

Death 1, Destiny 0

DEATH 1, DESTINY 0

Harry smiled as he looked around the Great Hall. Hermione, the entire Weasley family and most of the staff of the school (with two notable exceptions being the caretaker and the Potions professor) surrounding him and running interference. The reason for the impromptu party? Voldemort was finally permanently dead, his corpse still smoldering out by the main gates. Harry had even managed to avoid the Hospital Wing this time.

The group was carefully deflecting Ministry representatives, the press and random well-wishers away in order to give Harry some peace, and was managing it with enough skill that few of them realized that they were being managed. No one got through that was not known as a friend.

He chuckled to himself, because he was awaiting a very specific guest, one that he knew would not (and could not, in all honesty) be denied. He'd invited her himself, and was mildly surprised she wasn't here yet, but that just gave him the opportunity to do some extra things he'd been thinking about recently. He had surprised both Ginny and Hermione early on by planting rather intense kisses on them, and both girls looked as if they wanted to skip the party and drag him off somewhere in order to work this situation out. They also looked as if said working out might well involve as little clothing as possible, based on the half-lidded looks they kept giving him.

Fudge had been distracted multiple times by the staff, and was beginning to get loud about it, having finally realised that they were not about to let him near Harry. "I don't think that you understand me, Madam McGonagall," he began to bluster.

She cut him off before he could build up a full head of steam. "I understand you all too well, Cornelius. You have always embodied some of the worst of the Slytherin qualities, not caring who is hurt on your climb to the top. You swore that Voldemort was not back, despite having known for more than a year. You got the Daily Prophet to help you in a smear campaign, and none of us here at the school have forgotten that beast that you forced upon us."

"Hem-hem," Dolores Umbridge broke into the conversation, as if she had been Summoned by the reference. "I do not believe that it is in the best interests of the unity of the wizarding world to bring up small missteps that might have been made by the Ministry, but I can assure you that all actions were both legal and deemed necessary at the time." The tight-lipped expression on the woman made her look even more toad-like than usual.

"Including your use of a Blood Quill as an instrument during your detentions?" Albus Dumbledore asked softly.

Her face went white. "Who claims that I used a Blood Quill?"

"Your favourite victim," Harry said into the sudden silence. "I'm sure that several others would be willing to come forward as well – people who were subjected to it for no crime more dastardly than pointing out flaws in your logic. I name no names, but I know that Hogwarts keeps records of detentions given and points taken. It might be interesting to look at the records from two years ago." He finished with a gentle smile at her, and she fainted.

"It's time, Mr Potter," said a voice from beside him. Everyone spun to look at the one who had somehow managed to get past some of the most intense security in the wizarding world – people who loved Harry.

Next to Harry was someone in a long black cloak. No face was visible, nor were hands visible either. More than twenty wands rose to point at the person, their faces implacable. Harry's response, however, surprised them all.

He laughed.

Not a simple chuckle, but a full-blown belly laugh, as if the situation were the funniest thing he had ever come across. He nearly lost his footing and fell to the floor, but he managed to keep himself upright by pure force of will.

"I'm sorry, folks, but this is the one 'foe', if you will that you will never defeat. Tommy boy learned that. You might want to show them who you are, and maybe they'll understand," he said to the cloaked figure.

In response, the cloaked individual raised two dainty white hands to reach up and pull back the hood on the cloak, exposing a face equally as white as the hands. It was a black haired girl, looking about Harry's age, and her short black hair was wild enough that some spectators wondered briefly if she was a relative of his. Her eyes were black as well, the left with a black stripe and curlique to give a resemblance to the Eye of Horus, and as she opened the robe, she showed herself to be wearing Muggle clothes – a black spaghetti strap top and black denim jeans. She wore a silver belt around her waist, and a silver ankh hung from a chain around her neck.

"Guys, meet Death. Death, these are my nearest and dearest, those who have you in their wand sights."

Albus Dumbledore looked at the slight figure next to Harry for a long moment before saying, "I had hoped that it would be me that you would come

for before choosing to come for Harry. He has so much ahead of him.”

“I appreciate the thought, Professor, but I got three more years than I should have,” Harry said. When he received puzzled looks, he explained, “For Cedric and I, there were *four* tasks in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Neither of us succeeded in our fourth task – surviving Voldemort.”

“But you stand before us right now, obviously alive,” Dumbledore said.

“I made a deal with the beautiful lady here,” he replied. “Tom should have died and stayed dead back when he tried to murder a little child, but he didn’t. I was badly hurt at the graveyard. Didn’t anyone question how someone battered and bruised, with a broken leg, managed to survive someone with fifty years of experience? I died there, and she showed up. I asked her about Tom, and she admitted that he was going to keep on going because Destiny had written a loophole into the Prophecy, and that really got her goat, unless I remember wrongly.”

“You don’t,” came the now soft voice. “Riddle escaped me, and without Harry, he’d escape me forever, while sending an astronomically large number of people to me before I was ready for them. I don’t *think* Destiny intended for the universe to go on endlessly with Tom Riddle sitting on a dead planet, but that’s what would have happened. So Harry made a deal with me – he’d come back and make sure that Riddle died, and then he’d go quietly.”

“And you even gave me some extra time to let me say goodbye in my own way, didn’t you?” Harry asked her. “I was wondering why I didn’t see you out there.”

“Of course. I could have come for you at the same time I took Tom. But regardless of what anybody says, I’m not cruel, I’m just inevitable. I didn’t think either of you would appreciate being taken in the same batch.”

Harry nodded his head to show his gratitude. “Shall we get on with it, then?”

“But you can’t die now! There’s so much more ahead of you!” Hermione wailed.

“Hermione, I got what everyone else gets – a life. What more can I ask for? I had wonderful friends that I can prove I was willing to die for, because you people right here – all of you – are the ones I made the deal for. I didn’t want you dying at Tom’s hands if I could prevent it.”

“But I think I love you,” she nearly whispered.

“I think I’m in love with you and Ginny both. I’ll never have the chance to find out which one I was meant to be with, but I’m okay with that. You’re both alive.”

“Dear lady,” Albus Dumbledore said into the sudden silence. “You seem to be willing to make deals.”

“Sometimes,” the girl replied with a smirk. “What’s yours?”

“My life for his. Mine is at its end, and his is at its beginning. I await the next great adventure and know it to be soon for me. He should have longer to wait. There is so much for him to learn in this wonderful world.”

“No deal,” Harry said harshly.

“Hush,” Death replied. “I make deals all the time. Why do you think so many people die after a major incident in the family, such as a holiday or a wedding or the birth of a grandchild? They make a deal to hang on until the event is over. It’s easy enough for me to loan them some of the time others willingly give up or lose accidentally. Then they go quietly, with no fight. I hate fighting for them. Riddle was a *real* pain in the arse.”

Harry growled. “If such a deal is being made, then I should have a say in it,” he said. “Don’t you agree? After all, I’m being directly affected by it, even more so than those left behind.”

Death nodded, conceding the point.

“Therefore, if the cost of my remaining alive is the direct result of someone else dying, then I refuse the bargain. No one will die just to keep me alive.”

He calmed and walked to Dumbledore. “I understand, sir, but ... how do you think I’d feel knowing that I was alive because someone else thought that I was more important than they are? I have problems with my parents making that decision, but I understand it. But to know that the person I respect most in the world, just barely ahead of Mr and Mrs Weasley, is dead specifically because he bargained to keep me alive? That would be a tremendous emotional pain. If I were to remain alive, I’d want you there to meet any children I might have, and be their grandfather, if only for a while. You couldn’t do that with your deal.”

Dumbledore laughed sadly. “And I see in my hands the chance to give you what I took from you all those years ago – a life. My life is worth that, Harry. If dying now meant that you could have those children you speak of, then I would consider that a bargain. Your life is that pearl of great price, and I would give all that I have to purchase it. What more does a man have than his own life?”

“However,” Death said, “you’re offering a rather lopsided deal for me. You’re offering anywhere from two minutes to maybe fifty years if you’re lucky, in return for me not taking him for what theoretically could be another two hundred years. Although all bets are off if he keeps on playing Quidditch.” The smirk was back in full force.

Hermione and Ginny stepped forward. “Take from us. It sounds as if you’re able to take a portion. Am I right?” Hermione asked. At Death’s nod, she continued. “Take enough from the two of us that all three of us die together. That way no one dies immediately.”

Ron finally spoke up. "How many here are willing to give up a year of their lives for Harry?" A huge number of hands rose into the air, including his own. All of the house-elves that had been replenishing the food for the party became visible and started jumping up and down to make sure people saw their hands, too. "Everyone willing, go to the wall over there," he ordered. There was a small stampede, and soon the only ones standing in the centre of the room were Harry and Death, Fudge, and the unconscious Umbridge. Fudge looked around wildly and quickly scrambled to join the crowd.

"Headmaster?" Harry asked painfully.

"Please do not deny me this, Harry," the Headmaster said. "While I understand your feelings about giving up my entire span remaining, I would ask that you allow me to return to you some of that which I stole from you in my attempts to keep you safe. If I happen to have given the remains of my life, then so be it, but I do not believe that it will be the case. Was not one of your proctors for the O.W.L.s Griselda Marchbanks? She proctored my own O.W.L. tests, so you know that I might well have another forty years before me."

Harry nodded reluctantly.

Death made a show of counting heads and looked to him. "Well, that's interesting. How do you feel about living another three hundred and ninety seven years?"

His face fell. "In other words, outliving everyone else here?"

"Well, yes."

"I'd give half of that up if I could have my parents or Sirius back with me," he murmured.

"Hmm. I'm afraid your parents are out of reach, and I can't create new bodies for them. But your godfather was a different case..." She reached for her cloak and started rummaging about through a surprising number of pockets, dropping various things on the floor next to Harry – coins; various books, scrolls and pages sewn together; lint; several peculiarly coloured socks (which made at least one house elf in the crowd against the wall make a noise sounding something like "Squee!"); a simple earthenware cup ("So *that's* where I put it!" she murmured); handfuls of keys; a large chunk of green cheese with a tag that read 'Lunar sample #23'; a grey kitten that yowled for a moment before running under a table. Finally, she opened one small pocket and said, "Aha!"

She turned the pocket upside down and began shaking it. People looked at her oddly, but gasped when something far larger than could fit in the pocket fell out and hit the floor with a loud "Ouch!"

"Sirius!" Harry yelled as he tackled the man.

"So, do we have a deal?" she asked with a grin. "They give you a year each, and in return, you get to live another one hundred and ninety eight years or so, while Sirius gets to return from the dead and do the same."

Harry looked the crowd, and saw Hermione and the others smiling at him, nodding hopefully.

"One year, freely given? I can agree to that, as long as Sirius gets half of my time."

"Right. You both get half as a normal life expectancy. You're not immortal until then, mind you. You can still lose it all if you do something stupid like stepping in front of a lorry."

Death held out her hand and Harry shook it. "We'll be careful. It would be rude to waste what everybody's given us, wouldn't it?"

The tension broke and Hermione and Ginny came running over to hug him, while Ron and the others started to pick up the things on the floor. Fudge picked up the cup and yelled "Ouch!", drawing Death's attention to him. "Whoops! Don't think you need to have your hands on that," she said, reclaiming it and slipping it back into a pocket.

"What was it?" Dumbledore asked.

"Just a simple carpenter's cup," she said with a mischievous smile.

Percy picked up one book and raised an eyebrow in confusion. What he was looking at was a small, well thumbed paperback book entitled 'CHEESE - the attack training guide.' In smaller print, under a picture of a French tricolour, it continued 'Volume 16: Brie.' "Um, what an interesting book," he said, offering it to Death.

"Ah, keep it. I pick up all sorts of odd things along the way." She looked at Hermione, who was thumbing through the sheets of parchment that had been sewn together and said, "If you can read Ancient Greek, you might find those interesting. Those codices are from Aristotle. I think the modern translations call them 'Poetics'. That's a complete set." Hermione's eyes went wide enough that Harry was afraid they'd fall out of her head. "Keep 'em. They'll get back to me again some day."

A thin green hand reached out and snatched a rainbow-striped sock with eight toe pockets from the pile, and Death winked at the elf who clutched it possessively. "Well, if everyone is happy with the deal, I think I'll be on my way." Before anything could be said, she was gone, taking the rest of the socks, the keys, the cheese and other non-claimed detritus with her. The kitten poked its head out from under the table as she disappeared, then walked over and rubbed against Sirius's leg.

The house elves took the unconscious Umbridge away (she was found locked in a storage room two days later), the Weasley twins lit off a set of indoor fireworks, the reporters tried to figure out just how they were going to report this, Harry and Remus tried to explain to Sirius what had just happened, Hermione and Ginny plotted to get Harry alone for an hour or three, and the party re-commenced with a will.

Death hummed to herself as she walked down the path to the main gates of Hogwarts, picking up a few lingering Death Eaters along the way. The day had ended most satisfactorily for her. She'd allowed his friends to "save" the young hero, not that she wouldn't be seeing him again in the end, and got rid of some of the junk that built up in her pockets. More importantly, she'd thwarted her older brother's latest attempt to avoid the end of the universe. Really, she thought he would know better by now.