

“Harry Potter,” he said very softly. His voice might have been part of the spitting fire. “The Boy Who Lived.”

None of the Death Eaters moved. They were waiting: Everything was waiting. Hagrid was struggling, and Bellatrix was panting, and Harry thought inexplicably of Ginny, and her blazing look, and the feel of her lips on his ---

Voldemort had raised his wand. His head was still tilted to one side, like a curious child, wondering what would happen if he proceeded. Harry looked back into the red eyes, and wanted it to happen now, quickly, while he could still stand, before he lost control, before he betrayed fear ---

He saw the mouth move and a flash of green light, and everything was gone.

Chapter Thirty-Five

King's Cross

He lay facedown, listening to the silence. He was perfectly alone. Nobody was watching. Nobody else was there. He was not perfectly sure that he was there himself.

A long time later, or maybe no time at all, it came to him that he must exist, must be more than disembodied thought, because he was lying, definitely lying, on some surface. Therefore he had a sense of touch, and the thing against which he lay existed too.

Almost as soon as he had reached this conclusion, Harry became conscious that he was naked. Convinced as he was of his total solitude, this did not concern him, but it did intrigue him slightly. He wondered whether, as he could feel, he would be able to see. In opening them, he discovered that he had eyes.

He lay in a bright mist, though it was not like mist he had ever experienced before. His surroundings were not hidden by cloudy vapor; rather the cloudy vapor had not yet formed into surroundings. The floor on which he lay seemed to be white, neither warm nor cold, but simply there, a flat, blank something on which to be.

He sat up. His body appeared unscathed. He touched his face. He was not wearing glasses anymore.

Then a noise reached him through the unformed nothingness that surrounded him: the small soft thumpings of something that flapped, flailed, and struggled. It was a pitiful noise, yet also slightly indecent. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he was eavesdropping on something furtive, shameful.

For the first time, he wished he were clothed.

Barely had the wish formed in his head than robes appeared a short distance away. He took them and pulled them on. They were soft, clean, and warm. It was extraordinary how they had appeared just like that, the moment he had wanted them. . . .

He stood up, looking around. Was he in some great Room of Requirement? The longer he looked, the more there was to see. A great domed glass roof glittered high above him in sunlight. Perhaps it was a palace. All was hushed and still, except for those odd thumping and whimpering noises coming from somewhere close by in the mist. . . .

Harry turned slowly on the spot, and his surroundings seemed to invent themselves before his eyes. A wide-open space, bright and clean, a hall larger by far than the Great Hall, with that clear domed glass ceiling. It was quite empty. He was the only person there, except for --

He recoiled. He had spotted the thing that was making the noises. It had the form of a small, naked child, curled on the ground, its skin raw and rough, flayed-looking, and it lay shuddering under a seat where it had been left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath.

He was afraid of it. Small and fragile and wounded though it was, he did not want to approach it. Nevertheless he drew slowly nearer, ready to jump back at any moment. Soon he stood near enough to touch it, yet he could not bring himself to do it. He felt like a coward. He ought to comfort it, but it repulsed him.

“You cannot help.”

He spun around. Albus Dumbledore was walking toward him, sprightly and upright, wearing sweeping robes of midnight blue.

“Harry.” He spread his arms wide, and his hands were both whole and white and undamaged. “You wonderful boy. You brave, brave man. Let us walk.”

Stunned, Harry followed as Dumbledore strode away from where the flayed child lay whimpering, leading him to two seats that Harry had not previously noticed, set some distance away under that high, sparkling ceiling. Dumbledore sat down in one of them, and Harry fell into the other, staring at his old headmaster’s face. Dumbledore’s long silver hair and beard, the piercingly blue eyes behind half-moon spectacles, the crooked nose: Everything was as he had remembered it. And yet . . .

“But you’re dead,” said Harry.

“Oh yes,” said Dumbledore matter-of-factly.

“Then . . . I’m dead too?”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore, smiling still more broadly. “That is the question, isn’t it? On the whole, dear boy, I think not.”

They looked at each other, the old man still beaming.

“Not?” repeated Harry.

“Not,” said Dumbledore.

“But . . .” Harry raised his hand instinctively toward the lightning scar. It did not seem to be there. “But I should have died – I didn’t defend myself! I meant to let him kill me!”

“And that,” said Dumbledore, “will, I think, have made all the difference.”

Happiness seemed to radiate from Dumbledore like light, like fire: Harry had never seen the man so utterly, so palpably content.

“Explain,” said Harry.

“But you already know,” said Dumbledore. He twiddled his thumbs together.

“I let him kill me,” said Harry. “Didn’t I?”

“You did,” said Dumbledore, nodding. “Go on!”

“So the part of his soul that was in me . . .”

Dumbledore nodded still more enthusiastically, urging Harry onward, a broad smile of encouragement on his face.

“. . . has it gone?”

“Oh, yes!” said Dumbledore. “Yes, he destroyed it. Your soul is whole, and completely your own, Harry.”

“But then . . .”

Harry trembled over his shoulder to where the small, maimed creature trembled under the chair.

and not boast of it, and not to kill with it. I was permitted to tame and use it, because I took it, not for gain, but to save others from it.

“But the Cloak, I took out of vain curiosity, and so it could never have worked for me as it works for you, its true owners. The stone I would have used in an attempt to drag back those who are at peace, rather than enable my self-sacrifice, as you did. You are the worthy possessor of the Hallows.”

Dumbledore patted Harry’s hand, and Harry looked up at the old man and smiled; he could not help himself. How could he remain angry with Dumbledore now?

“Why did you have to make it so difficult?”

Dumbledore’s smile was tremulous.

“I am afraid I counted on Miss Granger to slow you up, Harry. I was afraid that your hot head might dominate your good heart. I was scared that, if presented outright with the facts about those tempting objects, you might seize the Hallows as I did, at the wrong time, for the wrong reasons. If you laid hands on them, I wanted you to possess them safely. You are the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying.”

“And Voldemort never knew about the Hallows?”

“I do not think so, because he did not recognize the Resurrection Stone he turned into a Horcrux. But even if he had known about them, Harry, I doubt that he would have been interested in any except the first. He would not think that he needed the Cloak, and as for the stone, whom would he want to bring back from the dead? He fears the dead. He does not love.”

“But you expected him to go after the wand?”

“I have been sure that he would try, ever since your wand beat Voldemort’s in the graveyard of Little Hangleton. At first, he was afraid that you had conquered him by superior skill. Once he had kidnapped Ollivander, however, he discovered the existence of the twin cores. He thought that explained everything. Yet the borrowed wand did no better against yours! So Voldemort, instead of asking himself what quality it was in you that had made your wand so strong, what gift you possessed that he did not, naturally set out to find the one wand that, they said, would beat any other. For him, the Elder Wand has become an obsession to rival his obsession with you. He believes that the Elder Wand removes his last weakness and makes him truly invincible. Poor Severus . . .”

“If you planned your death with Snape, you meant him to end up with the Elder Wand, didn’t you?”

“I admit that was my intention,” said Dumbledore, “but it did not work as I intended, did it?”

“No,” said Harry. “That bit didn’t work out.”

The creature behind them jerked and moaned, and Harry and Dumbledore sat without talking for the longest time yet. The realization of what would happen next settled gradually over Harry in the long minutes, like softly falling snow.

“I’ve got to go back, haven’t I?”

“That is up to you.”

“I’ve got a choice?”

“Oh, yes,” Dumbledore smiled at him. “We are in King’s Cross, you say? I think that if you decided not to go back, you would be able to . . . let’s say . . . board a train.”

“And where would it take me?”

“On,” said Dumbledore simply.

Silence again.

“Voldemort’s got the Elder Wand.”

“True. Voldemort has the Elder Wand.”

“But you want me to go back?”

“I think,” said Dumbledore, “that if you choose to return, there is a chance that he may be finished for good. I cannot promise it. But I know this, Harry, that you have less to fear from returning here than he does.”

Harry glanced again at the raw looking thing that trembled and choked in the shadow beneath the distant chair.

“Do not pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living, and above all, those who live without love. By returning, you may ensure that fewer souls are maimed, fewer families are torn apart. If that seems to you a worthy goal, then we say good-bye for the present.”

Harry nodded and sighed. Leaving this place would not be nearly as hard as walking into the forest had been, but it was warm and light and peaceful here, and he knew that he was heading back to pain and the fear of more loss. He stood up, and Dumbledore did the same, and they looked for a long moment into each other’s faces.

“Tell me one last thing,” said Harry, “Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?”

Dumbledore beamed at him, and his voice sounded loud and strong in Harry’s ears even though the bright mist was descending again, obscuring his figure.

“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean it is not real?”

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Flaw in the Plan

He was flying facedown on the ground again. The smell of the forest filled his nostrils. He could feel the cold hard ground beneath his cheek, and the hinge of his glasses which have been knocked sideways by the fall cutting into his temple. Every inch of him ached, and the place where Killing Curse had hit him felt like the bruise of an iron-clad punch. He did not stir, but he remained exactly where he had fallen, with his left arm bent out at an awkward angle and his mouth gaping.

He had expected to hear cheer of triumph and jubilation at his death, but instead hurried footsteps, whispers, and solicitous murmurs filled the air.

"My Lord... *my Lord...*"