

Now What? ...the quest is over

Waking up in a bed, a real bed, after a year of cold, hunger and too short, rickety camp beds and sleeping bags strewn over stones and tree roots was disorienting. The discomfort in his bladder was the only thing that prompted him to leave this little bit of heaven inside four posts, but he staggered to the loo without reaching for his glasses on the nightstand. Minutes later he thought of making his way to the Great Hall, but the bed beckoned to him – he could always eat later, but who knows when he'd get a chance to sleep in such luxury again.

Kreacher found him minutes later, prone on the bed, one arm over the side, hand almost touching the floor.

"Master," he said to himself in a rasping voice that petered out. Something resembling a grin flashed across his leathery, lined face before disappearing again, the scowl and frown winning out through force of habit. He pulled the covers over the sleeping man, carefully picking up the arm and placing it in the bed again. Then he pulled the shades, making sure that the afternoon sun would not interrupt Master's rest.

It was dark when he woke again, feeling stiff and sore and tired. Some debts cannot be paid in a single instalment. With some great effort he sat up, and after contemplating the merits of lying back down again, he plucked his glasses from the nightstand and staggered out of the room and down the steps to the common room, where the not-quite-perfect efforts to repair the window were still in evidence. The scorch marks on the wall next to the hearth were no longer visible but there were still some deep grooves in the panelling and in the stonework.

He had no idea what he should be doing now, but reckoned that he should be doing *something*. He was startled when the portrait hole opened, a look of recognition spilling across his face as he saw Kreacher's ears peeking out behind the large basket that he was carrying.

"Master needs to eat before wandering the castle to see his friends. Kreacher is disappointed that Master did not think to call for him while he was wandering the country, as it is evident that his friends whom Kreacher has remembered to not call 'Mudblood' or 'Blood Traitor' did not feed Master. Kreacher also has a tonic that will lessen the pain that Master is surely feeling in his joints, having died at least once yesterday at the hands of that wizard who murdered the most blessed Master Regulus. Kreacher is glad that Master did not join Master Regulus beyond the veil. Master Regulus was a very good master; Kreacher did all that he asked," Kreacher intoned in his slightly 'off' monologue, pausing to put the basket down and blow his long, crooked nose with a handkerchief that appeared out of thin air.

Harry thought of protesting that he didn't need to eat, and that he didn't need a tonic, but the smells emanating from the basket sapped his resolve. Within minutes he was sitting in a chair before the fire, eating warm bread and cold cheese, pausing long enough to drink from an oddly tinted cordial glass – presumably the tonic. He smiled to himself before reaching for spoon, mug and ladle; the soup smelled heavenly, assuming of course that they made beef vegetable soup in heaven. Kreacher made himself scarce, although Harry was somehow certain that all he need do was whisper his name to have him attend to his needs.

After the soup, there were sandwiches, carefully wrapped in stiff brown paper, and then, at the bottom, a plate of biscuits, ginger newts by the look of them. Harry snapped one in half, eating the tail before finishing the head that was sitting in his palm. He felt oddly tired again, but some of the burning aches were beginning to wane in an overall feeling of satiety and indolence; he knew that he should get out of the chair and go find his friends, but he couldn't move.

That was when the portrait hole opened, quietly, a pale hand on the rim of the hole preceding a flare of scarlet.

"I thought I'd find you here," Ginny said, looking about at the debris from Harry's impromptu picnic before the fire. She picked up the dishes and carefully placed them back into the basket, and then the papers, disposing of them in the fire.

"You done?" she asked.

Harry looked up, working hard to keep his eyes in focus. "I reckon so," he answered.

Ginny plopped into his lap with a suddenness that made Harry wonder if she'd tripped and fallen. He moved his arms to make his lap a bit more comfortable for both of them, wondering what he was supposed to say now.

Ginny smiled, pressing a finger against his lips. "Not now," she said.

Harry discovered that he had no objection; then he was asleep. Minutes later Ginny's head was nestled against his neck, and moments after that, she too was drawing deep, regular breaths.

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The residents of Gryffindor Tower, including not a few who chose that night to return from their makeshift quarters in the Room of Requirement, came in a staggered procession, opening the portrait hole, spying the pair before the fire, commanding silence in variations on "shh!" and "pipe down!" before heading to the stairs. Hermione and Ron were the last to open the portrait hole that night, Ron talking loudly before Hermione silenced him with fingertips placed upon his lips. He looked at the tableau before him for a long moment and then quietly threw several chunks of

coal on the fire. Hermione looked about the common room, and failing to find a blanket, reached into her beaded bag, pulling a lap quilt from its depths. After placing it around the slumbering pair, she felt Ron's arms around her shoulders; she gave him a peck and then inclined her head towards the boys' staircase. Ron raised one single eyebrow.

Ginny opened one eye and then whispered, "Don't do anything that I wouldn't do."

Ron snorted, and then replied, "Not tonight," paused, and then added, "You too."

Ginny nodded and then snuggled back into her nest.

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Ginny woke when Harry began to squirm beneath her. The common room was silent and cold. Harry was twitching his wand, carefully floating chunks of coal onto the embers of the fire. She cleared her throat.

"See any Veelas in the last year?" she asked.

Harry snorted and continued to float another two chunks of coal into the fireplace. "Only one; and you're related to her," Harry replied.

"Good," Ginny said, planting a small kiss on his lips before snuggling back into him.

"I've missed you," Harry whispered. "Almost every night, I'd take out the map and look for your dot."

"Keeping tabs on me?" she asked.

"Trying to believe that you still existed – I think at some level I was hoping that after all of this, there'd be something else," he said after a moment of silence.

"Oh, I *existed* all right," Ginny said, her voice rising. "I tried to keep the Carrows busy; it was a good thing that I never made prefect, I spent a lot of time in detention this year – then I went home and the Weasleys went underground, which was dreadful. All in all, I preferred being here; at least I had something to do while I waited. Did I ever tell you that I hate waiting?"

"I thought you were good at waiting, having years of experience," Harry said teasingly.

"Good at it, yes, but I hate it," she said earnestly.

There was a long silence.

"Did you *really* ride a dragon out of Gringotts?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah," he replied with a laugh.

"You *do* know that's mad?"

"It seemed like the thing to do at the time; we could either be eaten by it, or ride it out," Harry explained.

"Well, if that was the choice, then maybe it wasn't so mad," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Right now? Warm, I guess," he replied, pulling her a little closer to him. "I've got a few new scars, and my chest is sore – it feels like it's been smacked with a Bludger after Voldemort hit me with the killing curse."

"So you didn't die again?"

"No, actually, I *did* die," he explained. "I had to, you see, because I was carrying a little bit of Voldemort's soul in my scar; he couldn't die until that bit of soul was destroyed."

"So, if you're dead, what are you doing here?" Ginny asked suspiciously.

"Keeping you warm, I suppose," he quipped.

"No, seriously," she said.

"Unfinished business, I guess. I had the choice of coming back – in hindsight, after Voldemort was mortal again, I suppose *anyone* could have killed him – I'd've placed my money on Neville, actually."

"He did look very impressive, pulling Gryffindor's sword out of the smoking hat," Ginny said. "He'd better keep that sword handy though, the girls are going to be swarming him."

Another long silence.

"So you came back to kill him?" she asked.

"Not really," he said with certainty. "I came back because I was curious to see if there was a life to be had after being the Boy Who Lived."

“Yeah, ‘the Boy Who Faked it before offing Voldemort’ just doesn’t have the same ring to it,” Ginny quipped.

“I wasn’t faking it,” Harry said.

“The idiots who read the *Daily Prophet* won’t know that,” she said earnestly. They were quiet for a spell, listening to the coal hiss as it burned.

“The night I died, I saw you, before I went to find Voldemort in the woods – I was under my cloak,” Harry said.

“Why didn’t you say goodbye?” she said, her voice taking a hitch.

“I couldn’t,” he said, thankful that they were having this conversation in the dark. “You were sunshine and flowers and life itself; if I stopped for you, for even a moment, I couldn’t have left you again to go die.”

Ginny didn’t say anything in reply.

She pulled away from him, looking at him intently in the wan, flickering light from the fire. There were silvery streaks running from her eyes to her chin. She leaned in to kiss him again. It wasn’t like the birthday kiss, but it had promise.

“You know, for a thoughtless lug who’s no good at words, you’ve been downright poetic tonight,” she said, before kissing him again.

“I think it might be something that Kreacher slipped me for the pain,” Harry admitted.

“Hmm, might be,” Ginny said noncommittally, “won’t do you any good to deny it in the morning though.”

“How’s that?” he asked.

“All of Gryffindor Tower trooped past us tonight while you were sleeping, by breakfast time half of Hogwarts will swear that we were grinding away like crazed minks, while the other half will be making bets as to how long we’ll stay together this time,” Ginny said smugly.

“You know, those two scenarios aren’t mutually exclusive,” Harry said.

Ginny snorted, shaking her head. “I’m not that type of witch and I’ve had enough of being your ex-girlfriend, thank you very much.”

“Really?”

She nodded.

“So maybe we should do something about the ex-girlfriend part,” Harry said nervously.

“I think, maybe, we already have,” Ginny said, snuggling into him again.

That was a good enough answer for Harry.

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The sunlight of the new morning snuck through the windows of the common room. Harry and Ginny, who’d been talking in front of the fire, rose from the chair they’d shared, stretched, and then walked one at a time through the portrait hole, meeting up on the other side to amble towards the kitchens, hand in hand. He still had no idea what he should be doing, but that didn’t bother him so much any more.

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