

The New Sacrifice

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Harry moved silently through the familiar passageways of the old castle. Silencing charms on his shoes ensured that he moved silently on the flagstone. Behind him, Ron and Hermione moved with equal stealth, following his path with alert eyes and wands at the ready. He turned a corner and led them up a flight of stairs, watching for any signs of movement. Being detected wasn't his primary concern and he thought idly as he darted in and out of a set of gothic columns that he was being cautious simply because it was now ingrained habit.

The portrait of the Fat Lady came into view as they rounded another corner and stole down a short corridor. As they approached her, he nodded back to Hermione, who sent the password to the slumbering figure with a clever spell that encapsulated one's voice into a packet of magic. The painting swung open and before he stepped inside, he caught a glimpse of the guardian of Gryffindor waving a sleepy hand in the air.

It had been almost a year since Harry had set foot inside the common room and seeing the scarlet and gold hangings made something in his heart ache. When his eyes found a familiar jet of flaming hair falling off the sofa nearest the fireplace, the ache tripled.

Someone's hand touched his shoulder and a voice whispered in his ears. "Ron and I will see you in the morning." He nodded, but did not say anything. Hermione went up to the mostly empty girl's dormitory while Ron lingered at the foot of the stairs.

"When are you going to give it to her?" Ron whispered, pointing to a bulge in Harry's pocket.

Harry shrugged and Ron nodded, taking the stairs two at a time to their old room. Seamus and Dean hadn't returned to Hogwarts, but only because their parents had insisted. Neville was the only one in the room at the moment and Harry couldn't think of anyone he trusted more outside of Ron, Hermione, and the slumbering girl in front of him with the secret of their arrival at Hogwarts.

Her hair was longer and her face paler than remembered. He stepped closer, watching her deep, slow breaths and wondered how he had made it for so long away from her. He knelt on the hearthrug and continued to stare, soaking in her features and with a trembling hand, tucked an errant piece of hair behind her ear. She sighed in her sleep and snuggled closer to the fold of robes that acted as a pillow.

The dying embers of the fire crackled behind him and somewhere outside the small glass window to his right, an owl hooted in the distance. This girl in front of him meant everything to him, had grown into something so integrated with his life that he wondered if he could ever live without her. Seeing her unleashed a flood of feelings that he realized had been waiting for release ever since Dumbledore's funeral. He had been so focused on Voldemort and Horcruxes since then that the ache of loneliness had been shoved into a deep corner of his mind, swirling and burning until he was confronted with the reality of *her*. For the millionth time, he wondered about the wisdom of returning to Hogwarts and felt his resolve melting away along with the cold cloud of loneliness that had gripped him for a year.

"Harry?" asked a sleepy voice and his eyes darted to a pair of murky brown ones. "Is it really you?" She propped herself up on an elbow and stifled a yawn. A slim smile creased her lips. "I was having this wonderful dream..."

He arched a brow and edged closer. "I hope the dream involved a lot of snogging."

"Oh, definitely," she replied with an exaggerated nod of the head and a twinkle from the light of the fire sparkled in her eyes. "But Dean was never a great kisser."

Harry snorted. His thigh was touching the lip of the sofa now and he could feel her warmth radiating in the space between them. "So who would you rather be kissing, then?"

"Hmm," she said with feigned concentration. "It's been so long since I've been properly kissed, I couldn't really say."

He placed a hand on her hip and she shifted her leg so that it touched his waist. They stared at each other for a second before the smile left her lips and her eyes fell to the floor. "Oh, Harry," she said, a faint quiver in her voice. "I've missed you so much."

A little surprised by the sudden mood change, Harry faltered and felt himself wanting to run away, to escape from her tears. Then, she sniffed, wiped at her eyes and looked determinedly up at him. "Kiss me," she said, sitting up. Relieved that her weepiness was gone, he stared at her, making sure that he had heard her correctly. Ginny wasn't going to repeat herself, however, and took the situation firmly into hand.

Harry didn't make it to his bed until very late in the morning, but slept better than he had in a very long time.

It wasn't until the next afternoon that a cry of alarm was heard throughout the school. Voldemort had come to Hogwarts.

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The battle was already running full tilt when Harry arrived with Ginny, Ron, and Hermione in tow. A score of Death Eaters, a pack of Trolls, and three

Giants were assailing the meager defenses of the school. The Order was there, led by Arthur Weasley, along with a dozen Aurors, and as many of the students and staff of Hogwarts as could fight, the latter led by Professor McGonagall. Harry wanted to join the battle with them, but he knew his path led elsewhere. Instead of the main battle, he sought out a pair of glowing red eyes on the edge of the fight. He found him, behind the Trolls and Giants, standing by a tree next to Hagrid's hut. He locked eyes with the monster that threatened the wizarding world and felt his scar spike with pain.

"Stay here, Ginny," Harry said, not taking his eyes off the hooded figure in the distance. "I'll be back for you in a little while."

Ginny said something then, possibly a rebuke of his order to stay put, but Harry didn't hear her. He moved his hand to his pocket and felt the reassuring bulge. Ron and Hermione followed, running around the edge of the battle, dodging the occasional jinx or hex, and shooting off spells of their own when they were spotted. Soon, the three of them faced Voldemort and the real battle began.

There was no rambling or witty taunting, as Harry expected, only the flash of red, blue, and green, as spell after spell rained down upon Harry. He dodged, parried, and deflected everything Voldemort threw at him. They Transfigured bits of earth into projectiles and shields, Conjured flame and ice, and hurled themselves at each other with reckless abandon. There would be no more meetings; this was the final one.

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Unbeknownst to Voldemort, Ron and Hermione were not there to fight him, but to take care of the final Horcrux.

Slithering at the Dark Lord's feet when they arrived, Nagini retreated to the Forbidden Forest as Harry attacked her master. Ron and Hermione immediately followed.

Once in the thickets and brambles, the snake became difficult to track, but as usual, Hermione came prepared for this. As she raised her wand a white light exploded from it and pulsed into the forest without any verbal incantation. Before them now, clear to their eyes was the faint, glowing outline of a snake in the distance. They ran towards it as fast as they could because Voldemort couldn't die until they destroyed the last piece of his soul outside his body.

The snake lunged at them as they approached, sinking its long fangs into the stump of a tree that Ron barely managed to dive behind.

"Ron!" shrieked Hermione. She cast another nonverbal spell at the monster, splitting off its large tail, causing it to hiss in fury. It arched its back high in the air and struck. Hermione brought up her wand and raised a shield just as the snake's mouth bit down. It shrieked and writhed in pain as one of its fangs snapped in two on her shield, but not before the other fang pierced Hermione's thigh. She screamed in pain, falling to the ground, clutching her wounded leg.

"No!" Ron bellowed and felt his heart drop into his stomach. Regaining his footing, he pointed his wand and shouted "*Sectumsempra!*" over and over at the snake. He'd seen what its bite could do firsthand and he was not going to let that happen to Hermione. Blood spurted from the lacerated serpent. Still, Ron flicked his wand at the snake, opening more and more wounds until it was a quivering mass of blood and slashed flesh on the forest floor. He walked tentatively over to it and with a final surge of hatred for the monster and its master, he said, "*Avada Kedavra!*" With a woosh of green light, the snake died.

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Harry had just sent a flock of canaries at Voldemort, which on the surface didn't seem very threatening, but Harry was counting on that. Voldemort's first reaction was to blast several of them out of the sky, but there were more than two dozen of them. Soon they were pecking at his disfigured face and skeletally thin hands. Harry used the distraction to get in a cutting hex that slashed at the Dark Lords midsection before the canaries were banished. At that same moment, there was a flash of green from deep in the forest and Voldemort let out a high-pitched scream that made Harry cover his ears. Blood began to seep from the peck marks on his face and from the large gash in his stomach.

"How?" Voldemort asked as he drew a shaky finger across his middle, staring at the blood on it with disbelief. "How can I bleed? I am immortal!"

"Not any more," Harry said as a glimmer of hope inflated his confidence. He took a bag out of his pocket and enlarged it. Then, he dumped the contents onto the ground between them. "These were once yours, I believe."

There, in a jumbled pile on the ground, was a dented cup, a broken ring, a smashed locket, the fractured splinters of what was once a ruby from Gryffindor's sword, and a punctured diary.

"The reason you bleed, Tom Riddle," Harry continued, using his given name, "is because you are *not* immortal. I already killed you once, and today you will die forever."

Harry readied himself for an attack and watched as Voldemort stood in shock staring at the remains of his Horcruxes. Then, with a maniacal gleam in his eyes, Voldemort smiled. "Oh, well done, Harry. Well done!" He took a step forward, but hadn't raised his wand. "I admit to being surprised that you would have tracked down so many well-concealed pieces of my soul. Especially after I had taken such great pains to protect them from everyone."

Rubbing his neck where the locket had nearly choked him to death, Harry winced. "There's still one more piece I have to destroy." Then, without warning, Harry lunged at Voldemort, his wand leading the attack.

Voldemort dodged and parried with even more skill than before, as if the first part of their battle had only been a game. Now, it was serious, and both parties knew it.

The battle was nothing like Harry had imagined. Voldemort fought like a dragon, and taunted him the entire time. "I'm going to kill you, Harry and

with your death, begin a new collection of Horcruxes that will ensure my life will never end.”

Harry fought with all the energy of his whole soul. He thought about all the people that had been killed in the war, in both wars. His parents, Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore, Percy. He thought about all the people that yet lived and would be killed if Harry let Voldemort win. Ron, Hermione, Ginny...

“NOOOOO!” Harry yelled and deflected a red curse with the wave of his wand. He shot a Cutting Hex, a Disarming Hex, Stunning Spells, and many much darker curses he had learned on his hunt for the Horcruxes, but Voldemort was too strong and Harry fell on the ground, panting.

Winded and still bleeding, Voldemort stepped closer to Harry and cackled. “It is you who will die today, Harry Potter.” He raised his wand and pointed it at Harry, who knew that the end was close. Then, a flash of red in his peripheral vision alerted him to the presence of someone else. At first his exhausted brain thought it was Ron, but when the person spoke, a sharp, shooting pulse of dread strangled his mind.

“Leave him alone, Tom.” It was Ginny.

“Ahhh,” he said slowly, maliciously. “Another red-headed woman coming to your rescue, Harry?”

Harry’s shock turned to terror. “Ginny,” he gasped, pulling his battered body along the cratered ground. He had to reach her, to warn her.

She didn’t pay him any attention, instead focusing her angry stare at the newly-mortal Voldemort. “*Expelliarmus!*” she yelled and watched helplessly as her spell was easily deflected.

“You know, Harry, I think I’ll reverse the circumstances this time.”

Harry struggled to his feet and watched in mute horror as Voldemort raised his wand once more, pointing it at Ginny, even as she continued to send spell after spell at him. Harry began to run, as Voldemort formed the words of the Killing Curse. Ginny’s eyes grew wide, Harry dove at her as he heard the sickening sound of rushing death and as he connected with her, everything went black.

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Ginny saw the flash of green light, prepared for her fate, when something heavy collided with her and knocked her to the ground. Her breath was forced out of her lungs with a *whoosh* and her wand flew from her hand. “Harry,” she gasped and pushed on his shoulders. “Get up. Tom’s coming.”

But Harry did not move. With every ounce of strength, she pushed him over and gasped as the green eyes she had fallen in love with six years ago stared lifelessly back up at her. She felt the glass fingers of a scream claw its way out of her throat. Kneeling at his side, she pulled his head into her lap with trembling fingers and watched as tears poured down her cheek and onto his still body.

“So it ends!” yelled Voldemort, breaking through Ginny’s sorrow.

Only the knowledge that Voldemort still lived made it possible for Ginny to leave Harry’s side then. The monster that had killed him was cackling with glee, triumph etched on his inhuman face. Wandless, friendless, and almost without hope, Ginny squared her jaw and faced Harry’s murderer.

“So like your mother, Harry,” Voldemort taunted. “You met death openly and gave me the power to live.” He cackled again and Ginny fought the urge to retch.

“Don’t speak to him you bastard!” she spat and took a brave step towards him.

Voldemort looked up to her as if he’d just noticed she was there. “Mind your manners little girl,” he said and with a flick of his wand, she was paralyzed. “If you don’t, I may not mercifully send you to be with Harry. I may just have to do something worse.” His wand flicked again and a gash appeared on her face, just under her left eye. Unable to speak, Ginny could only watch as Voldemort continued to point his wand maliciously at her. He stopped, seeming to consider what he was about to do and then opened his mouth to speak. “I shall not play with you any further, little girl; you are too stubborn to be left alive. *AVADA KEDAVRA!*” and for the second time in her life, she saw death speeding at her.

Ginny did not flinch, but instead thought about how much the Killing Curse looked like Harry’s eyes on a summer’s day....

As the curse struck her a blinding pain shot through her worse than anything she’d ever experienced. She wanted to die, wishing that the curse would do its job properly so she could be with Harry again. She just wanted to see Harry.

In an instant the pain was gone and she fell to a heap on the broken lawn. Every muscle and bone felt like they were on fire. She moaned and struggled against her protesting body to sit up. Someone was calling her name.

“Harry?” she asked meekly, searching for him. The voice was getting louder, and was joined by another one.

“I’m here,” she said, with more strength, finally able to pull herself into a sitting position. Her head swam, pounding as if a drum had been shoved into her skull and was being beat by a hundred Giants. Her vision blurred as a figure loomed in front of her.

“Ginny,” said the voice, but it sounded wrong. It sounded like...

“Ron?”

“Ginny!” he exclaimed and her vision snapped back into focus. Hermione was there, too and soon they were caught into a tight, six-armed hug. “I thought you were dead. I saw V-Voldemort and you and then he screamed the Killing Curse and... and...” Ron couldn’t seem to go on, but Ginny knew just how he felt because over his shoulder, still staring unseeing into the sky was Harry.

And Voldemort is *dead*,” Ron finished, bringing her attention back to her brother. “You... you killed him!”

Ginny’s eyes tore away from his to another body on the ground. This one was black and smoking, but just as dead. She didn’t understand how it could have happened, until she locked her gaze on Hermione. “He sacrificed himself for me,” Ginny explained, wishing even then that it wasn’t true, but numbly, knew that it couldn’t be any other way.

“He loved you,” Hermione said through her tears and choked back a sob. “He always loved you.”

She disentangled herself from Ron and Hermione, who were staring at their best friend’s body and crawled back to him. Stroking his hair, she bent to kiss the fading scar on his forehead. It would be a long time before she would let anyone take Harry from her.

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The instant Harry’s shoulder made contact with Ginny, he felt a terrible burning sensation connect with his back and spread throughout his whole body. The pain was intense, but only lasted a second, before he felt his soul ripped from his body. It was quite a strange experience to watch in slow motion as his dead body fell onto Ginny, knocking her to the ground. Then, as he turned to see his killer, he shouted at her to run away, the only thing he wanted was for her to be safe.

Then, Ginny stood and faced Voldemort. She wasn’t going to back away, so Harry screamed and screamed at her to run, telling her that he couldn’t watch her die, not fully realizing that he, himself was dead. When the next flash of green struck her, he watched with paralyzed fear as it seemed to cover her entire body in a sick green bubble and then shoot back toward its caster, propelling Ginny onto the ground.

Voldemort shrieked long and loud, but Harry didn’t hear it. He only watched Ginny, ready for her spirit to meet his, but it never came. Instead, he saw her chest rising and falling as she continued to breathe. He couldn’t believe his eyes. She hadn’t died. Without a second’s hesitation, he rushed to her side, but couldn’t quite seem to touch her. Ron and Hermione appeared and embraced her and they all began to cry. Then, she crawled over to his body and took his head into her lap. It was then that he hit him. He wasn’t really there; he was dead and he would never be able to hold his Ginny again.

As this thought caught in his mind, he began to choke on the bitter irony of his life. He had just figured out what it meant to truly love and be loved when his life was ended. He knelt beside Ginny as she stroked his hair, his lip quivering with the effort to not cry. Then, a hand touched his shoulder and he jerked his head around to see who had touched him. There, standing above him in a pillar of pure white light were two people that he knew without having a single memory of their faces. His mother was smiling down at him and his father at her side.

“Come, my son,” she said in a loving voice. “Your time is done. We need to return to the light.”

Harry nodded, turning into his mother’s embrace. Her warmth and comfort enfolded him for the first time in memory and the strong hand of his father added to the feeling of safety. He glanced back at Ginny and noticed that they were slowly lifting into the air, towards the source of the light. Ginny seemed to not be moving at all.

“We’re proud of you, Harry,” his father said, pride beaming on his face. “We couldn’t have asked for a better son.”

The comfortable embrace of his parents nearly overwhelmed him, but the ache of loneliness returned more powerfully than before. “Wait,” he said and their ascent halted. “This - this isn’t right.”

His mother looked curiously at him. “Don’t you want to rest, sweetheart? Don’t you want to be with us forever?”

Harry felt a throbbing where his heart should be that radiated throughout his spirit. “Of course I want to be with you, Mum,” he replied, liking the sound of that word in his mouth. “I just...” He looked back toward Ginny and the longing returned. They started to descend. “Isn’t there any way I can stay with Ginny?”

His parents shared a private glance and then smiled. “There’s always a way, son,” said his father. “Love is the most powerful magic in the world.”

“Dumbledore said there’s no magic that can bring back the dead.”

His father sighed. “There is no magic that mortals can perform that will bring back the dead and only the strongest of love can overcome death; if you want to stay, you can.”

Ginny was moving again as they touched the ground, her tears falling thick and fast on his face. He watched her tender fingers as they lingered over his face and the pain etched into the lines around her eyes.

“How do I do it?” he asked, still staring at his Ginny.

“Just love her, Harry; love her and you will stay.”

He concentrated hard on Ginny, letting his mind flow through the memories they’d shared. Her laughter and mischievous smile, their slow and passionate kisses by the lake, the fierce determination to be by his side through thick and thin...

His mother hugged him from behind and whispered in his ear. “We’ll be waiting for you when you’re ready, dear. We love you.”

He felt a tingling warmth spread from his toes and he was pulled inexorably down and over to Ginny. “I love you, Mum, Dad.”

“We’ll be watching, son. Be happy and live a long life with her.”

He felt a tingling warmth spread from his toes to his head and over to Ginny. She kissed his scar and he opened his eyes.

"Harry!" she exclaimed and sucked in her breath as if she didn't believe it.

"Hey," he said weakly, barely registering that he couldn't move his arms or legs. "Miss me?"

"You... you died! I saw you die! How..." but then her curiosity flew off her face and she kissed him. It was hard and urgent and greedy, but Harry didn't care. He was back with his Ginny. "You died for me," she whispered, her breath tickling his lips.

"I couldn't leave you, Ginny," he whispered back. "I love you."

Ron and Hermione descended on them and he was engulfed in a crying, happy mass of friendship. No one could believe their story. Tonks, Remus, and McGonagall were there just after Harry woke up and had only seen the spell rebound off Ginny. He later learned that to a man the Death Eaters died at the same time as their master, a final, cruel tie to the monster they served.

He was placed on a conjured stretcher and started to drift into unconsciousness while excited conversation swirled around him. More and more defenders approached them and shouted with joy at the news they bore with them. As Harry's eyes closed and his mind descended into sleep, he felt Ginny's steady, loving hand anchoring him to earth.

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Harry lay asleep in the Hospital Wing for hours and Ginny stayed on or near his bed the entire time. Ron watched Hermione sleep while her wounds were healed and the rest of the wing was a bustle of healers and the injured.

When Madame Pomfrey had changed him into his hospital robes, Ginny had placed Harry's trousers on the table next to the table. Normally she would have been more distracted by the fact that Harry was trouserless than the trousers themselves, but a hard, square object brushed against her hand when she put them down and her curiosity was piqued. As soon as the hospital matron was out of sight, she thrust her hand into the pocket.

In her hand was a velvet-covered box the size of a chocolate frog. With trembling hands, she opened the lid and saw a single gold ring, set with a large twinkling diamond. *Harry was going to propose to me!* Stealing a glance at him to make sure he was still asleep, she pulled the ring out of the pinch of velvet that held it in place and slipped it on the appropriate finger. She had only admired it on her hand for a moment when there was a cry from the door.

Looking up from Harry's bed, Ginny saw a hoard of red-headed wizards appear in the doorway. A shorter figure burst through the pack and launched herself at her daughter. With the speed of a snitch, she shoved the closed box under Harry's pillow and held her hands so that the ring was hidden.

"Oh, Ginny!" her mum cried and clung to Ginny's neck. "You're alive! You're alive!"

"Of course I am, Mum," she said with a mote of irritation. "It's Harry that's not well."

Her mum detached herself from Ginny and gaped at him for a second before turning back to Ginny. "But it was *you*, wasn't it? Everyone is saying that you're the one that killed him."

Fred, George, Charlie, and Bill flanked her mother while her dad sat in the chair next to her. "She's right," said Fred. "It's revolting actually."

"What they're calling you," added George.

Ginny looked confusedly from one smiling face to the next. "What? Just tell me."

Fred and George nodded at each other and together, recited, "The Girl Who Lived."

Ginny growled. "That's rubbish! It was Harry! He's the one that died for *me*. I didn't do anything but act stupid."

Her father cleared his throat. "Regardless of how you feel about it, sweetheart, I think you will find that the wizarding world has already formed its opinion of you and there won't be a thing you can do about it."

"Well I think she's brilliant," came a voice from behind her and all eyes went to Harry.

"Harry!" cried the Weasley matriarch and she gave him the same treatment as Ginny. "We were so worried!"

Harry seemed to take the situation better than Ginny had and winked at her over her mother's shoulder. "I can't think of a better person to deserve notoriety than you."

Ginny frowned. "You're just glad they'll be fawning over me and won't have time to kiss the ground you walk on."

Harry snorted.

"I have a feeling," said Hermione, who had just woken up on the bed next to Harry's, "that the world will be watching both of you with equal attention."

Harry's face turned pink as she and Ron looked on. "That's not far from the truth." He motioned at the rumpled pile of clothes on the table. "Fred? Hand me my trousers?"

The blood drained from Ginny's face. "I... er, Harry?" she asked, reaching out to stop Fred from taking the empty clothes. "I... already looked at it." Then, with a bright red face, she revealed the ring on her left hand.

Harry stared at the ring and then swallowed. "Do you... do you like it?" He stammered nervously. "I mean... is that what you want?"

"What?" Ginny asked quietly. "To marry you?" There was a collective gasp and Ginny looked down at the sheets.

Harry's finger found her chin and raised it so that he was looking directly into her eyes. "Is it what you want?"

Unable to hold in her emotions, a single tear coursed down her cheek. "After what you did today? After dying for me, can you honestly think I'd want anything else than to be with you forever?"

Harry smiled and she leapt onto the bed.

"Oh my," Molly said and began to fan herself. "Did he just ask Ginny to marry him?"

Arthur chuckled. "Yes, dear, I do believe he did."

Ginny continued to strangle Harry, but he didn't mind. They wept and laughed and held onto each other as if they wouldn't get another chance for a hundred years. When Madam Pomfrey returned, she howled at the indignity and scolded Ginny for her lack of respect for healing patients, but Harry saw the twitch of a smile on the stern matron's face. After all, how could anyone be mad when there was so much happiness in the world?

The End