about to charge down the corridor after Malfoy. "No, Harry," she whispered. "The slime isn't worth it. It was only words; just venomous, untrue words."

Harry slipped his arm around Hermione, and she felt Padma Patil support her from the other side. "We're here for you," Padma told her.

Snape was shocked to see Potter team up with Malfoy that day. Everyone seemed to keep an eye on that team. Yet, at a moment when nearly everyone was not looking at them (only Hermione and Snape were looking, and even Snape did not dare make any comment), Harry leaned over to Draco and whispered something. Draco paled even more than usual, and shivered in fear.

Draco was shaking a little for the rest of the lesson. Neither ever repeated what was said that day.

Yes, the arrest of Malfoy had ended one era in her life, ended it more than even Ron's death had, and a new one was starting, even if she did not know what to do with it. Her organizations were thriving. Hermione had even been congratulated by the head of each of the Houses (even if Professor Snape looked like he was swallowing a very bitter potion while he said it) for her coaching of the O.W.L. students of all the Houses. She felt she was almost certain to be named Head Girl the following year.

Of course, she still felt an emptiness in her heart that reminded her of Ron every day, and even more every night. Harry and Luna had brought her into a new trio, but as wonderful as both were, as wonderful as Ginny and Neville were to her, and as nice as most of the other students had been, nothing could replace Ron.

The next year would be hard to face, with no Ron to argue with or to have make fun of her efforts to free the elves -- it would be hard with no Ron to kiss.

Even the summer would be hard. There were no O.W.L.s to worry about, and for once Harry was in better shape than she was. In two weeks, she and her parents would head to spend two weeks in Scandinavia (although she would not be looking for Luna's beloved Snorkacks). When they returned, she would spend a few days at the Burrow (Harry would be spending that entire week at the Lovegood's restored cottage; he would not even be going back to the Dursleys). On July 30, the four would go to spend the day and night at Neville's, to celebrate his birthday. They would spend July 31 -August 3 at Potter Place.

Hermione just wished Ron would be with them to enjoy the summer.

The Movement for Pure-Bloods still existed, and Hermione knew Regulus Black would not be keeping a low profile, personally or professionally, for much longer. It would take a long time for the terror and destruction Voldemort and then his followers had created over the previous two years to heal, assuming the Movement for Pure-Bloods allowed the wounds to heal.

Even if Bellatrix Lestrange and Peter Pettigrew had been executed and Lucius Malfoy in prison for decades, Draco Malfoy would be free in two years. With his money, he would not need the N.E.W.T.s. He was already vowing to radicalize the Pure-Bloods at some point in the future.

In a perfect world, Hermione knew, none of this would be happening. Of course, in a perfect world, she and Ron would have had at least another hundred years to argue and make up, and to make love in.

But, as Hermione knew perfectly well, while the world was a very magical place, it was far from perfect.

THE END