

Absolution

by jmlane57

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Reassurance

Chapter 1 of 1

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Absolution

Harry Potter was in the midst of one of his nightmares. He had had many over the course of his life, especially during the last few years, but this was the worst of all, born of his guilt over getting so many of his friends and loved ones killed. His tendency to blame himself for their deaths had recently come to a head, only exacerbated by his recent marriage to Ginny following the end of the Second Wizarding War and the vanquishing of Voldemort.

Many of his friends and loved ones had been killed in the Second War, among them his beloved owl Hedwig and Tonks, who had only recently married Remus and had his son. Harry had been made the boy's godfather, so he could help Remus out some, but it would take time for Remus to get over losing his wife, if he ever did. He had been badly wounded in the battle at Hogwarts, but managed to survive. However, others hadn't been so lucky, such as Colin Creevey and Fred Weasley, not to mention Tonks's Muggle father, Ted, as well as the venerable old ex-Auror, "Mad-Eye" Moody.

Even one of Draco Malfoy's cronies, Crabbe, had been killed, while Draco and his family had been spared, mainly due to the generosity of Harry and company. At first he had been glad to have heard of Voldemort having ordered his snake to kill Snape upon learning of his duplicity, but had developed a new respect for his once-despised old Potions teacher as one of the bravest men he'd ever met, risking his life day by day as a double agent for the Order.

Some of the deaths he was glad of, like Wormtail, and the hypocritical, two-faced Rufus Scrimgeour, one-time Minister of Magic, but others had hit him where he lived, such as that of Dobby, the free house-elf who had been enslaved to the Malfoys, but whom Harry had managed to free. The elf had become almost slavishly devoted to Harry and managed to save several of his friends, but lost his own life in the process. Harry had buried him himself and wrote on the headstone, "Here lies Dobby, a free house-elf." And something else had happened that Harry had never expected: the Blacks' nasty old house-elf Kreacher had actually turned over a new leaf and began working with the Light. Harry could well imagine how Sirius would have reacted to *that* knowledge ...

Harry could only imagine how George must feel at his twin's death, not to mention Ginny and the elder Weasleys. It was most incredible of all, however, to hear of how Molly Weasley had ended up killing Bellatrix Lestrange for killing Fred and trying to kill Ginny, declaring that she wasn't about to allow her to harm any more of her children. The one good thing for the Weasleys was the return of Percy, the total and complete reconciliation between the Prodigal and his family ... so essentially, upon losing one

son, they had gained another back.

He himself had even died, yet had been brought back via the Resurrection Stone, one of the three Deathly Hallows. A wizarding legend had said that whoever had possession of them, they would make him or her invincible, literally the master of Death. It had turned out that Harry himself was the true owner of the Hallows since it had been discovered that he was the last living descendant of the last person to have owned the three artifacts: the Elder Wand, which had once belonged to Dumbledore, the Invisibility Cloak which had once belonged to his father, and the Resurrection Stone, which reportedly could bring the dead back to life. For that matter, the Elder Wand had even been able to repair his original wand, which had been damaged beyond repair by ordinary means.

Even at that, he had no idea how Ginny had felt after learning of her brother's death at Bellatrix's hands. She had never mentioned anything in that regard, but couldn't be too upset with him; she wouldn't have married him if she was. Even at that, she might still be in shock and it hadn't sunk in yet. They hadn't even heard just when Fred's funeral would be yet. Neither had they heard of how his fiancée Angelina Johnson was taking the news, but he was sure she had to be devastated.

But at the moment he was totally preoccupied with the guilt-induced nightmare he was now in the midst of. Fred and Colin had already come to him and assured him that they didn't blame him for their deaths, that they had cared about him too long and it was worth dying just knowing that the Light had won and that Voldemort had been vanquished for all time. They also considered it incredible how Harry himself had actually died, then been resurrected. If that wasn't a parallel of the actions of the Muggle Messiah, Jesus Christ, who had died to save humanity from their sins and been resurrected, nothing was.

Harry knew that he certainly had, thanks to the Resurrection Stone. If it hadn't been for the Stone, he wouldn't be here today, especially since he had originally intended to simply let Voldemort kill him and be done with it once and for all ... but fate, Providence or whatever force controlled the lives of those in both the Muggle and Wizarding world, had had other plans.

Harry was in something which resembled the restaurant section of the Leaky Cauldron in Diagon Alley, in a booth nursing a drink, and it seemed as though the ones who had died were coming in reverse chronological order. If he wasn't mistaken, Sirius should be showing up soon. His godfather had been gone two years, the length of their relationship before his death. Tragically short, admittedly, but at least they had had a quality relationship, and Harry had seen to it that Sirius had been exonerated of any and all responsibility for the deaths of the twelve Muggles and Wormtail. It was sad that he had spent so many years unfairly incarcerated, but what mattered was that he had finally been cleared.

The next thing he heard was Sirius's voice. "Harry?"

He looked up into his godfather's face and stood up; they embraced warmly, then Sirius had sat down across from Harry and ordered a firewhisky. "I understand that you believe yourself responsible for my death, mate."

"Aren't I?" Harry shot back, taking a swig of his own drink. "If I hadn't believed that codswallop Voldemort put in my head about torturing you in the Department of Mysteries and gone off half-cocked, risking the lives of my friends to help you and then finding out you weren't there after all, that Kreacher had lied to me ... you'd still be alive."

"Harry, it was only natural that you would react the way you did," Sirius tried to soothe him by resting a reassuring hand over Harry's free one. "Don't beat yourself up over that."

"But my reaction got you killed," he protested. "It was like living a nightmare to see Bellatrix blasting you into that veil; for a long time I felt like I might as well have been the one to do it."

Sirius looked at him fiercely. "Harry, stop it. Stop it right now! It's more my fault than it is yours. I should never have left Grimmauld Place. I hated being cooped up there, but at least I was safe. It was because I left there that I got killed. I came because I chose to, Harry. You didn't make me come. And what's more, you're worth sacrificing myself for. If I had it to do over again, I would."

"You came to rescue me, essentially clean up the mess I'd made and cover my sorry arse, you mean."

Sirius sighed in affectionate exasperation and took another swallow of firewhisky, noting that this argument was quickly becoming circular, literally going nowhere. It seemed that Harry needed input from certain others before he finally got the message. Out of the corner of his eye, Sirius noted that Cedric Diggory had entered the Leaky Cauldron-like room and shortly thereafter, James and Lily Potter. However, it was the latter pair who joined Harry and Sirius in the booth, while Cedric maintained a discreet distance for the time being.

Harry's eyes widened upon seeing his parents. "Mum? Dad? How can you possibly be here?"

"This is your dream, son," James replied. "Anything's possible in a dream. In addition, we've heard that you also blame yourself for our deaths. That is bloody ridiculous. As Padfoot said, we chose to sacrifice ourselves in order that you could live and would do it again in a minute."

Lily reached to touch her son's hand after Sirius withdrew his. "Besides, darling, you were just a baby at the time. There was nothing you could have done to stop it."

"But you all died because of me!" Harry protested.

Lily's reply was calm, matter-of-fact and firm in its conviction. "Correction. We chose to sacrifice ourselves, as your father said. There's a difference."

It was at this point that Cedric chose to come up to them and stood nearby, leaning with one elbow and one hand holding the wrist of the other on the counter behind Harry. "Also, you had no idea what was waiting for us at that old cemetery, mate."

"I should have expected it nonetheless," Harry insisted.

"Not even you can second-guess Voldemort on everything, son," James returned sagely, then recalled how Sirius had told him what Fred and George had done in Harry's fifth year (and their seventh). He had loved it, said it was brilliant, highly reminiscent of some of the jokes he himself and his friends had pulled. Sirius had told him just recently, shortly after his death. Harry had told him shortly after the incident in an owl post. In fact, it was the very last post he had received from Harry before his death, and he had still not answered it when he was killed.

"I also thank you for defending me to Snape, son, but he was right about me ... at least for the most part."

Harry looked incredulous at his father's unexpected statement. "How can you say that, Dad? He was a liar, a Death Eater, a murderer!"

"Doesn't make it any less true. It took being married to your mum and my smarter friends for me to realise just how much of an arrogant bastard I had been. And remember, even you eventually realised what a brave man Severus really was, to have been a double agent for the Order for so many years."

James then related the story of Snape's childhood; Harry was incredulous at how similar it was to his own, even more so than Voldemort's own was. Snape's Muggle father had abused him and his mother, although Eileen Prince-Snape had loved her son dearly, virtually the only love young Severus had ever experienced. Harry had heard that many times people who had been abused as children tended to be abusive in their later lives, but they'd turned out so differently despite the abuse they had each endured. Even as tough as Harry's early years had been, at least he had had love, acceptance and friendship later, which was more than could be said for Snape, even though he

had been good at heart, despite the fact it had only really showed in his work for the Order.

"How did you know about his early life?"

"We once overheard him telling his Slytherin companions about it," James confessed. "That was part of what made me realise how wrong I had been to treat him as I had."

At this point Lily broke in. "And we couldn't be prouder of you for your work with the DA, helping your friends learn to defend themselves against the Dark Arts. Not to mention your bravery at the cemetery and all those other times you'd encountered Voldemort, but most of all in the forest when you went to Voldemort, intending to sacrifice yourself ... then the Resurrection Stone resurrected you. You've done things a lot of grown wizards couldn't have done!"

"But most importantly, your first kiss with Ginny was somewhat reminiscent of my and James's first kiss. I don't think we came up for air for at least thirty seconds, if not longer, even if we didn't do it in public as you did. But the way you proposed to her ..." Lily's voice trailed off before she resumed speaking again. "That was definitely reminiscent of the day James proposed to me!"

James looked apprehensive, sensing what his wife was about to say. "Lil, don't ..."

Lily's green eyes hardened. "Hush, James. Harry deserves to know." And she proceeded to tell him. Even at that, James was unable to hold his son's gaze for long after Harry gave him a sly, knowing look and a smile which was equally so, knowing he had come by his actions and desires naturally.

"Just the same, I wish so much that I could have known, or at least been able to remember, what it was like to be held, kissed and loved by you both. Voldemort robbed me of so much."

"But he had very little himself, as you may recall. You have far more in common than you ever realised until now. Remember, his father never wanted him, and his mother basically died of a broken heart shortly after giving birth to him, being worse than destitute after being deserted by her husband." Harry had to admit that his mother's words rang all too true. Even as difficult as his life with the abusive Dursleys had been, he had been able to know love, acceptance and friendship both at Hogwarts and at the Burrow. Harry even recalled telling Voldemort that he felt sorry for him, which he was sure had totally galled him.

Harry even saw his mother's eyes go soft as she once again gazed upon him and moved to squeeze his hand. "I'm sorry that your dad and I can't be with you, sweetheart, especially now, but always carry the knowledge of our love for you in your heart, let it give you the strength to endure in rough times...and the memory of this as well." With that, Lily gestured to Harry to stand up, then moved to take him in her arms. His arms slid around her, and he rested his head on her breast, feeling her love wash over him as she stroked his silky, albeit unruly mop of hair. "Voldemort may have taken us from you, darling, but he could never take away our love for you."

She even recalled one time when Harry was maybe nine months old and Sirius had curled up around him in his dog form, letting the child rest his head on his warm, furry side before their fire, lulled to sleep by the rhythm of his breathing, one tiny thumb in his rosebud mouth. Then she related another time a few months earlier when Sirius had babysat him while James and Lily took the opportunity for a rare night out, then they had fallen asleep on the couch while waiting for them to return. "It was such a sweet, adorable sight that I just had to get pictures of both," Lily reminisced. "You should find them in that photo album your half-giant friend Hagrid gave you." Harry didn't recall any such pictures being there, but didn't contradict his mother, just made a mental note to check it out.

Harry felt tears fill his eyes at her tender words and, even as much as he wanted to pour out his heart, he didn't trust his voice to say more than two words: "Oh, Mum ..." A moment later he saw a tall shadow step up beside Lily.

"Don't I get a hug too, son?" James's voice broke in.

"Of course, Dad." With that, Harry released his mother; she touched his cheek and smiled before allowing him to move into his father's arms. Harry soon felt his father's right hand holding his head on his shoulder, James's love enveloping his son even as his arms did. "I love you, Dad."

"I love you too, son. Your strength and courage do us proud."

"Hey, what about me?" Sirius asked, his arms open and inviting Harry into them. Harry looked up at his father, who nodded and smiled before releasing him as Harry then moved into his godfather's arms. Over Sirius's shoulder, he saw Cedric smiling, still leaning against the nearby counter. He had a few things to say to him before their time was over, but for now he just wanted to hug Sirius one last time.

James and Lily hovered nearby, watching Sirius and Harry together, in full agreement as he said, "As I once told you, mate, the dead we love never truly leave us. They live in our hearts forever. Your parents and I will always be with you, now and throughout eternity." Padfoot then hugged his godson tightly once again and said, "You'd better talk to Cedric soon. It's getting late ... but I just wanted to say that what happened to me, I did to myself. You had little, if anything, to do with it...but I'd do it again, if it meant helping you. That house was a ruddy prison. I hated it! It was frankly a relief to get out of those walls. So often, I felt like they were closing in on me! You did me a favour, really. And those hallways were every bit as narrow as the minds of the people who once lived there."

"But I got you killed by making you leave the safety of your house ..."

"My parents' house," Sirius corrected. "I never considered it truly mine. Nor was my birth family my true family. That was you, James, Lily and Remus." Sirius reluctantly released Harry, but placed a hand on his cheek. "I love you, mate."

"I love you, Padfoot ... and I'll always miss you, all of you. But I've got to talk to Cedric now."

Sirius smiled understandingly and said, "Don't worry. We won't leave without telling you. Go, now."

Cedric moved to stand up straight as Harry moved to face him. "I'm sorry you had to die, Cedric. If I'd had any idea what was going to happen, I'd have taken hold of that ruddy Cup by myself."

"That's right; you had no idea what was going to happen, no idea that an ambush had been set up for you ... so how could you possibly have prevented what happened?"

"But you died needlessly, mate, simply because you stood between me and Voldemort."

"You weren't responsible for that, Harry. Finally, if I hadn't been there, they might have killed you instead," Cedric returned.

Harry doubted that, especially since he had still been under his mother's original protection at the time, but said, "I resigned myself to that some time ago. You had so much to give, so much to live for. Cho, for instance. She loved you. Even though she and I dated for a while after your death, she never stopped caring for you. There was even a picture of you nearby when she and I kissed for the first time ... and I couldn't help thinking that she must have been picturing you in her mind, even then."

Cedric smiled and shook his head. "I don't think so, Harry. She really liked you, too. Don't disparage yourself. You have every bit as much going for you as I did, and then some. And I was aware of you and Ginny long before you were. You're very lucky to have found her. Never let her go!"

Harry couldn't help a grateful smile in Cedric's direction. "Thanks, Cedric. I needed to hear that. Just the same, I'll always regret your death."

"As with your parents and the others, mate, it was worth it if it meant helping you. Go on now, go back to your life. Live it long, live it well, live it in love."

He didn't want to leave but had heard Ginny's voice calling him back and was unable to resist her siren call. "Harry! Where are you, luv?"

Harry then moved back in front of his parents and Sirius. "Mum, Dad, Padfoot, I love you all, but I've got to get back to my wife."

Lily smiled. "We understand, darling. And take good care of our grandchildren now. I assure you, we'll know if you don't!" she warned playfully. "Go now, son. Give Ginny our love and take good care of her. You couldn't have chosen better."

"Thanks, Mum. I will." Harry was hard-pressed to not show his incredulity at his mother's statement. Did she know something he didn't, something that Ginny hadn't told him yet? He made a mental note to ask her at the first opportunity. Meanwhile, he felt absolved of all guilt. In fact, he had never felt more at peace in his life and suspected that all the input he had gotten tonight was responsible.

Lily smiled and blew her son a farewell kiss. James and Sirius smiled and waved, then all of them left...and Harry woke up.

He even woke up with a smile this time, something he had rarely done, and it was not lost on Ginny. Her own smile was a mixture of love and worry as she lay facing him in their sunlit bedroom. "Did you have another bad dream, luv? I couldn't seem to reach you."

"No, it was fine. I'll even tell you about it." Ginny's eyebrows rose at that statement. Harry had rarely wanted to talk about his dreams, so she had best listen while he was willing to do so.

"All right, I'm listening."

It took roughly half an hour for him to tell everything, and once he had, she smiled and kissed him thoroughly even as she hugged him tightly. "Your mum is right, luv. They were *all* right. There's something I haven't had the chance to tell you because I fell asleep so early last night. You know I went to the Healer the other day and got some very good news."

"Yes?" Harry suspected that he knew what the news was, but preferred to let her tell it.

Ginny's smile was radiant as she spoke again. "I'm pregnant ... and it's a boy. Congratulations, Daddy."

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After everyone had finished celebrating the news of Harry and Ginny's coming child, he decided to tell them about his dream. Once he had re-told it, Remus nodded and smiled in agreement. "Glad to see that Padfoot and I got through to that boneheaded friend of ours after all ... even though it took Lily almost literally knocking some sense into Prongs for it to actually sink in."

And even as Hermione sat snuggled close to Ron, her head on his shoulder, just recently engaged, she said, "For a long time, I was sure that Ginny was going to have to do the same thing to Harry. Thankfully this dream did it for her ... at least this time. After all, he's going to need all the wisdom he can get, being Teddy's godfather...and what better experience can he have than being a father?"

"And if I have my way, it'll only be the first of several," Ginny returned, exchanging a look with Harry which dared him to contradict her. "In the meantime, let's just enjoy our coming child and taking care of Teddy. Right, luv?"

"Erm ... yeah, right," Harry returned absently, having barely heard her since his thoughts were on what was likely to happen in the future. But even with all her idiosyncrasies, Ginny was the only woman he had ever truly loved...and the only woman he would ever love. How he could ever been deemed worthy of her, Harry had no idea ... but what mattered was that she was his and that he was hers. What was more, when even his dead loved ones and friends approved of her and his subsequent actions, both in his earlier years and in recent months, how could he possibly doubt that he had done the right thing by marrying her?

And Hermione was right as usual. He was indeed going to need all the wisdom he could muster, and not only to be a proper godfather to Teddy, if only for Tonks's sake, but his own child ... and if Ginny's prediction came true, *children*. Meanwhile, all concerned had more than earned the right to live their lives in love and peace after all they had been through ... and Harry most of all.