

## The One Who's Always Loved Me

It was over.

After sixteen years, seven Spring Surprises, and Merlin only knew how many visits to the Hospital Wing, it was over.

The remains of Voldemort, all his Death Eaters, a pack of werewolves, a clan of vampires, and half of the giants in the world lay smoking on the grassy lawn in front of Hogwarts. Somewhere out there lay the bodies of Severus Snape, Lucius and Draco Malfoy, and Bellatrix Lestrange, but nobody cared much. The corpses were largely ignored by the castle's surviving defenders, who were removing their injured and their own dead.

Harry Potter sat, exhausted, on the steps of the castle, surrounded by friends, fans, well-wishers, and people who just wanted to say they'd seen him on that great day. He just wished they would all go away. Hedwig perched overhead on one of the elaborately carved gargoyles above the door and hooted plaintively.

"What are you going to do now, Harry?" an anonymous voice asked from the crowd.

He was about to make a sarcastic comment about going to Disneyland, when another voice, a familiar but long silenced one, spoke up.

"Now? Now he's going to collect his hero's reward!"

Harry looked up, to see the silvery, vaguely translucent, figure of Albus Dumbledore standing in a beam of sunlight.

"Reward? For *this*?" snarled Harry.

"Yes, your reward. For overcoming such a terrible enemy. For freeing the Wizarding world. For all the sacrifices and hardships you've faced over the years. And I'm here as a representative of Merlin and the Founders to..."

"Don't tell me. You get to haunt me and give me advice to make sure I use it properly."

"No, I'm just here to give it to you, my dear boy, and afterwards I'll be back to my next great adventure ... unless, that is, you want me to stay?" Dumbledore asked hopefully.

"Far be it from me to keep a man from his great adventures, Headmaster," Harry said witheringly. "So what is this reward and how much trouble is it going to get me into?"

Dumbledore raised his hands and held them a few inches apart. A ball of pink light formed between his palms, then floated over toward Harry. The young man rather doubtfully extended his own hand, and the ball of light settled on his upraised palm. It tickled slightly, but nothing happened.

"What is it?"

"That, Harry, is a Happy Ending. It's a special form of Wish which guarantees you a long and happy life with the individual of your choice, in a relationship appropriate to yourself and that individual."

"What if the one I would have chosen is one of *them*?" Harry snarled, pointing at the rows of shrouded bodies awaiting removal from the field.

"This is a very powerful Wish, Harry. If the one you want is dead, they will be restored to life in order to live happily ever after with you."

"Restored to life, huh? Anyone I want?" Harry noticed a number of ghosts beginning to congregate behind Dumbledore, from the ones that normally inhabited Hogwarts, to some new ones just created on the field of battle, to some that he had never seen as ghosts before but recognized anyway: his parents, Sirius, Cedric.

"Anyone. You just have to choose, but choose carefully." Dumbledore smiled benevolently at him. "Remember, it should be someone you want to spend the rest of your life with."

"Anyone. Even if I was nursing a secret unrequited passion for the greasy git or the incredible bouncing ferret?"

Dumbledore looked slightly nauseated, but nodded. "Yes."

"Even old Tom? Would this Wish bring him back as a nice guy if I wanted it to? He was kind of good-looking when he was my age."

Dumbledore was beyond 'slightly' nauseated, and there were cries of "Harry, no!" and "Eeeew, gross!" from the assembled crowd. But Dumbledore admitted, "Yes, if that was what would make you happy, yes."

"I see," said Harry, contemplating the pink light. "Fortunately I'm not at all inclined to give Voldie or any of the Death Nibblers another chance, so you

can all rest easy."

There were sighs of relief all round.

"So I have to choose. Does it have to be right away?"

"I'm afraid so, my dear boy."

"Ah. I hope you all don't mind if I work it through carefully, then." Harry leaned back on the step behind him and stretched his legs out, passing the little ball casually from hand to hand.

"In order to find out who I want to be with most, I have to consider who loves *me* the most. After all, it would be awful to spend the rest of my life with someone who didn't love me, right? Right," he said, answering his own question without waiting for a comment from anyone else. "So who loves me the most? Could it be my mother? She was willing to die for me, after all."

He looked speculatively at the silvery ghost of Lily Potter, who smiled tremulously, hopefully at him.

"But she wasn't willing to live for me, was she? There were other protective spells she could have done. And she wasn't willing to make sure I never went near her magic-hating sister, did she? I found out, you know, that there were other relatives or friends, on both sides, that I could have gone to. Should have gone to. Remus, even. Nobody at the Ministry knew he was a werewolf then. But my loving mother – and father – never bothered to write a will, to say where I should have gone, or to give me access to family property where I could have lived with a guardian instead of in Little Whinging, or even to leave me a letter to explain anything. So no, it won't be my mother. Sorry, Mum! Or my dad, since they're kind of a matched set. I'd hate to break up the pair. So, sorry, Dad, not you either."

Lily dissolved in ectoplasmic tears on her husband's shoulder.

"How about Sirius, then?" Harry continued. "My godfather, the one who offered to let me live with him, the one who broke out of Azkaban for me, the one who died trying to save me?"

Now it was Sirius' turn to look hopeful, and proud of his exploits.

"Except he really didn't do it for me, did he? Oh, he offered to let me live with him, but somehow it never happened, not even when he had a house of his own, protected by the *Fidelius* and a ridiculous number of wards. I needed someone else's 'permission' to stay there. He listened when Dumbledore told him to stay in the house and not speak to me. He was a *Marauder*, for fuck's sake. Since when did *he* listen to authority? For two whole years he knew where I was and how to contact me, but letters were few and far between. And doesn't *anybody* around here know how to write a decently chatty letter? Aunt Petunia wrote grocery lists that were longer than anything I ever got from any of you. But back to Sirius. He died because he couldn't resist playing around with his cousin instead of focusing on what he was supposed to be doing – saving me. His ego was more important than getting us out of there. Even when he escaped from Azkaban, it wasn't because of me, but because he knew where Pettigrew was. If it were for me, he wouldn't have waited twelve years to do it. He wanted revenge for himself. So no, he didn't really love me. He kept treating me like I was James. But I am *not* James."

Harry waved at the now stricken ghost. "Sorry, Sirius. No hard feelings, eh? Better luck next incarnation."

Harry balanced the pink Wish on the tip of one finger and looked around. His audience was rapt, practically holding its collective breath.

"Who else do we have among the unlamented dead? How about our dear Headmaster, he who claims he loved me like a grandson, and made sure I spent my childhood with my family where I'd be safe. It was just too bad I wasn't safe from *them*, wasn't it? For ten years, he didn't bother to check up on how I was. When I got to Hogwarts, he didn't tell me jack about what I desperately needed to know, what I asked him about as early as my first year. No, he kept steering me into trouble and making excuses for why he ignored me. And at the moment of my greatest loss, *then* was when he decided to add to my burden by telling me about the prophecy. But giving me training? Anything helpful which might help me succeed in my task? Hell, no, he still wanted me to be a child, dependent on him to tell me what to do."

"Harry, you must understand," said the Headmaster's ghost, spreading his translucent hands. "I had a plan. It was all for the greater good, and it worked!"

"No, what worked was me getting off my arse and doing what you should have done years ago to track down the damned Horcruxes, and then organizing an army of children – *children*, Headmaster! – to fight the Death Eaters and their allies! Your precious Order members showed up halfway through the fight and got eaten alive, because they treated the battle as individual duels instead of using group tactics. The Ministry *still* hasn't shown up, and when they do, they'll probably haul me off to Azkaban for littering the school grounds. No, Headmaster, if your plan was still in motion, I'd be under one of those sheets and the rest of you would be kissing Voldemort's feet. Greater good, my arse!"

"Harry, please. I'm sorry. I can make it all up to you if you'll let me!"

"What, give you another hundred, hundred fifty years to run my life? I don't think so. Funny, isn't it, how 'the greater good' was never once what was good for *me*. Surely you'd think even once ... but no matter, we're way beyond the point where I could trust you. And I'd need to trust you to be happy living with you as my mentor, wouldn't I? Somehow I know I'd be the one changing to make that happen, not you." Harry shook his head. "Never again, Albus. Never again."

Dumbledore's shoulders slumped in dejection.

"And just to finish off the list of ghosts, we have Cedric." Cedric looked up with a bit of surprise on his face. "Well, I suppose I could bring back Cedric, if I was in the market for a new best friend, but that would put us in kind of an awkward position with Cho. Not exactly a recipe for a good

relationship, you know?"

"I just came to say thanks anyway," said Cedric. "And to wish you a good life. I wouldn't want you to bring me back."

"And there, ladies and gentlemen, is the true Hogwarts Champion. Don't ever forget him," said Harry. "Thanks, Cedric. It means a lot to me. Now let's get on to more reasonable choices, shall we? Like people who are still breathing."

Harry wouldn't have thought the crowd could become more interested, but they did.

"If I want a parental figure, I could do a lot worse than my dad's old friend, Remus Lupin. He taught me how to produce a Patronus that could drive off a hundred dementors, after all. But that's all he did. Like everybody else, he left me with the Dursleys for ten years. Twelve, on his part. And he never even tried to keep up a relationship after third year, either. Being a werewolf was no excuse; he knew I didn't care about that. No, he was too busy playing house with Sirius, even when Grimmauld Place was full of nosy teenagers." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Remus go pale. "Did you think I didn't *know* about that, Remus? You grow up the way I do, you learn to listen for people's footsteps in the hall – and which rooms they go into."

Tonks' hair flamed red, she gave Remus a resounding slap across the face, and she stomped away, pushing her way through the crowd.

"Oops. Looks like someone else didn't know, though. Sorry 'bout that," said Harry.

Remus gave him a glare and headed off after Tonks, begging her to wait, come back, he could *explain* ...

"Well, that was entertaining," said Harry, watching them go. "But back to business. How about my closest female friend? Hermione, of course, stood by me the longest, was with me on most of my adventures – as long as we don't count sixth year, when her hormones dropped her IQ a hundred points. She took it on herself to make sure I passed all my classes, working on the assumption, of course, that I would have been completely incapable of it without her. And like someone else of my acquaintance, she's always completely certain that she knows what's best for everybody. Even if they might think otherwise. If I chose her, she'd have me in the Ministry pushing her social agenda for house elves and others before I could say 'Quidditch'. Unfortunately, I've got no interest in that. Besides, she's got the hots for that red-headed lunk next to her, though Merlin knows why. I wouldn't want to break that up. So good luck, take care, and all that.

"And speaking of the lunk, Ron, you're the first friend I ever had that was my own age, and I love you like a brother, but if you don't get your temper and your jealous streak under control, Hermione's going to have to blast you into a wall one of these years. I could pick you to actually *be* my brother, I guess, but who wants to spend 'ever after' with someone who alternates being jealous of my fortune with being angry that I won't give it to him – and never bothers to think about what it cost me? Sorry, Ron. No luck."

Harry put the ball down on the step and rolled it about with his fingers. "Ginny? My damsel in distress? The one I saved from the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets, thereby showing my undying love? The one who would wait patiently for her shining knight?"

Ginny, who was practically kneeling at his feet, clasped her hands in bliss.

Harry didn't look up at her. "Except she didn't wait, did she? How many 'practice boyfriends' did she have while waiting for me to 'see the light'? And as for my undying love, what she doesn't realize is that I'd have gone down to the Chamber for anyone at that point. Ron, Eloise, even Draco. Nobody deserved to be killed by the basilisk or drained of life force by Tom. It was nothing personal. But Ginny's *never* got past her crush on a hero," Harry said sadly, still looking down. "She's in love with the Boy-Who-Lived, not Harry. She told me she knew me better than anyone else, but she thought that chasing Voldemort would make me *happy*. And she's looking forward to the social whirl as the wife of the most famous, and richest, wizard in England." He finally raised his eyes to look into hers. "No, Ginny, you don't know me at all if you think any of that is what I want. On top of which, you've got a temper like your mother, and I've spent too many years being yelled at and slapped by experts to want to get into a relationship like that voluntarily."

Ginny promptly demonstrated her technique by taking a swing at him. Harry ducked, protecting the precious pink ball. Hedwig flew down from her perch, hooting angrily and going after Ginny's face with her viciously sharp talons and beak. Ginny fled shrieking, trying to get away from the bird whose attack was worse than a Bat Bogey Hex.

"And that just proves my point," said Harry as Hedwig flew back to settle beside him, a clump of red hair clutched in her talons. If an owl could look territorial, Hedwig did. Nobody else was going to be slapping *her* wizard!

"Who else is there? Cho? I think we proved a couple of years ago why that wouldn't work. Colin? No, thank you, I don't swing that way. And I want my own personal publicist even less than I want the Weasley Princess. Luna, Susan, Hannah, Daphne? I don't know anyone else well enough. Between the House system and our beloved Headmaster's designs, I never got to make any real friends except for Ron and Hermione." He petted Hedwig idly. "No, there's really only one choice. One who's defended me and stood faithfully by me, asking nothing of me and offering me everything. One who likes doing what I like doing best. Only one who's always loved me, who's always been there for me, even at the Dursleys', when things were darkest."

Everyone was puzzled. Only a Muggle could have known him at the Dursleys'. But he'd been locked up most of the time. Who could he have met?

Harry picked up the pink wish. "I wish to live happily ever after with ..." and he whispered a name into the glowing ball. It exploded into pink brilliance that made everyone look away or go temporarily blind. When it faded, and the spots had gone away from their vision, they saw, sitting on the stoop, a pair of snowy owls, Hedwig and a male who was pure white except for a black zigzag mark on its head. With a joyous hoot, both birds spread their wings and sprang up into the air. They swooped and circled around the corpse-strewn lawn, ignoring the bodies below them or the screams of protest from the crowd, and just enjoying being young, and free, and in love, and having the wind beneath their wings. Then they flew away, rapidly disappearing beyond the Forbidden Forest, with the sunset flashing gold on their shining wings.

"Oh. Oh, dear," said the ghost of Dumbledore. "I seem to have forgotten to tell him the part about his children vanquishing the next Dark Lord ..."

Harry Potter did live happily ever after, although no one ever saw him again.

Twenty years later, the reign of the Dark Lord Iyanos the Merciless was ended by the Great Post Owl Rebellion. But that's another story.