

Making Happy

by neelix

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

1.Where Harry Can't Avoid The Past

Chapter 1 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

A/N:This is a huge departure for me. I am trying to stretch my writing muscles so I hope you will all bear with and give me some constructive feedback. if it wasn't already evident, this is a Snarry fic :)

'A great source of calamity lies in regret and anticipation; therefore a person is wise who thinks of the present alone, regardless of the past or future.'

~ Oliver Goldsmith ~

Harry

Serephina Bulge told me, in one of her more lucid moments, to "Cut the Glamour, Harold, and grab life by the balls." At least, I hope she was lucid. She has been in the Janus Thickey Ward at St. Mungo's since before the final battle, the befuddled victim of a Confundus Charm gone badly wrong. At least that's the diagnosis. There are no records of Serephina Bulge, so we don't even know if she is who she thinks she might be. This means that the children and husband she talks about might or might not exist, and the worldly advice she imparts to me day and daily might be good, or it might be so bad I should ignore it completely.

I have taken that one little nugget to heart though, and it is energising to be Glamour-free and yet remain anonymous. I love it here in Dublin, and I am content to watch the seething mass of Christmas shoppers from the right side of Bewley's window, a cup of steaming coffee in my hand. I think I am becoming obsessed with ordinary Muggle life, because no one gives a shit about Harry Potter here. Even the waitress looked right through me. I fucking love that.

I drink my coffee and close my eyes for a moment, savouring the flavour and my freedom to do so unobserved. Unfortunately, as I go to put my cup back onto the shiny, porcelain saucer, I can sense someone staring and the familiar tingle of magic. Before I turn my head, I already know that Hermione is looking in at me from the street.

Fuck it. After seven years, why here of all the bloody places?

She looks beautiful. I don't know why I'm surprised. She always was, although she could never see it. I wonder if she does now. I should at least acknowledge her, I suppose. I wave, and she stupidly waves back, still staring with her mouth open. If Ron were standing there doing that, Hermione would be all high and mighty about manners and 'It's rude to stare, Ronald.' Apparently the mighty have fallen, but I already knew that. This reminds me... I look beyond Hermione, and suddenly there he is, as if my sudden recall has summoned him out of the ether.

Now I'm the one staring. His hair is longer than I remember it, and he looks leaner in his Muggle coat.

'Stop staring, Potter.' I can almost hear his voice inside my head yet again.

Oh, how touching. The possessive hand on Hermione's shoulder makes me want to punch him through the glass and damn the consequences, but his piercing gaze meets mine and I look away. Through the corner of my eye, I see him put his arm around Hermione's shoulders and drag her away, and I can't help but turn to watch as my old life rejects me once again.

There is a child walking between them, a girl. She is holding their hands and skipping, which makes her long, dark curls bounce between her shoulders. I think I'm going to throw up.

I abandon my coffee and the Christmas melee in favour of beer and licking re-opened wounds. I should have known the bliss of my pity party wouldn't last long.

Hermione

Honestly, there are days when I could quite happily strangle Severus Snape, and today is one of them. Bloody wizarding vows. Of course, in hindsight I should have stayed a bit more sober. It's always that way when we start talking. Time flies, and the Firewhisky comes out.

I need to stay calm. It's not Harry's fault I'm pissed off, and I don't want to get off on the wrong foot. Imagine him being in Dublin, for goodness sake! Actually, I don't know why I'm surprised. Severus and Harry have more in common than they would ever admit, and it could have been so different. But Severus is the most stubborn arse of a man I have ever met, especially where Harry is concerned. The whole subject has been off-topic for years, but seeing him the other day has churned up a whole load of stuff. Severus could hardly look at me at breakfast, but bloody tough shit. Harry is still my friend. I hope.

Here it is, number 30. Nice, and so much more cheerful than Grimmauld Place. It looks like a lovely street, too. You don't see many places with front gardens these days. Not in London, anyway. Maybe Dublin is different. Oh, look! He has cyclamen in pots.

I know I'm procrastinating, but I just can't bear the thought that this will be a disaster. Severus will smirk and say, 'I told you so.' He always looks on the dark side. *Snort* Oh god! I mustn't laugh hysterically on the doorstep; Harry's neighbours might think I'm a weirdo. Here goes nothing.

I knock the door with the shiny, brass knocker. The sound echoes around for a moment, but there's no sign of life from the house. I knock harder in irritation, and I can hear movement behind the door. It cracks open slightly, and I see a sunlit glint on Harry's glasses and a familiar tuft of dark hair.

'Hey,' I say, trying to keep the nervousness from my voice.

'I might have guessed.'

He's miserable, but he's left the door open, so I'll take that as an invitation. He's been drinking. I can smell stale beer, which immediately takes me back to the summer I worked for Rosmerta. I can't ponder that for too long, because this is far more important than thinking about what might have been.

I follow Harry into the kitchen and try not to stare at his five o'clock shadow or the stains on his t-shirt. The worktop looks like it's made of good quality granite, but it's hardly visible under the numerous empty beer bottles.

'I suppose you've come to gloat,' he says. He's angry; there's a harsh, deep rasp in his voice. I wonder briefly if it's because he's older now, or just because of the beer. Behind his glasses his eyes are red, and suddenly I know he has been crying. I feel guilty.

'I came because I'm your friend, Harry.'

"Course you did. How is it, playing happy families with Snape?"

I can't tell you. It's complicated.

'We love our daughter very much,' I say. I can feel the weight of the Vow lie heavily on my tongue, and I want to curse Severus Snape to Azkaban and back.

'Bit of a shock that,' he says. His voice is soft. He's hurting.

'I wanted to tell you, but Severus...'

'Severus. How cosy.' Now he sounds bitter. I want to cry.

Damn. I hate crying in front of people. I swallow deeply and try to avoid his gaze.

'Harry, please. I didn't mean to hurt you.' Even I can hear the pleading tone in my voice and suddenly, I can feel everything slipping away. It was never meant to be this way.

'Of course not. So you decided to hide your relationship with Snape, and your pregnancy. I'm surprised the wedding picture didn't make the front page of the *Prophet*.'

Ah. Right. That.

'We're not married, Harry.' He looks surprised, and I see the flash of relief in his eyes. I can't help but smile as I see the face of my old friend for a brief but welcome moment.

'I suppose you're waiting until your daughter is old enough to be bridesmaid?'

That was below the belt, but I suppose I deserved it.

'Her name is Happy, and no. We have no plans to marry, Harry.'

'And that's supposed to make me feel better, is it?'

Oh, god. He looks like he's going to cry. Please don't let him cry, because I can't tell him what he needs to know to make it alright again.

'How could you, Hermione? You know how I felt, back then.'

'I know, Harry, but...' *Damn you, Severus.* 'It's complicated.'

'Why are you here, Hermione? This changes nothing, and as you can see, I need to clean up, so unless you've come with better news, you should go.'

He's right. I probably shouldn't have come. I can see the mess he's in, and I know I'm probably making it worse. He doesn't understand, and I can't explain. It's so unfair, on all of us.

'I really am sorry, Harry,' I whisper. I stand in silence, watching him as he scuffs his heel miserably against the tiled floor. He always used to do that when he was anxious or upset. I should leave. I take one more look at his face, and he takes his glasses off to rub at his eyes. I can't bear it.

'Hermione...' His voice cracks and I turn at the door to look at him.

'Yes?'

'Is he... Well, Snape, I mean. Is he..?' I know what he wants to know.

He wants to know if Severus talks about him at all, if he misses him.

I can't answer the real questions, so I give him the only response I can.

'He's fine, Harry,' I say.

Harry nods and takes a breath, and I know it's not enough. He wants to know everything. Everything I can't say.

I murmur goodbye and leave without looking back.

The house looks welcoming when I finally arrive home. Spinner's End is often like this, grey, dull and wet, but Severus always leaves a light on in the front window. Usually it cheers me up, but not today. I don't know what to say to Severus, but I go in anyway. I can feel the heat from the fire as I walk into the sitting room. He looks up from his magazine, his reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. Normally I would find it endearing, but I can't help the sudden urge of anger that bubbles up. I shoot him a glare and turn around to hang up my coat, ignoring him.

'It didn't go well, then?'

Well done, Snape. Powers of observation are as sharp as ever.

I don't want to tell him, because he has this habit of looking superior when he's right. He's right about most things, the smug bastard.

'Where's Happy?' I try to change the subject, but I know I'm just putting off the inevitable. I could never hide from him. I suppose that's why we're friends.

'She's asleep. It's past eight. I left your dinner under a Warming Charm, if you're hungry.'

He looks at me, eyebrow raised in that 'you know you'll tell me eventually' way of his, and I give in. I flop down onto the sofa and feel suddenly exhausted.

'I hated you today,' I say, sighing pathetically. 'Not for very long, of course, but that bloody Unbreakable Vow...'

'You wish me to free you from it?' He folds the magazine carefully and slips his glasses off, putting them safely back into the case. His face is a blank mask.

Shit.

He always said I would throw it in his face one day. I didn't mean it. I really didn't.

Fuck.

'Of course not. We both agreed, and I still stand by it. I couldn't regret it, not for a moment. It did make my conversation with Harry very difficult, though.'

I hope my tone is placating, but he just looks at me, his smooth, cool hands folded in his lap as if he didn't have a care in the world. Perhaps he doesn't care anymore. I wouldn't know, of course, because it's still 'off topic.' Maybe he really doesn't give a shit.

'Don't you even want to know how he is?' I know I'm challenging him.

'He seemed well the other day. What else is there to know?' He speaks so softly, and I wonder if he does that on purpose, at times when his voice is likely to betray emotions he wants to stay hidden.

'That he's really unhappy, and that bumping into us sent him off in search of alcohol and who knows what else? He was a complete mess, Severus.'

'And no more mature, it would seem.' His voice is sharp and his eyes are narrow now, and I know we're treading on risky ground. Better if I go and avoid a difficult and probably dangerous argument. It's all such a bloody mess.

'I don't want to go over all of this again, Severus. I do think that you should tell him the truth, though. In fact, you should have told him the truth at the start,' I say softly.

'I had my reasons,' he says stiffly, his jaw tight.

'It hasn't made you happy though, has it? Not really.'

He doesn't answer, but turns his head away to brood at the fire, and I know the conversation, such as it was, is over.

'I'm going to eat and get an early night. Goodnight, Severus.'

I pause at the door, wanting to apologise, but he senses this and waves me away imperiously. I understand he needs to be alone, so I go, wondering just when he will realise that I was right all along, and that all we have done is cause hurt and pain to someone we both care about.

2. Where Normal Life Resumes

Chapter 2 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

'You can close your eyes to things you don't want to see, but you can't close your heart to the things you don't want to feel.'

~ Anonymous~

Severus

I enter the kitchen, and my eyes are immediately drawn to a note addressed to me in Hermione's handwriting. It's resting beside the kettle, as she knows I would head there first. She normally knocks my door to let me know she's leaving, which means she's still pissed off with me. She'll get over it.

I lift the note and shove it in my pocket for later. I've overslept. It's a bloody miracle I slept at all. I still have time for a quick cup of tea before waking Happy. Honestly, I sometimes wonder how long she would sleep if we didn't wake her.

Why do we think tea is the solution to everything? I doubt it will help me this morning, but I mustn't brood. In fact, I won't think about it at all.

Damn. Now I'm thinking about it. At some point in the night, I almost came around to Hermione's way of thinking, but I refuse to risk everything on a glimmer of a chance. A fantasist I am not. It would turn his life upside down, just as he has his foot on the ladder. I feel stupidly proud, as if I had some hand in his success. I just pushed him to better himself. *'Pushed him away,'* Hermione would say. She never could see that it was the right thing to do.

I drink my tea and ignore the gnawing ache in the pit of my stomach. I don't miss him. Things are much better this way.

I hear the tell-tale noise of feet padding along the floor above my head and can't help but smile. My earlier question has been answered for me, at any rate. I turn and watch as Happy walks up to me, her hair a tousled mess, her face full of sleep as she yawns softly and rubs at her eyes. Her pyjamas are a little too long, and she's dragging Fluffy, her stuffed rabbit, along by his ear. My heart feels full again.

'Good morning.' I hug her to me with one arm as she snuggles against my side, and I bend to kiss her messy head.

'Hello, Daddy.' Her voice is quiet, for now. No one told me that small children could be quite so endearing when they're half asleep. 'Can I have toast today?' She lifts her head and grins, and I know this girl has her daddy wrapped around her little finger. Hermione would insist on porridge or fruit.

'Two slices. Don't tell your mother.'

I feel smug as her giggles fill the room. Getting one over on Hermione is one of life's little pleasures, and I ignore the guilt of using Happy to do so.

Once breakfast is over and Happy is showered and dressed, we head to what was once the spare room but is now the study. Home schooling was one of Hermione's better ideas. It alleviates the complications involved in Muggle schooling and also means that Happy will be equal, if not a step ahead of her peers when the time comes for her to start at Hogwarts.

Before I have the chance to ignore the thought, it occurs to me that I am destined to be alone one way or another, and that even Happy is not mine to keep.

Harry

Changing the bed sheets by wand is nowhere near as satisfying as doing it by hand. Aunt Petunia always insisted on 'hospital corners,' and in a strange way I miss that. Repetitive, mind-numbing tasks that can be done with a flick or a swish are all well and good when I want to think, but there's nothing like physical exertion when I don't.

When the beds are made, I sneak into the cleaning cupboard, grab a mop and bucket and find a deserted hallway. Energetically I wring out the mop, and I start at one corner and push and pull the mop from side to side, putting effort into each stroke. My shoulders stretch and flex, and my back aches satisfyingly. I could keep going until I collapse from exhaustion, but I'm interrupted by footsteps. I flick my wand, and the mop moves without further physical input from me. I feel cheated.

'Harry?' Fred Hopkins, Deputy Ward Supervisor and all round arse-licker stands and stares at me, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. 'Elizabeth wishes to see you.'

I avoid his gaze and walk past without speaking. Once a Slytherin, always a Slytherin; he thought he could fuck the Gryffindor out of me for a time. Being dumped by one didn't really help his ego, and it certainly hasn't made for a pleasant working relationship, either. We hate each other now, but it wasn't always the case.

Elizabeth Fairburn is a different story. As Ward Supervisor, she has ultimate responsibility for the patients and staff on the Janus Thickey Ward, and I don't think I have ever met such a kind and patient person. She's also my mentor. Without her, I would still be lost.

The half-smile she gives me as I walk into her office doesn't fill me with joy, and I know something is up.

'Have a seat,' she says, her soft voice caressing me with warmth even though she is now looking down at the parchment in her hand.

'What's wrong?' I demand to know. After being kept in the dark by Dumbledore, and others I choose not to think about, I can't be bothered to play the waiting game.

'Nothing is wrong, Harry.' Finally, the full smile and the bright blue eyes are aimed in my direction, and I relax slowly. Not bad news. Thank goodness.

'Go on, then.' I still don't want to wait.

'You've been promoted,' she says, a touch of regret in her eyes. My stomach clenches.

'I didn't ask for promotion. I'm happy here,' I plead my case weakly. I already know what's happened; the look in Lizzie's eyes tells me.

'No you're not. You're going through the motions. And you're hiding away.' All efficiency, I can sense her guilt from this side of the large desk.

'Why, Lizzie? I thought we were friends?' I can milk that guilt for a while, I think.

'You know we are, so don't start that. You've been here for almost five years and I won't allow you to waste your talents a moment longer. You'll end up as institutionalised as the patients. As your friend, I can't stand by and watch that happen.' Thin lips press together into a determined line, and I know there is no budging her.

She's right of course, particularly about the hiding bit. But I feel safe here, where the patients don't know me and I'm just Harry, junior mediwitch. There was a time I had ambitions for myself, before everything. I know I have been pathetically feeling sorry for myself here ever since. I think I've quite enjoyed the self-flagellation.

'Where?' I ask eventually, and I ignore Elizabeth's grin at my childlike pout.

'Children's Ward, Mediwitch Potter. Congratulations.' She doesn't smile this time but raises a challenging eyebrow in an uncomfortably familiar way.

I guess my hiding days are over.

3. Where They remember, and Something Serious Happens

Chapter 3 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

"What is past is prologue."

~ William Shakespeare~

Hermione

Walking through Hogsmeade in the early evening used to be one of my most favourite things to do. Tonight it feels cold, but that summer... God, was it really so long ago? Anyway, that summer it was always balmy. It was as if the weather had joined everyone in the celebrations at the end of the war and was reluctant to leave the party. Even here, people were walking around in vest tops, most of them with sunburnt shoulders.

I pull my coat tightly around me and start to walk faster. The lights in the Three Broomsticks are like a beacon in the dark, and I feel an unfamiliar fluttering in my tummy. Lost in thought, I reach the door in surprise and pause to take a breath. My heart is starting to beat a little faster, but I ignore it to push the door open. I'm instantly engulfed by noise and warmth and aromas that assault my senses, forcing hidden memories to the fore.

I don't want to head to the bar straight away, so I find the nearest empty booth and slip into it. I can feel the heat from the open fire, and I know from experience it will get stifling before long, so I slip off my coat and scarf before casting my gaze around. I can see her now, standing with her hands on her hips as she engages yet another leering customer in banter. I know the game well; she taught me herself. She stops in mid-sentence and turns to look over her shoulder. Our eyes meet, and she smiles slowly. Immediately she breaks off her conversation with the serving of beer and a swift goodbye, tucking the Galleons into her apron pocket as she walks towards me.

'Well, here's a surprise,' she says warmly, sliding into the seat opposite.

'I fancied some company,' I say. She takes my hand across the table, and I let her.

'Told you it wouldn't be easy, didn't I?' Her face is kind, warm and understanding. The weight of the past few months comes crashing around me, and I feel the tears sliding down my face as I nod in agreement.

'Floo him and let him know you're staying tonight,' she suggests. My eyes widen and the words get stuck in my throat, and she laughs. The sound is familiar and welcome and I realise how much I've missed it.

'Don't be silly, girl. We'll just talk, if you like,' she says, but I hear the question in her voice. I think for a moment, then remember that Happy is with Ron and Luna tonight and there is no real reason to rush back. I nod, and our eyes meet again.

I know we won't be just talking as I walk to the Floo.

Severus

The house feels too quiet tonight. It's a long time since I've been here on my own, and I hadn't realised how accustomed I had become to the sound of females in my living space. They seem to have gradually crawled under my skin, and I want to scratch the place where they're absent. Not that I mind. God knows I had plenty years of that at Hogwarts to get used to my own company.

I'll have another Firewhisky. Why not?

Perhaps I should go out too. I don't blame Hermione for staying in Hogsmeade. I have been bloody miserable company lately. Let's be honest, I've just been bloody miserable. For so long I have been content with the status quo. Home teaching suits me, and I still have plenty of free time to brew and tend the herb garden. I have time to read and occasionally listen to music. I can still hear Hermione's laugh when she discovered the stack of old vinyl in the attic. She was still laughing later, after we dusted an L.P. off and let the sounds of The Kinks reverberate loudly around the house. We got rat arsed that night, and I think she even convinced me to dance. Unbelievable, the changes she has brought to my life. She is my best friend, and I'm wondering now if I've done her a disservice, binding her to me through Happy. It seemed the perfect solution, at the time.

But where do we go from here? I can't expect her to live a celibate life, and I'm not sure I want that for myself either. I have thought about Harry more and more in the last few months, and I can no longer hide from myself. I regret everything. Hermione was right.

Fuck, I'm turning into a maudlin old bugger. Pub it is.

Harry

I grab the clipboard and take a slow walk up the ward. We have five patients in at the moment and three empty beds. Although the ward is small, it's busy and challenging, and although it's taken me months to admit it to myself, I love it. Our patients tend to be here as the result of an accident, and they're almost always under the age of eleven. Poppy Pomfrey tends to cover the bases after that. This makes for a lot of laughter on the ward, and some tears, but there is very little we can't treat here. Magic can quite literally work miracles.

I approach the fourth bed and hear the familiar sound of Miranda Abbot singing to the young girl tucked up in the bed. She's recovering from a potions poisoning. God knows what she took, but the purple boils on her face are fading slowly. The lecture I gave to the parents was particularly satisfying. Being the Boy-Who-Lived has its uses, because the parents recognise me instantly but the children don't.

I'm just about to walk back to the Medi-witch station in the middle of the ward when Marcus Hedley runs into the ward. It looks like we have a new patient.

'Tell me,' I say, walking quickly with him to the treatment room at the entrance to the ward.

'Girl, aged six. She fell off a broom, apparently. Must have been from some height, I've counted three fractures to her arm and a broken leg, but she hit her head too.'

I nod in understanding and wonder briefly why the hell a child of that age was allowed to ride on a broom in the first place.

'Are the parents with her?' I can't wait to hear their excuses. My unwritten rule is that parents should protect their children at all costs. Mine did.

'No. She was having a sleep over with friends. They brought her in.'

'The child's name?' I grab my quill, ready to start yet another new record.

'Harriet Granger-Snape.'

Fuck.

Where Chaos Ensues, And A Door Opens

Chapter 4 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

"Chaos often breeds life, when order breeds habit"

~Henry Brooks Adams ~

Harry

My first thought is always for the patient, but I am halted momentarily by the knowledge of who she is. I force myself to remain professional as I enter the treatment room, and although I am shocked by the lack of colour in his face, seeing Ron sitting next to the child brings my mind back to the present.

'Ron.' I nod.

'God mate, Hermione is going to bloody well kill me,' he says quickly.

'Let's see how Harriet is, shall we?'

I'm not going to assuage his guilt. It would be bad enough if his own child had been injured, but it's far worse that this is someone else's. Inwardly, I am amused that it's Hermione he's scared of and not Snape. He should have realised that at school.

The child is beautiful, and I try not to note the alabaster skin and the dark, glittering eyes of her father as I approach.

'Hello, Harriet. I'm Harry, and I'm a medi-witch. Are you hurting somewhere?' I try to smile as if everything is normal as I catch her gaze, and she forces a weak smile back.

'I know you. You're Uncle Harry,' she whispers.

I feel a knot in my stomach. This child knows who I am, and part of me wants to know if her father has ever spoken about me. I feel dazed, but then I realise that Hermione is her mother and it would be natural that I would come up in conversation.

'Yes, well... I know your Mum,' I say. I can't look into her eyes now, so I take out my wand and start the diagnostic. Hedley was right about the broken bones, but I'm more concerned about the large, purple bruising on her forehead that disappears into her hairline. As I run my wand close to the area, the results confirm my suspicions, and I feel sick. I turn immediately to Hedley and murmur instructions quickly and then turn back to the child, who has now closed her eyes and looks ready for sleep.

'Harriet,' I say loudly. 'You need to stay awake for me, okay? I'm going to get your mum and then give you some special medicine to keep you awake. It's really important.'

Her eyes spring open, and she bites her lip in an endearingly familiar way.

'Harry, you're scaring her,' Ron says in a low whisper.

'If it keeps her awake then so be it,' I mutter.

'What's wrong with her, then?'

'I can't tell you, Ron. I'm sorry. I really need to speak to Harriet's parents,' I respond. 'It's procedure, you understand. But I could use your help,' I say.

I can imagine how he's feeling, despite the fact that I do blame him even though I'm unaware of the circumstances. The burden of Lupin's death still weighs heavily on my shoulders, no matter how many people tell me it wasn't my fault.

'Anything,' he says.

'Keep talking to her; keep her awake. It's vital.'

Severus

'What in the bloody blazes are you doing in my Floo?' I glare at him, and I don't know if I'm angrier that he woke me from my alcohol-induced sleep or because of shock that he is here in my reality, as well as my dreams.

'I'm sorry, Snape, but can I come through? It's urgent.'

I can hear the authority in his voice, and I don't even consider refusing him. The part of me that yearns for him is singing, but I ignore it in favour of petulance and feel even angrier for it.

'Do I have a choice?'

As he steps through onto the hearth rug, I notice he has changed. He has grown taller, and his frame has filled out with adult muscle, his face peppered with what looks like the beginnings of stubble. He looks around the room briefly and then our eyes meet. They are still green, and I'm instantly reminded of pools of hidden desire, of passion and want. I find that I cannot look away.

'Where's Hermione?' he says quickly, no preamble, no pleasantries. Immediately I bristle.

'I do not hold her prisoner, Potter. She has a life beyond these walls.' I can hear the acid in my voice. I'm not prepared for the withering look I get in return.

'You'll have to come, then. Your daughter is at St. Mungo's. She's had an accident.'

'No!' I leap from the chair and feel faint. I can feel myself trembling, and as my legs try to balance themselves, I almost fall. My arm is gripped by warm, firm fingers, and I steady myself.

'You're okay,' he says gently.

'Don't tell me what I am or bloody well aren't, Potter. Take me to Happy. Now.'

I wrench my arm from his grasp and try to ignore the flinch in his eyes and the residue of warmth from his sure, firm fingers.

My stomach churns as I follow him from the Floo, and I don't stop to look about as we walk from the office into the long, stark corridor. We are shoulder to shoulder, and part of me is aware that we are almost the same height now. We walk purposely, like comrades on a serious mission. Perhaps we are.

He stops suddenly outside a closed door. He turns and looks apprehensive for the first time. Oh, God almighty. This is fucking serious.

'Spit it out, Potter.' I am aware of the tremor in my voice but right now all I need to know is... Is...

Please, God, let her be alive...

'She has a fractured skull and some broken bones. There is a large contusion on her forehead, and until I run further tests I can't tell how bad it is.'

I feel numb. I appreciate his forthright approach, but now I have the information, I have nowhere to hide. I take in a long, slow breath.

'I want to see her.'

'Of course. I don't think she needs to know how badly hurt she is, not yet, anyway.' His eyes are suddenly compassion and caring, and I cannot bear it. I nod and look away, and I can feel the tears pricking my eyes.

'We really should let Hermione know.' I hear his voice through the fog that clouds my thinking, and I know he's right.

'She's at the Three Broomsticks, but the Floo will be locked. You will have to send your Patronus.' I don't think I could summon my own right now if I tried.

'No problem. I'll take you in now. Ron is with her. You have to keep her awake if you can.'

He pats my shoulder, and I know he's trying to be reassuring, but I stiffen automatically, and he shrugs before opening the door.

As if suspended in time, I will never forget the sight that greets me as I go into the room. There are pictures on the walls, bright, colourful images. A knight is slaying a purple dragon, and on another wall, two children are playing with butterflies that fly and flutter out of their reach. I note all of this in the brief moment it takes my eyes to focus on Happy.

She is lying on a hospital trolley with her right arm in a sling, and I can immediately see the large purple lump on her normally perfect forehead. She looks so small, so frail, and my heart aches as I paste a false smile on my face. I ignore Weasley, who scuttles towards the door like a cockroach, as well he might. I'll deal with him later.

'Hello, sweetheart,' I say softly. I want to touch her but feel afraid to do so. Her eyes are slowly drooping, but she wakens at my voice.

'Hello, Daddy. Did you really help Uncle Harry kill a bad wizard?' she whispers.

I feel rooted to the spot, and have no idea what to say to that. Fucking Weasley and his big mouth.

The door flies open suddenly and Hermione rushes towards us, hair flying and her face white. Her lower lip trembles, and I instinctively pull her into a hug.

'Don't let her see you upset,' I murmur into her ear. I feel her shake, but she nods in response and takes a shuddering breath to calm herself. She hugs me back gratefully and over her shoulder, I see Ron glance sideways at Harry, who is staring at us like he has seen a ghost.

Hermione is right. It really is all such a bloody mess.

Where They Wait, And So Do We.

Chapter 5 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

'It kills you to see them grow up.

But I guess it would kill you quicker if they didn't.'

~Barbara Kingsolver~

Hermione

'Severus! That's enough!' I can feel my body shaking as I forcefully remove his wand tip from Ron's throat. They stare at each other unmoving before Severus grudgingly steps away. I stand between them to keep them apart, only this time I am keeping Severus from Ron, not the other way around.

'We have to hear what happened before you hex him,' I say firmly, even though I feel precisely the same way. At no point during the war did I ever feel so helpless.

'It had better be a fucking good story, Weasley.' Severus stands his ground, a nerve twitching near his jaw. I've lived with him long enough to know that his temper is just simmering below the surface and it will take very little for him to blow again.

'I am really sorry, Hermione.' Ron pleads with me but all I hear is his eleven-year-old self, whining about Snape and too much Potions homework. He has never truly matured, but I did know that deep down.

'You should be apologising to both of us, Ron. Severus is Happy's father, and I suggest you don't forget it.'

I feel suddenly exhausted, and as I glance at Severus I see the storm has passed. His shoulders slump, and the fire in his eye is replaced with anxiety and pain, a look I haven't seen since... Well, since the time everything changed. Judging by the dark shadows, he's been drinking too much. I don't have the energy to ask what has driven his mood to seek solace in the Firewhisky. I know already, of course.

I sink into the nearest chair, not looking at either of them as they find their own seats on either side of me. I want to be with Happy, but Harry was insistent that he carry out the scans in the Stasis Room, and the least amount of adult magic in there the better, apparently.

'Explain,' Severus murmurs, loud enough for his voice to reverberate across my cheek. Ron leans forward warily to look at Severus, and I know he's gauging just how safe he is. He shouldn't worry, because yet again I sit between him and perceived danger.

'We were playing Soft Quidditch. Happy was on my broom with me, and I promise you, we were only a few feet from the ground, and I used a Sticking Charm to make sure she wouldn't slide around too much. I thought she was safe, but as we turned to dodge the Bludger, I swear to you, she just flew upwards. I think when she realised she was just floating in the air, she panicked and started to fall. I turned back to get her, but I just wasn't fast enough. Honestly, it really was an accident.'

Severus has stiffened in his seat, and I know exactly where his thoughts are going.

'Don't you dare,' I whisper, laying my hand on his forearm. 'She was always going to inherit some of your traits, Severus, just as she has mine. It's not your fault.'

'I should have considered...' he mutters.

'Nonsense. We can't wrap her up in a Cushioning Charm all of her life, and this is just another aspect of her magic she can learn to manage. You can teach her, Severus. You'll have to, because she will be too scared to do it on her own.'

I feel him relax, and I'm aware of Ron watching us as I speak. I turn to look at him, and he shakes his head.

'Unbelievable. How do you do it, 'Mione?' He smiles a wan smile, and I know he needs forgiveness. I'm not ready yet.

'You told our daughter about the Dark Lord,' Severus says quietly.

Oh, fuck.

'Harry said I had to keep her awake; I had to tell her something!' Ron is indignant now, and I can't blame him really.

'It's okay, Ron. We just didn't want her to know until she was older, when we can explain it properly,' I say quietly. I really cannot be bothered with this tennis match any longer.

The waiting room has a small kitchen area to the side, so I get up and grab a glass and fill it with cold water from the jug beside it. I hear Ron telling Severus that Happy thinks he made the story up, but it's too late for all of that. She's an inquisitive girl.

That's one of the traits she inherited from me.

Harry

I feel like I'm on automatic pilot. This isn't the first time I've dealt with such an injury, but despite this and any previous positive outcome, I can't seem to shift the ball of fear in my stomach. This time, no matter how far apart we've all been and no matter how professional I appear to be on the outside, this is personal.

This is the child I would never have had if things had been different. That *he* would never have had. What would his life be now if he and Hermione hadn't...? No. I can't think about that now, for fuck's sake. And yet I can't shake the image of them together in the Treatment Room, so cosy, so close. As Minerva would have said, they're a good fit.

I'm staring at the girl as I watch the changing colours of the scan. Thank God Marcus is recording the results, because I haven't been paying attention at all. She seems paler, but that could be because I'm looking at her through a pale, yellow haze.

Hang on a minute. Yellow is not a positive indicator.

'Marcus,' I say urgently. 'Let me see the results so far.'

He's frowning as he passes me the clipboard, and as I scan my eye over his notes I can see why.

'Compound fracture, internal bleeding... Shit.' I close my eyes and take a slow, inward breath.

'Shall I put the child in steady stasis, Mr Potter?' his voice is clear, organised, and I'm very glad to have him with me because suddenly I'm all over the place. My hands are shaking.

'Yes, do that. I'll go and speak to her parents again. I think surgery is the only option.'

I see Marcus nod and walk to the side of the bed, his wand at the ready. I leave the room and feel chilled to the bone.

I had often imagined what I would say to Snape if I ever had the good misfortune to bump into him, but never had I thought I would be telling him that his daughter could, might, possibly will, die.

I enter the waiting room before I can turn around and come back later. The air is charged, the silence deafening. Snape is staring into space, his face a pale mask of tension and concern. I realise I have seen this same mask staring down at me from the Hogwarts head table on any number of occasions, when I thought he hated me.

How wrong I was. We all were.

Hermione is up first, wringing her hands tightly, and her eyes searching mine for any sign of hope. I look away and speak to a point beyond her shoulder.

'I need to speak with you and Severus in my office,' I say calmly. I don't know how I got the words out, but they hang there momentarily until I turn and walk away.

As I try and formulate my next sentence, I can hear the familiar thud, thud, thud of dragon hide boots behind me, and I wish they were following me for a better reason.

Where We Revisit A Memory

Chapter 6 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

'Sometimes Goodbye is a painful way to say 'I Love you.'

~ Kezia~

Harry

He thanked me. Out of the blue, he thanked me for telling him the worst possible news. Hermione cried, which I expected her to do. She's not the most emotional person I know, but I've seen how much she loves her daughter. I'm tired now, and my shift has ended, but I can't seem to move myself to the Floo just yet.

Hermione has decided to stay, even though I told her she can't see Harriet for a few more hours and nothing is likely to change. I've allocated the parents' room to her and left instructions with the house-elves to keep her fed and watered. The fact that Hermione didn't even flinch when I did that says a lot for her state of mind right now.

I jump when the Floo flares green, and Snape steps out with quiet grace, holding a bag of things that Hermione needed from home. He pauses, and we look at each other for a brief moment. His eyes are soft, and perhaps a little sad. I can't let him pass without hearing his voice. Selfish, but I don't care. Not about that, anyway.

'Are you holding up, Severus?'

He stops before reaching for the door and his head bows, letting his long, dark hair obscure his face as he turns his profile to me.

'As well as can be expected, Potter.' He doesn't move, and I realise he is waiting for me to say something else.

'You used to call me Harry.'

Even I flinch at the implication in that loaded statement, but for fuck's sake, I'm tired and sick to death of pretending that the past didn't happen and that at one point, many years ago, I was in love with him.

I distract myself from my embarrassment with the pile of parchment on my desk and lift the quill purposefully, although what I intend to write is anyone's guess. I hold my breath until I hear the distinctive click of the door, and when I look up, he's gone. Again.

I Floo home, desperate to shake the remnants of the day from my head. A quick, hot shower and a bottle of beer from the 'fridge should do it, but instead of heading up the stairs to the bathroom, I take my beer and sit on the sofa and stare into the fire. It's not long before my thoughts drift back to Hogwarts. They were halcyon days, between the end of the war and, well... things changed very swiftly afterwards. I don't think I even said goodbye to Hermione after packing the few items I wanted to keep.

I still find it hard to believe. Hermione was so determined to gain her apprenticeship; I think she just wore Severus down with her constant presence in his lab. I had nothing planned and no other home to go to apart from Grimmauld Place. Minerva was happy enough for me to stay in the guest wing for as long as I wanted.

I thought Hermione had a thing for him at first, but there was nothing to suggest it and she said it was purely professional. I started to watch them brew to pass the time, and it was soothing, in it's way. I grew up and started to see the man beneath the robes, and there was nothing left to fight about after Voldermort died. Severus and I made our peace.

It didn't take long before I became the errand boy, running between the lab and Poppy's store, keeping the shelves stocked at first, and then helping out in the ward now and then. It was his suggestion, to become a medi-witch. He said I should have a purpose beyond the walls of Hogwarts, but I couldn't face the public scrutiny at first. When Hermione started to work at Rosmerta's, I found myself alone with him more often than not, and I realised I was more than happy with that. Sometimes he would arrange food for us and talk about his student days. I loved hearing him talking about my parents. He didn't really hate my dad, not at first anyway. He wouldn't say why things changed.

I lean back against the sofa cushions and close my eyes. I know where these memories are taking me, and I let it happen for once.

...I'm whistling as I walk down the dark, musty corridor. Funny how the darker it gets the more cheerful I feel, because I know that he is there at the end. I knock on the ancient wooden door and it opens immediately, as I knew it would. He changed his wards to allow me entry over a year ago, and it still gives me a thrill to know that he trusts me and welcomes me into his domain. He calls me the Boy-Who-Just-Is and tries to hide his smirk when he says it. I think he secretly enjoys teasing me, as much as I enjoy hearing the amusement in his voice and seeing the glint of warmth in his eyes.

I pass through the dimly lit office into the sitting room. It contains a mis-match of old furniture which seems to fit together perfectly as if by accident, much like the three of us. Severus enjoys holding court here when Hermione and I are in a heated debate. He watches us with a wry smile as we each try to best each other. Eventually one of us will give in and ask him to support our argument. He rarely sides with either of us, and we turn on him as a pair, challenging him to stop sitting on the fence and decide who is right. He laughs, tells us he has sat on the fence for all of his adult life, and gets the Firewhisky out, signalling the end of his part in proceedings. Hermione and I share an indulgent smile, because we both adore him for who he is, albeit in different ways.

I sit on the old, green sofa, ready to wait until he returns from his rounds or wherever he is. There is a journal on the seat, and I lift it and open it, curious to its contents. I see Severus' handwriting and close it immediately. I don't want to pry, so I put the book back where I found it, just in time to hear his familiar cough behind me.

'I didn't read it, Severus. I was just interested,' I say immediately.

He walks around to the open fireplace and says nothing. He looks like he has just stepped out of the shower. His hair is damp, and he's wearing only his black shirt and trousers. The firelight highlights his skin, and his face is all sharp angles and planes. I find myself holding my breath as I look up at him, and it takes me a moment to realise he is staring at me strangely.

The atmosphere changes imperceptibly. If I'm honest, things have been changing subtly between us for a while. The comfortable silences are no longer quite as comfortable, and a frisson of something hangs in the air.

'Why are you here?' he says quietly.

I'm thrown for a second and start to wonder at the question myself. He never uses words flippantly, and I know he really does want me to answer.

'For you.'

He closes his eyes and lets out a soft groan before starting to walk away. Spontaneously, I jump up from my seat and grab his arm. He turns and stares at me, and I see the uncertainty in his eyes. For a brief moment I realise that I don't even know if he's gay, but I push that to the back of my mind as I pull him back to me. He lets me, and I smile briefly as I close the gap between my lips and his. Warm, soft and pliant, I explore his mouth with mine and slide my arms around his waist. He's resisting, I can tell, so I press forward firmly and sweep the crease of his lips with the tip of my tongue. With a moan, he opens his mouth and his arms wrap themselves around my shoulders. He presses me closer to his body and his tongue battles firmly with my own...

Hidden passion, that's what the kiss told me. I loved him from that moment.

7. Where Severus Makes A Decision

Chapter 7 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

"Some choices we live not only once but a thousand times over, remembering them for the rest of our lives."

~ Richard Bach ~

Severus

'You should try to eat something, Hermione.'

I don't remember seeing her quite so out of sorts, and while I'm tempted to wallow in my own pain and misery, I find worrying about her a welcome distraction. I have learned to expect the worst and be relieved when it doesn't come to pass. It is less disappointing than hope.

'I can't,' she whispers. She's hugging the pillow to her body for comfort she can't get from me, despite everything.

'You need to stay strong, Hermione. Happy needs you to be,' I plead. *I need you to be.*

'Strong like you, Severus?'

Her tone is biting. So be it. If it pulls her from her maudlin pit then she can vent at me as much as she likes. I'm open to that and more than likely I deserve it for some reason or other. I don't respond, but sit at the end of the bed and wait for the rest to follow. She doesn't disappoint.

'How can you sit there like everything is normal? Our daughter might die, Severus!'

'And you expect me to behave how, exactly? Does it say how I should manage this in *Hogwarts: A History*, or *Moste Potente Potions*?' I try hard not to rile back at her because I know she is hurting but fuck it, so am I. I just hide it well.

'I don't know, but you just sit there like there's a block of ice around your heart! You didn't let Harry in, and you only allow me what you feel you can give. I thought that Happy had thawed you, but look at you!' She throws the pillow across the room in temper, and angry, frustrated tears course down her face.

I take a slow breath and bite my tongue. Really, she can be such a harridan when she's in full pelt. I try not to let her words find their target, but I already know it's too late. Cruel and cutting and yet so scarily accurate, I'm reminded how well this woman knows me. My heart, icy though it may be, aches for her pain and mine, and for everything that went before.

I feel her moving towards me, and suddenly she is curled beside me with her head on my lap, tears streaming. I can't help but sigh. I forget that she is young still, and the responsibility of parenthood has been hard for her with no parents to turn to for support. I never felt the need. I always knew I would do a better job. I stroke her hair, as much to soothe myself as her.

'I'm sorry, Severus. I didn't mean it.'

'Yes, you did. You're always honest,' I say with a laugh. She closes her eyes and reaches up to take my hand. I'm shocked when she presses a soft kiss to my upturned palm.

'I'm glad you're here,' she says quietly.

'Where else would I be?'

She doesn't answer, and I realise she has fallen asleep, the result of long hours of waiting and worrying and the explosive expression of emotion. I envy her that.

I summon her thrown pillow so I can lean comfortably against the wall and dim the lights. It could be a long night. I close my eyes and find myself mentally cataloguing the day's events, a habit I thought I'd left at Hogwarts. I feel numb, like I'm watching someone else's life from a distance, but there are some images I can't shake.

I fight back tears as I think about Happy. She has been at the forefront of my thoughts, my only child. I went into her room and gathered the things I thought she might want during her recovery. I did it mechanically, trying to ignore her unmade bed and the books on her bedside table. Underwear, t-shirts, her favourite skirt and the pair of Muggle jeans that she refused to take off for a week at Christmas. I was holding it together until I went to grab her bloody rabbit. Dammit. I take a shuddering breath and wipe away the tears swiftly. I don't want Hermione to see me like this.

I was still struggling when I stepped back into Potter's office, and the look of concern on his face made me immediately long for the time before. The feeling of being held by someone who cares deeply about you should be bottled for use in such emergencies. Although he's older, he's still impulsive, still pushes the accepted boundaries of our relationship, such as it is. There is part of me that is heartened by his boldness, but it only serves to remind me that I could have kept it for myself.

Somewhere deep down, I am aware that reality as we all know it is changing. My life started out on shaky foundations as it is. Now, I fear I am losing everyone. I close my eyes in a bid to stop myself thinking and mentally list the contents of my potions lab.

When I reach Ashwinder eggs I stop and wonder if all of my decisions were foolish ones.

We are roused by a loud knock on the door, and Hermione sits up awkwardly. I ignore the sudden rush of blood to my numb thighs and walk swiftly. It is Potter, as I expected. I stand aside to let him in and resist the urge to laugh as he notices the bed has not been slept in and that Hermione, although a tad dishevelled, is still dressed. Did he imagine we would use the room as a hotel suite, a perfect opportunity for a romantic interlude in our busy lives? The look of confusion is still pasted to his face when he looks at me, and I can guess at the unanswered questions he wishes to lay before me.

Hermione doesn't give us time for further wordless conversation. 'Harry, please tell me that Happy is okay.' She stands, pale and thin, wringing her hands. I go to her, hoping my closeness will bring her some comfort, but the gap between us remains.

'Happy needs an operation. There is bleeding, causing her brain to swell. We have to reduce that quickly and stop the bleed.' His words are delivered staccato, like he's struggling to get them out.

'Who will do the procedure?' I immediately wish I could do it myself and berate my history as Potions master and teacher. If I were a surgeon...

'Mr. Armitage. He's our best man; I trust him completely. I've volunteered to assist.'

'You've done this before?' I can feel Hermione's glare, but I choose to ignore it.

'You can trust me, Severus.' He takes a small step closer, his eyes sincere, urgent. I see what he's really saying, but it cannot happen here, now, when I have my child to think of.

'Severus.' Hermione sounds like she's far away, and I can't seem to focus on her voice until she shakes my arm firmly.

'Yes?' I'm aware my own voice is faint. My mouth has gone dry from the sheer will of staying silent.

'Remove the Vow, Severus. Now, just do it. Make it easier on yourself,' she says. I can hear the pleading tone and the words she doesn't say *Make it easier on me*.

'Will you stay?' I reply. I couldn't bear it if she left, taking Happy with her.

'Of course. It's our home. Nothing has to change, unless you want it to.'

I'm still staring at Harry, who is looking bewildered and confused and very much like he did at eleven years old. He's still so much younger than I want him to be, but wizard or no; I have no control over that. But I want things to change. My eyes flick to his mouth, and the memory of that firm lower lip, and the curve of his smile, assault my senses like a dagger to the heart.

I withdraw my wand, and he flinches, stepping backwards. I feel Hermione sigh in relief.

Where Lives Are Saved

Chapter 8 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

'It hurts to love someone and not be loved in return, but what is the most painful is to love someone and never find the courage to let the person know how you feel.'

~ Anonymous~

Hermione

I've imagined this moment so many times that it's an anti-climax. The weight of the Vow lifted, I'm now left with the weight of worrying about Happy. I have no energy to contemplate what might happen next. Nothing has changed. Nothing has been said. The only difference is that we are silent through choice and not will.

They let us see Happy for a short while, but she doesn't even open her eyes. Harry says it's residual because she's been in stasis for so long. I hold her cold hand in mine for as long as I can, staring at her pale face and trying to remember all of her before they take her from me. Her long, dark curls hang limply on her shoulders. I want to take a brush to it and sing to her, like I do before she goes to bed at night. Her lips are tinged with blue, and her dark eyelashes stand out starkly against her cheeks. She definitely has her father's colouring.

Severus looks shell shocked. I know everything is happening too fast for him, but perhaps that's for the best. If he'd thought about it for too long, he would never have done it, and now, the rest is up to him. I shouldn't have been so cruel. I know he's more sensitive than I gave him credit for and that he loves Happy deeply. I wonder if he has been scared all this time that I would take her from him.

I make two strong cups of black coffee and take one to him as a peace offering. He gives me a resigned look but takes it anyway. I slide into the seat beside him and take his free hand in mine, threading my fingers through his. I squeeze tightly in what I hope he knows is reassurance, and he squeezes back. The last time we did this, I was giving birth, I think. It seems fitting.

As I stare into the bitter, hot coffee, I can't help but think back over everything. It's not the first time, of course, but being with Harry and Severus in the same room brings everything back so clearly.

It took me a while to see what was going on, but I was a bit wrapped up in myself at the time, so that's no surprise. I'd known for a few years that girls were my thing, but it took Rosmerta to make that real. I knew there was no future there, but that wasn't what it was about. There is a fondness between us, but she's already lost the love of her life. Anyone else is just a distraction.

It never occurred to me that Harry was gay, too. I mean, he'd been out with Cho and with Ginny, and I know for a fact they were shagging. So when he told me he was in love with Severus, I almost laughed, until I saw that he was deadly serious. Things changed after that. We still spent time together, all of us, but I noticed the way they were with each other more and more, and I felt a bit out of it to be honest. Not that they did anything in front of me. In fact, I thought there was more going on than there was, but Severus told me they'd only kissed once, and he had avoided being alone with Harry after that. But Harry would stare at Severus, who would make a big show of not noticing and pretending everything was normal. I'd laugh if wasn't all so sad.

Severus should have known Harry wouldn't let it drop. He was always so stubborn about following things through, even when we were kids. He roped me in to help, which I thought was the right thing at the time. Severus was furious with me for even thinking it was a good idea, and I was so upset that Harry went to confront Severus there and then. It was just awful. Harry left and didn't answer any of my owls, and Severus didn't speak to me for a month beyond the formalities of the lab. Then he turned up at my quarters one night with brownies and Firewhisky. After an hour we opened a second bottle, and of course the conversation turned to our respective love lives, or in Severus's case, the lack of one. He wouldn't admit to his feelings for Harry at first, but I managed to refill his glass enough for it all to come out. For someone so bloody proud and stubborn, he can be a stupid man. But he was so scared of being hurt. I told him Harry is the most loyal person he would ever meet, and how did he know that the next man in his life would be able to commit any more than Harry?

He told me there would never be another man. That's what made it so pathetic, really. They both felt the same way.

Harry

Armitage is a good man, and I'm relieved I chose to trust him with this. The operation is over, and another child is safe again. I settle Harriet into her room myself. I feel the need to take personal charge of her care, and I don't want to examine the reasons why just now. I feel weak, and I know I have to go and tell them both that their daughter is well and they can stop worrying, but being in their presence is confusing and exhausting. There is something going on that I'm not party to, and I want to expedite their daughter's recovery so they can exit my life as quickly as possible. I didn't choose to revisit this situation, and if I was hurt before, now my wounds are open and bleeding.

I take the well-worn path to the waiting room, too wiped out to feel buoyant and excited to be passing on such good news. I ignore the nagging part of me that wants to see him again and force myself to maintain my professional façade. I paste on a smile before I open the door, but all of my careful planning crumbles away when I see the relief on his face and am engulfed in Hermione's arms, her curls buffeting my cheek as she crushes me to her.

'Thank you, oh God, Harry, thank you!' She's squealing in my ear, and I wince at the shrillness of it. He laughs, a sound I haven't heard in a very long time, and as I look over Hermione's shaking shoulder, our eyes meet.

He rolls his eyes and smiles, but I can see the tracks of his tears down his cheeks. He mouths a silent 'Thank you,' and I nod and smile back. We hold the gaze for longer than is really necessary, until he sits and rubs his face wearily with his hands. Hermione loosens her grip and goes over to him.

'It's okay, Severus. What ever happens, Happy will always be your little girl,' she whispers. She sits and put her arm around his hunched shoulders. He nods, but he's looking at me and not her.

'Can we see her?'

'Of course. She's sleeping, but she'll probably wake soon and she'll want you with her, I'm sure.'

I lead them in silence to Harriet's room. She's awake, and Severus pauses with me by the door, watching as the child smiles up at Hermione and they hug each other gently. I feel his energy pulsing from him and catch a hint of the aroma that is so typical of him, a mix of spice and soap and maleness that used to make me almost beg to climb under his skin. I hold my breath and try and step away, but the door frame stops me. Hidden from view, he takes my hand and captures my fingers between his, caressing them with a ghost of a touch. He doesn't even look at me, but as he runs the tip of his index finger across my palm I feel myself shiver. He steps into the room to greet his daughter, and the whole incident lasts no more than a few seconds. I feel faint, wondering if I imagined it.

I go to leave, but he stops me.

'Harry.' His voice is deep and rich, but it's his use of my name that stuns me into speechlessness. 'Thank you, for everything.'

Hermione looks between us with a knowing smile on her face, and as I Floo home, I'm feeling more confused than I was before.

Where Harry Learns A Little

Chapter 9 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

'You may not love me today, tomorrow, or ever, but I will love you until it kills me, and, even then, you'll be in my heart.'

~ Anonymous ~

Severus

'Can I come home, Daddy?'

Her dark eyes sparkle with hope as she sits comfortably against the hospital pillows. She has steadily become herself over the past few days, and although we no longer need to maintain our dual vigil, neither of us can bear to be away from her for any length of time. Hermione finally allowed herself to return home to bathe and sleep, and for now I have Happy to myself. I cherish the simple conversation, and the quiet moments where I read and she listens.

'When you are fully recovered, and not before.'

'Uncle Harry said I'm better,' she protests. Uncle Harry, indeed. He tolerates it, too. He has a way with him around his charges, a gentle authority and warmth that they respond to with eager smiles and quick laughter, and now it seems that Happy has embraced him as part of our small family.

'Medi-witch Potter will tell us when the time is right.'

Medi-witch Potter is avoiding me like the plague right now, apparently. I went too far in my assumption that his affection had lasted the years between us. I never was that good at reading the signals, but it changes nothing anyway. I will go back to the life I had and be no worse for it. I had no expectations, but I had thought there was a look in his eye. I was mistaken, and I made fool of myself in the process. All the better that he makes himself scarce when I'm around.

'Daddy, will you read to me again?'

Happy moves across the bed to make space, and I indulge myself by sitting beside her. She rests against me where she can see the words as I speak, and I feel her small hand worm its way into mine.

'Which chapter today?' I already know the answer, but I live in hope.

'The Godric Gryffindor one,' she says with excitement.

'Again? Not Salazar today?' I'm teasing her, a familiar game. She giggles and squeezes my hand with hers.

'Daddy! Stop it,' she says, still laughing. I look down at her smiling face and feel gladness and love and all that comes with parenthood.

It's so good to have her back.

Hermione

I'm surprised to find myself here again so soon, but Harry deserves the truth. If I wait for Severus to tell him, Harry will spend the rest of his life in the dark, and if there is any chance for them, I have to do this. I really just want them both to be happy.

It's raining hard here, but when I Apparated the sun was shining. It's too Muggle-heavy to cast a charm, and with no umbrella I can feel my hair turning to frizz, and water is running down the back of my shirt. I knock on the door and try to find some shelter under the narrow overhang of cornicing and gutters.

'Hermione! No one called me from the hospital, is something wrong with Harriet?' The genuine concern on his face makes my heart melt.

'Happy's doing just fine, Harry. I just wanted to talk to you.' I smile as relief washes over him.

'You're getting soaked. Come on in.'

I walk past him and feel the warmth and gentle pressure of a Drying Charm. My heart sinks and I know it was done out of kindness, but Drying Charms play havoc with my hair.

'Thanks.'

'Come through, I just made a pot of coffee.'

I follow Harry into the sitting room and I'm momentarily stunned. The house is bigger than it looks. The room is large with a high ceiling and deep bay window, the walls painted a soft blue. There is a large, cream sofa and a blue upholstered chair opposite the fireplace and a television sits in the corner. On the large, oak coffee table sits a tray, complete with coffee pot and biscuits.

'Help yourself, I'll just go and grab another mug.'

I sit and pour myself coffee. Taking a sip, I'm not surprised to find that it's the best I've ever had. Harry seems to have impeccable taste.

'It's good, isn't it? I buy it from Bewley's. It's one of the perks of living in Dublin. That, and the fact no one really knows me.' He walks over and pours himself some of the delicious, dark liquid before taking a seat in the chair.

I'm suddenly unsure where to begin. He's settled here, so it seems, and I realise I know nothing of his life now, beyond St Mungo's. But I remember my first visit, and how upset he was.

'Harry, I came to talk to you about Severus.'

He pauses in mid sip, but tries to hide it swiftly. 'What about him? He's alright, isn't he?'

'He's over the moon about Happy. We'll never be able to thank you enough, you know,' I say sincerely.

'Just doing my job,' he says with a grin, but I know he's as pleased with the outcome as we are.

'He loved you, Harry.' There. I said it, and it can't be unsaid.

'Is that right? Not what he told me.' He frowns and drinks more deeply. 'Not that it matters now. He has you and Harriet, remember?'

'We have a daughter together, but that's all it is. Severus and I have never been a couple.'

'What?' He blinks at me in confusion and I wonder if I should start at the beginning.

'Severus is gay, Harry. And so am I.'

He laughs, disbelieving. 'Nice try, Hermione. You don't have to do this, really.'

'Yes, I do! You have to understand, Severus was trying to be noble by pushing you away. He didn't want you to throw your life away in the dungeons with someone old enough to be your father!'

I have to convince him somehow. Short of letting him use Legilimency, I'm running out of ideas, and I can't go that far. There are some things that are not mine to share, after all.

Harry is staring at me, his face pale and eyes bright. I don't know what else to say to him.

'He said that,' he whispers softly. 'The day that I left, that's what he said to me.'

'He didn't tell you everything, Harry. He was so scared you would leave him, and that you would bore of him. He doesn't have a good track record where relationships are concerned, and he couldn't bear being hurt again. That's why he let you go.'

'He doesn't know me,' he says, and I hear the hint of desperation in his voice.

'I know, Harry. I told him you would never let him down. But he wouldn't listen to me.'

He shakes his head and laughs again, this time incredulous. 'So at what point did you end up in bed with him Hermione? Did you take pity on poor, broken-hearted Severus?'

'Severus and I never slept together, Harry. We both wanted a child, and it was unlikely to happen the conventional way. I was with Rosmerta then...'

'You? With Rosmerta? You're winding me up!'

I grin at the look on his face. 'Oh yes. There were perks to working at the Three Broomsticks that I didn't share with you, Harry.'

He shakes his head and laughs. 'So, how the hell did Harriet happen?'

'Not in the usual way. But that's for Severus to tell you.'

'I doubt I'll be having an in depth conversation with him any time soon, Hermione.' I hear the sigh and feel as frustrated with Harry as I did with Severus all those years ago.

'Well if you wait for him to make the first move, I'd have to agree with you. But he still loves you, I'm sure of that. It's up to you, Harry. But he would never have removed the Vow if he wasn't hoping for something.'

'I wanted to ask you about that. Why an Unbreakable Vow?'

'We agreed that no one should know the truth about Happy. We wanted to protect her, so convincing the world we were a normal couple was the best way to do that. We didn't mean to hurt you.'

There is nothing more to say, and we sit in silence as the minutes tick past. The coffee goes cold, and as I leave, Harry is still nursing his mug between tightly-clasped hands.

Where Severus Accepts An Invitation.

Chapter 10 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

'If you press me to say why I loved him, I can say no more than because he was he, and I was I.'

~ Michel de Montaigne ~

Harry

It's been two weeks since Hermione's visit, and it's all I've been able to think about.

I took the coward's way out and took a few weeks off until I could be sure Harriet was well and back at home with her parents. Separating my feelings for Severus from my professional duties was becoming impossible.

I'm desperate to see him, to have his dark eyes glance in my direction and have my existence acknowledged. Actually, I want to do more than see him, but I won't get my hopes up. The trouble is, ever since Hermione left I've been doing just that. I choose to believe her when she said he loved me and possibly still does, because hope has always been my Achilles Heel. My imagination has Severus doing all sorts of things that I haven't thought about in years, and yet I thought I was over him.

So, I need to make the first move. I know Hermione was right on that score. I just don't know that I could bear to be rejected by him again. But then, he held my hand, didn't he? He touched me, and spoke my name, and his eyes looked into mine for longer than they needed to. I wasn't imagining all of that, but I've been staring at this sheet of parchment for over an hour now and I still have no idea what to say.

Time and time again I wonder why I'm putting myself through this agony. Then my thoughts go back to Hogwarts, and those precious hours when we were alone together. Sometimes we would talk, and at other times there was comfortable quietness while he marked papers and I would read. That all changed after the kiss. He changed the wards so I couldn't just walk into his quarters and there were no more opportunities to take it further. But I didn't imagine him kissing me back, or the delicious sounds his made when my tongue found his.

This is ridiculous. He can't ignore me if I'm right in front of him, can he?

Severus

We rarely get visitors. If someone knocks on the front door, it's usually a Muggle doing a survey or canvassing for votes, and they never stay long or call back another day. I give them my Professor Snape glare and they scarper. I find it amusing. So I'm ready with my usual glare, but not ready when I open the door to find Harry Potter standing on the doorstep.

He doesn't give me chance to speak but waves a paper bag at me and says something about a gift for Happy. Before I can respond and tell him to bugger off, Happy has heard his voice and my heart sinks.

'Uncle Harry!' She pushes her slim frame past my legs, and I feel jealousy consume me as she throws her arms around his waist and he laughs, hugging her back gently.

'You look much better, Harriet,' he says, his green eyes sparkling. His smile is so wide; he's flashing his perfect teeth.

'I am very well, thank you,' she replies, and I'm absurdly proud of her politeness.

We stand at the threshold, and there is an awkward moment when Happy looks from him to me and we're both numbly looking at each other and not her. I realise, belatedly, that she is holding his hand tightly. I should have guessed what was coming.

'Daddy, can Uncle Harry come in? I want him to see my room, and we could have tea?'

'You are meant to be studying,' I say, but I know I've already lost this battle. Her face is alight with excitement because we so rarely have guests, and here is the most special of all visitors. I can deny her nothing. I wouldn't crush her spirit, not now, not ever.

'I don't want to intrude,' he says, but I see his face fall in disappointment. Despite my resolve, I don't want to crush him, either. I want him to stay.

'Perhaps you should take a break, Happy. I don't want you to work too hard so soon after your illness. I'll make some tea.'

I turn away before I can change my mind, but as the door closes and I hear Happy chatting away behind me, I feel acutely aware that Harry is in my home. I walk immediately to the kitchen and busy myself with making tea. The blue ceramic tea pot was a Christmas gift from Happy because she knows how much I love tea. The matching mugs came the month after, for my birthday. They have sat on the shelf, unused but much loved, until today. I don't want to look too closely at why I'm breaking out the best china, or why my stomach is turning over.

Overhead, I can hear footfalls as Happy and Harry walk across her bedroom floor. I listen closely, and now I can hear Happy's girlish giggles, followed by deeper laughter, and then more footsteps as they leave the room and make their way downstairs.

I pull out a pack of chocolate biscuits, just so that I'm occupied when they come into the room. I'm aware at how ridiculous it is to feel like this in my own home, but I was unprepared for him to be here.

'Daddy, look what Uncle Harry brought for me,' she says brightly. She is holding out a book with a green cover, heavily decorated and embossed in Celtic knot work. I turn the pages, and my eyes are dazzled by the colourful illustrations. It is beautiful.

'This is a lovely gift. I hope you said thank you?'

'Of course she did, Severus.' I hear the hidden challenge and meet it by looking directly at him. He smiles, and I can't help but smile back.

'She was raised to be polite,' I reply.

'She probably had no choice, with you and Hermione as her parents.'

'Precisely.' I know he is teasing, but he does have a point.

'Is the tea ready, Daddy?' Happy pulls my sleeve to get my attention.

'It is. Harry, please, take a seat.'

I see the grin he tries to hide as he sits, and feel a glimmer of something. I pour the tea and hand a cup to him, and as our fingers brush against each other, our eyes meet.

It is a long time since I have felt so certain about a course of events being out of my control, but I'll go with it for now. We drink our tea, and Happy amuses and distracts us with her chatter between biscuits. Harry has a natural way with him, and the conversation runs smoothly for a while.

'Can I ask you both a question?' he says, his voice light and a little amused.

'Go on.' I pour more tea and stand to refill the pot from the kettle bubbling softly on the gas.

'Why do you call Harriet 'Happy'? It's a lovely nickname, but Harriet is such a pretty name.'

'It's because I couldn't say my name when I was little. I used to get... Daddy, what did I get?'

I sigh deeply. I knew this would come up sooner or later. Later would have been better.

'Tongue tied. You used to get tongue tied, sweetheart.' I take a little longer with the hot water so that I can keep my back to them.

'That's it!' She laughs. 'I couldn't say Harriet, and it always came out as Harry. But that was a boys' name like yours, so Mummy and Daddy changed it to Happy.'

'I see.' The words fall heavily from his mouth, and I know that he sees it all far too clearly.

I hear Happy yawn noisily and glance at the clock. 'You should go for your sleep, I think. Say thank you to Harry for visiting.'

'Thank you, Uncle Harry. You will come again, soon, won't you?'

'If I can, I will.' I turn to see Happy kiss him on his cheek, and he reaches up to touch the space where her lips rested as she walks from the room.

'She likes you,' I say quickly. I want to keep the focus on her for as long as I can.

'She's a lovely child,' he responds, passing his cup for a refill.

We sip our tea in silence, and the atmosphere becomes thicker with the things we don't say. I know he won't stay quiet for long. He never could. I wait, and he doesn't let me down.

'Hermione told me that you and she... that you're not a couple.'

'No. We never have been.' I'm not making this easy, for either of us.

'Come to dinner, tomorrow night. Let's talk, Severus. Properly.'

I can tell he's holding his breath, but I continue to stare down at my caramel coloured tea, swirling the dregs in thought.

'Please,' he whispers.

I can't help but look up now, hearing the twinge of desperation and hope in that one, simple word. It was the only thing that would have broken me, and he did it without knowing.

'Very well.' My mouth moves before I have time to think any further. His smile makes my acquiescence worthwhile.

Where The World Spins

Chapter 11 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

'I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.'

~ Daphne Rae ~

Severus

This has to be the most foolish thing I have ever done.

When I say this to Hermione, she laughs and reminds me that I had once chosen to take the Dark Mark, which sort of puts things in perspective. I remain quiet while she straightens my collar and brushes imaginary Kneazle-hair from my jacket.

'You look really handsome,' she says, overly-brightly in my opinion.

'This from a confirmed lesbian. I'm heartened.'

I turn to check myself in the mirror. I last wore this suit for Happy's naming ceremony, charcoal grey to differentiate from my teaching persona. I'm wearing it now for similar reasons, because although I have moved on, the age gap between Harry and me feels immense. I choose not to say this out loud, because I know Hermione will point out that the same gap exists between us, too. It's not the same.

'Harry will fall at your feet,' she says softly.

'You say that as if it's a good thing.' I run my fingers through the lengths of my hair and toy with the idea of changing my mind yet again.

'Well, you wouldn't be going if you didn't want something to happen, Severus.' She takes my hand and turns me to face her earnest eyes. 'It's going to be fine. He still loves you, so relax and enjoy it.'

'Romantic clap-trap,' I mutter, but I cannot help the surge of excitement at her words.

'Nonsense. You deserve to be happy, and Harry does, too.'

'You have convinced yourself he will find his happiness with me, Hermione. You could both be disappointed.'

'Do you love him, Severus?'

This is the question, isn't it? The one I have avoided, the one we've tip-toed around, and the one I didn't allow myself to think about. I pushed him away instead, not allowing myself to have even a glimmer of a chance to be fulfilled and happy in such a way. It had been so often denied to me in the past, I couldn't believe it was truly mine for the taking then. And now...

'Yes,' I whisper finally.

'Then you won't allow yourself to disappoint him, will you?' She kisses my cheek lightly, and I see the unshed tears in her eyes.

'You are sure you want this? It will change things.' I look at her closely. She was never able to hide her inner-most feelings from me. She smiles, and then laughs.

'Severus, you are ridiculous. I want you to be happy. We will all be fine, whatever happens. Now go. You've kept him waiting long enough.'

I hug her on impulse. She has given me more than I would ever have hoped, and now, she is giving me a second chance. I owe her everything.

Harry

In my mind, I've played scenes like this over and over again. Severus, in my house. Sitting at my table, or with his long legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles, his glasses perched on his nose as he reads the *Daily Prophet* in front of the fire. Or better still, asleep in my bed, his hair mussed from sleep, his long, tapered feet poking out from under the duvet.

The reality is far more intense than my imaginings. The house feels smaller with him in it, because no matter where I go, his presence fills every empty space. He seems tall, even though I know I'm not much shorter than him now. I take his overcoat and hang it on the hook by the kitchen door and try to think of something intelligent to say. It's hard to get the words out when I look at him. I've never seen him look so bloody edible in my life, and my mouth goes dry. He's made an effort, that's for sure. The suit is elegant, the colour forgiving, but it's the open collar of his shirt that grabs my attention, the flash of pale, smooth skin at his throat just slightly coloured by the scar of Nagini's bite. I feel an urge to lick the exposed flesh, and my pulse starts to race even faster.

He's smirking at me, and suddenly I'm back in the hallway, reality intruding on my daydream like a cold shower.

'I'm being an idiot, sorry. Drink?' I walk into the kitchen and pour two large measures of Jameson's.

'What is this?' he says, sniffing the amber liquid before risking a taste.

'Irish Whisky. Not as hot as Firewhisky, but smooth, warm and just as delicious. Try it,' I say, trying to stay chirpy and ignoring the fact that all I want to do is kiss him.

He tastes a long sip, and I'm jealous that he's touching the glass with his smooth, warm lips and not me. He darts the tip of his tongue out briefly, to catch the remnants of taste that remain, and I bite back the involuntary moan in my throat.

'Not bad,' he says. 'You have good taste.'

'I like to think so.' I look into his eyes, and he as he smiles I feel myself relax.

He's here. That means something. I feel suddenly brave and take a step towards him. I had toyed with the idea of letting Severus make the first move, but sod that. He looks far too delicious to avoid any longer. He doesn't move, but I see a flash of unease cross his face briefly. I remember Hermione's words clearly: he couldn't bear being hurt again.

'I promise I will never purposely hurt you, Severus,' I say firmly. He closes his eyes so I can't read him, something I remember from before.

'Don't,' I say. 'You have to look at me, or you won't believe me.'

His eyes spring open, wary but bright, and I lift my hand, threading my fingers through his inky black hair and cupping his face with my hand. He sighs.

'Harry...' His voice is low, almost a whisper, and as our eyes meet I can't help but smile as he puts his glass on the table without looking.

We move together like we have been doing this for years, our mouths slightly open as our lips meet. He tastes so much better than my memory told me, his tongue probing gently as he cups my face with his warm, slim hands. God... I have wanted this for so long. I can feel his firm body pressing closer to mine, and my cock twitches in appreciation. I slide my palm inside his jacket, and hear his soft groan as my fingertips brush his erect nipple through the fabric of his shirt. He deepens the kiss and pushes me back against the wall, and suddenly I realise he has taken control. Oh, God... His hands are sliding down my body, and he's cupping my arse now, flexing his fingers firmly as his tongue thrusts into my mouth. Delicious, firm, perfect... Oh, so perfect.

I want to stay right here for the rest of my life, but I can hear a buzzing sound beyond our moans *Fuck it*. I pull away reluctantly, lips hot and tingling. His eyes burn into me as he rests his forehead against mine.

'Much as I would love to carry on, that was the cooker timer. Let's eat.' I say quietly.

'That's what I was hoping for,' he says. I feel the laughter before it breaks, and he chuckles deeply, pulling me to him warmly. I inhale him.

It feels like home.

Where Foundations Are Laid.

Chapter 12 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

A/N: We are coming to the end of this little story and I have a couple of people to thank.

Firstly, a huge hug to my Beta, ARo, who isn't a Snarry fan but put up with my little detour with positive encouragement.

Secondly I would like to give an extra-special Thankyou to my reviewer, Orlando Switch, who gave me so much help in putting this chapter together. I couldn't have done it without you.

'The sexual embrace can only be compared with music and with prayer.'

~ Marcus Aurelius ~

Severus

I recognised the look in his eye the moment he opened the door, and I half expected him to leap at me before I had even taken my coat off. Maturity has taught him patience, but the tension was palpable. Thank god he finally acted on his impulse, because I needed to know. I know now.

His body is broader than I remember; muscular and firm. I could feel his erection starting through the fabric of his jeans, and it seems we have been blessed in that department too. I can tell he's had experience since the last time. I'm surprised that it doesn't make me jealous, but then, I haven't been totally celibate in the past seven years. I was tempted to go further, to give myself a fighting chance. His younger body will be ready for round two before I've even caught my breath.

'More wine, Severus?' He waves the bottle in my direction.

'No, thank you. I may be a wizard, but alcohol could still affect my performance,' I say quietly. He meets my eyes with amusement.

'You're very sure of yourself,' he says, but I can see the spark in his eye.

'You are many things, Harry, but I would guess that a prick tease isn't one of them.' I smirk.

'Hermione has always said I'm rubbish at hiding things,' he murmurs.

I reach across the table and take his hand, squeezing firmly. 'Where I'm concerned that's probably wise.'

He smiles and threads his fingers through mine briefly. 'You know I want you, Severus. I always have.'

I don't know what to say to that. I'm not one for declarations of love and passion, although I'm sure my desire for him matches his for me. I untangle my hand from his gently and drain my wine glass. I'm grateful when he changes the subject.

'Tell me about Harriet, Severus. I know that you and Hermione didn't conceive her naturally.'

I look at him blankly. This is not a line of questioning I expected, but I know he will find out sooner or later. Perhaps now is better, before it gets complicated. He will have time to change his mind about me.

'What exactly is it that you want to know?' The mechanics are simple to explain, after all. The rest is... delicate.

'Everything.'

Of course.

'Hermione and I were good friends. I knew of her relationship with Rosmerta, and I had shared some of my own experiences. We used to sit and talk, but of course you know that. After you left I was angry with her for her interfering, and we didn't speak for a while. I realised then how lonely my life really was.'

'I told you that myself,' he says smugly.

'Do you want to hear this or just tell me 'I told you so'? ' I can't help but smile as he rolls his eyes at me.

'Sorry. Go on,' he says, laughing.

'I had never felt the need for children. I didn't think I would survive the war, so daydreaming about a non-existent future seemed pointless. But I realised after you left how much I wanted a family. I said this to Hermione one night, after far too much Firewhisky.'

'And Hermione offered her services?'

'Not like that, no. She wanted a child, but she also wanted a career. We came to an arrangement that suited us both.'

'Without the sex?'

'Could you have sex with a woman, Harry?' He looks thrown by my question, which is unfair of me. I already know about him and the once-nubile Miss Weasley.

'Not anymore. I did a couple of times, with Ginny Weasley. It wasn't right.'

'Precisely. It would have been physically impossible for me to get Hermione pregnant the natural way, and we both wanted the child to be born for the right reasons.'

'The right reasons? Surely being parents was reason enough?'

'Not for us. Hermione and I agreed that the child should be conceived through love. You know how powerful that can be. It is the magic that protected you against the Dark Lord, after all.'

'Love?'

'You have to understand, Harry. I pushed you away to protect myself. It wasn't because I didn't care,' I whisper.

'What did you do, Severus?'

'Hermione is a clever witch, Harry. She is also a hoarder. The night you left the Dursley's with Mad-Eye and the rest of the Order, she kept what was left of the Polyjuice Potion and put it in stasis. I think it was for emergencies during the war, but it was never needed, so she just kept it.'

'My Polyjuice Potion?'

'We planned it for the summer holiday, when the school was virtually empty. Hermione used the Polyjuice Potion and came to my quarters.'

'You slept with her disguised as me?' His face is white, the shock immense. I want to laugh.

'Don't be ridiculous, how would that result in pregnancy? We kissed, once. Then she stayed with me while I prepared myself, and we used an extraction spell. She had taken a fertility potion to ensure conception, and she inserted my sperm in the bathroom of my quarters. We only had to wait a day to confirm the pregnancy.'

'So why the Polyjuice potion? You could have done all of that without it!' He is indignant now; the use of his likeness against his knowledge has irked him.

'You didn't listen, Harry. The child had to be conceived through love. I don't love Hermione, and she doesn't love me, but there is one person we both love.'

I watch his face closely as the penny drops. I'm surprised when tears fill his eyes and then fall undashed down his cheeks.

'You named her after me...' he chokes.

I say nothing. Finally telling him the truth has brought us to this, the point of no return, but I hadn't considered this reaction. He pushes back his chair suddenly and walks out of the room, but I can't let him go like this.

'Harry, wait!' I go after him, up the stairs. I don't know my way around, and he could have slammed any one of the five doors off the landing. 'Harry...'

I take out my wand and use a Point Me spell, and I don't bother to knock. His bedroom is in darkness, but I can sense him.

'You said you kissed her,' he says. His voice comes from the far side of the room, and I move quietly towards him.

'Once, yes.'

'Why not go all the way? You could have had your fun and be done with it.'

My eyes grow accustomed to the dim light, and I see him by the darkened window. His arms are wrapped tightly around his chest, but if he believes this will keep me away, he's wrong. I stand in front of him and remove his glasses. He doesn't look at me, so I tip his face upwards and kiss him firmly. His lips are full and warm, and I long to taste him. I feel him sag against me and I know he's given in. It would be so easy to have him now, when he's vulnerable, but I want us evenly matched. Although my instinct is to kiss him harder, I pull away and run my hands through his unruly hair, holding him still so that I have his full attention.

'I could have had my fun with Hermione, you're right. I could have taken out your cock and wrapped my hands around it, and stroked it until she was begging me to let her come.' He groans, and I push my thigh against his erection to emphasise my point.

'I could have gone on my knees and taken your cock in my mouth to suck it dry.' I kiss him again, my own erection now straining against my fly. I'm taunting myself with my own imagination, but I have to make my point.

'I didn't do any of that.' He kisses me now, and his hands push my jacket to the floor as he walks us towards the bed. He takes hold of the front of my shirt and shakes me, hard.

'Why not?' He's demanding, and I catch a glimpse of the glitter in his eyes.

'Because she wasn't you.'

This time, we both move as one, and I battle with his tongue as my hands pull his t-shirt from the waistband of his jeans. I touch his skin lightly, letting my knuckles graze his nipples as I bring the fabric over his head. He gasps with pleasure and reaches for my shirt, pulling impatiently at the buttons. I still his hands with a grin and pull the shirt off. It hasn't hit the floor before I feel his mouth on my chest, and his warm, wet lips move firmly over my nipple. He sucks and licks with confident strokes, and I don't

stop the groan leaving my throat as I run my nails over his firm shoulders. He moves his lips and the cold air hits my wet flesh, sending shivers down my spine and hitting my groin. I can't wait any longer.

'Jeans off.' I hiss, unfastening my fly quickly. My cock springs from its prison, seeking him out and bobbing with anticipation.

In moments, we are naked. I stand before him, grateful for the darkness because I know he is looking at me as I am looking at him. I can faintly see the definition of his muscles, the smattering of dark chest hair, and I follow the trail quickly down. His cock is straight and thick, surrounded by tight, dark curls, and the sight of it makes me harder than I've been in years. I already know how good he will taste in my mouth, but before I get there, he steps closer and pushes me back onto the bed. Before I can stop him, he's on his knees, kneeling between my thighs and nuzzling my cock with his nose. His hand is on my shaft, and his hot, wet mouth covers me, the perfect combination of wanking and sucking, and I lie back, unable to stop the waves of pleasure washing over me. Suddenly, he releases me, and I feel his firm flesh and hot mouth as he crawls up my body urgently. He takes my cock in his hand, and I reach for his, firm, thick and eager. We press our bodies together as he kisses me fiercely, his tongue thrusting as we rub our slick cocks against each other. He feels so hard, and I know neither of us will last much longer.

'Coming!' He cries into my mouth. *Fuck, so am I.* We rut against each other, and I feel the tip of his cock against my own as his comes with such force his orgasm hits my chest. I kiss him, our tongues colliding, and can't stop the jerk of my body as my orgasm finally explodes and mingles with his. I feel my come spurting over and over again and rub our still hard cocks together to prolong the sensation. Harry gasps against me, and I know he loves it as much as I do.

I lay back on the bed, panting and covered in sweat from the exertion, and stroke Harry's hair softly.

'Fuck...' he whispers against my throat.

'Indeed.'

Where We Move Forward In Time.

Chapter 13 of 13

Harry is confronted by things he would rather ignore.

'Is life not a hundred times too short for us to stifle ourselves?'

~ Friedrich Nietzsche ~

Hermione

There was a time when I really believed we would never get to this point. Severus was so stubborn, and even now I think he holds a little bit of himself back, just in case Harry does decide to leave him. I know that he won't, because he bought him a bonding ring. This is why Harriet and I are on our way to visit Ron and Luna for the evening. Harry has gone to quite a bit of effort for tonight, and part of me just wishes I could see the look on Severus' face. At least I'll get to say 'I told you so'.

I'm glad my final week at work is over. This baby seems more troublesome than Harriet ever was, keeping me awake at night with heartburn, leg cramps and awkward kicks when I least expect it. I wouldn't be surprised if he's Harry's, but that's something we will never know, unless the physical similarities are really obvious.

'I don't know why we had to come by train.' Harriet is pouting as she stares out of the window. I specifically chose an empty carriage, because she does have a lot to learn about being discreet when Muggles are present.

'You do know why. Apparating isn't good for the baby, and using the Floo makes me sick. You should get used to it. This time next week you'll be on the Hogwarts Express.'

She doesn't say anything, but in her reflection I can see her bite her lip. Her long, dark hair falls forward to hide her face, and she scuffs her trainers nervously. I take her hand and squeeze it.

'You'll have a great time, you know. Hagrid will meet you from the train, and Minerva will be at Hogwarts when you get there.'

'That's not the point. I'm a Snape, remember.'

'Yes, you are. You should be very proud of that, Harriet.'

'I am, Mum. I love Dad, but not everyone does.'

I don't know what to say. I know she's right, and she could very well be in for a hard time at school. Even if she didn't have Severus' name, there would be no hiding her heritage. She has grown tall and gangly like her father at the same age, and her colouring gives her away immediately.

'You promise I can come home when the baby is born?'

'Of course. I've already arranged it with Minerva.' I know Harriet wants something to look forward to, and her new brother is due in six weeks time. She would never forgive us if she wasn't part of it.

'And everyone is coming to the station?' She peers at me through the curtain of hair and I see the spark of hope in her eyes. She looks older than her eleven years, but she's still my baby.

'Your dad and Uncle Harry have it all planned, and of course I'll be there, too.'

'People might think it's weird, three of you coming,' she mumbles quietly.

I've been waiting for this. We have an unconventional arrangement compared to Harriet's peers, most of whom will have two parents who are married. When she was younger, she just accepted it for what it is, but now the questions have started.

'One of us could stay behind, if you want,' I say quietly. 'Who would you rather was there?'

She says nothing for a while, but I can tell she's battling with her conscience. 'I want all of you to be there.'

'Okay then. We'll all come.'

'I won't know what to say to people if they ask.'

'You could just tell them the truth, Harriet. I know it's not the same as everyone else, but it is special, isn't it?'

She smiles now. I know she loves having her Uncle Harry in the house, and she gets the best of all of us.

'Will Miranda come, too?'

'Do you want her to?'

'Well, it makes sense. Uncle Harry and dad are together, and you're with Miranda. She's still part of the family, even if she doesn't live in our house.'

'I'll ask her. I think she would love to come.'

Harriet shifts in her seat and rests her head on my shoulder. I put my arm around her and pull her close, and try not to think about having to say goodbye.

Harry

I can't believe I'm doing this. After five years together, Severus still keeps me guessing at times, and he might be happy with the way things are but I'm not. We have a baby on the way, and if that's not commitment I don't know what it, but I still think we need something more.

Not for the first time I wonder what will happen if he refuses me. I won't walk away, because I know that's not what he wants. He hasn't told me outright, but I know he gets scared that everything will fall apart. He becomes distant then, and I have to work hard to get him back to a place where we're equal. I wish he would just relax and enjoy it. This seems to be the only way I can convince him that I'm not going anywhere.

He's not one for sentimentality, but I've cooked the same meal we had in Dublin. I wonder if he'll notice. I light the candles with my wand and turn out the lights. The dining room at Spinner's End is small, and the candle-light casts a cosy glow. It's not as modern as the Dublin house, and most of the furniture is mis-matched and old, but I've grown to love it. It's very Severus. Appearances mean nothing to him, he prefers usefulness and function. This is about as romantic as we get, I suppose, candlelit dinners. It's ironic that I am the one trying to convince Severus of my feelings. I tell him I love him regularly. He's told me he loves me twice. Once, that first night in Dublin and that was in a round about way, and then another time three years ago, when he came home pissed from the pub, after our one and only fight. It was his fault, of course. But I can forgive him everything. That's what this is all about, really.

I knock on the door of the lab and wait for his rumbling tones to bid me enter. I open the door slowly and peek around. He's washing his hands, the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up tightly to his bony elbows, the veins of his forearms raised and blue as he flexes his muscles around soap and water. His slim fingers push the suds below his fingernails and I'm in awe of how scrupulously clean he is, always.

'Are you hungry?' I say quietly. Speaking loudly in the lab seems uncouth. He is always silent and diligent, and there is a church-like quality to the space, with the work bench the altar of his work.

He rinses his hands and takes a clean towel to dry them as he turns to me with his eyebrow arched.

'For food?' he says, teasing.

'Well, food first,' I reply with a grin. We don't often have the house to ourselves, but when we do, we make the most of the rug in front of the fire, and I know tonight will be no different. Well, perhaps a bit different.

'I'll be five minutes.' He walks over and kisses me, and I hold on to the wood of the door as my legs turn to jelly. He still does things to me, even after all this time. He always will. I know this with certainty.

I go back upstairs and pour two generous glasses of red wine, and immediately take a large gulp from my glass. I'm veering between nervous excitement and bravery, and between getting down on one knee or just putting the ring box on his plate and saying nothing. I decide on the latter, it being the least risky, and pull the warm, green velvet box from my trouser pocket, where it's been for the last two days. I sit it neatly in the centre of the green and white china plate. This dinner set once belonged to Severus' mother, and I've unearthed it from the back of the china cabinet specifically.

The oven timer buzzes merrily, and I check the beef casserole one last time before turning down the heat. I hear light footfalls on the tiled floor behind me, and as I turn, I see he's holding the box in his hand. His face is a pale mask, and I really can't tell what he's thinking.

'What is this?' he whispers.

'If you open the box, you'll see for yourself.'

'Harry...' His tone is wary with a hint of warning. Mentally, I make a plan to Floo over to Ron's if this goes tits up.

'Open it, Severus. It's not going to bite.'

He snorts at this. The last thing that bit him didn't survive the fight, and I've teased him a number of times about it. The bite mark is my favourite of all his scars, and I love the feel of it beneath my tongue, flat in some parts, wrinkled and rough in others. He opens the box but holds my gaze as he does so, then glances down quickly. I hear his sharp intake of breath, and watch as he lifts the heavy silver ring from its cosy nest. It's an antique ring, old and battered by the passage of time and its previous owners. The edges are smoothly worn, but it's simple and solid. Like him. Like us.

'Do you like it?' I already know that he does. His face has softened and the light in his eyes has gone from wary to bright. He won't cry, but I think he wants to.

'It's a Bonding ring,' he says softly.

'It is if you accept it, Severus.'

'You want a ceremony?' he asks.

'No need for all of that, is there? We can do it now, right here. All you need to do is say yes, Severus. I want to be yours forever. That's all there is to it, really.'

I walk up to him and take the ring from his tentative fingers, lifting his hand purposefully.

'Well?' I smile at him, because I already know he's mine, as I am his.

'Yes, of course.' He smiles as I slip the ring onto his finger. It glows bright blue as it shrinks to fit, and I withdraw my wand, tapping it lightly as I murmur the simple bonding spell from one of Hermione's books.

A replica ring appears on my own finger, and Severus laughs finally, expelling the breath he's been holding. He threads his fingers through mine and we kiss briefly. Later, there will be time for words and emotions if necessary.

Right now, this is all we need.

The End

A/N: I want to thank everyone for sticking with this story, even though it's not my usual fare. I've had a lot of fun writing it so I hope you enjoyed reading it, too.

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