

## Ever After Connecting the Dots

Ever After

Chapter 1 - Connecting the dots

It's all easy in hindsight.

The summer after our fifth year, Harry took a tutor, got closer to Remus and finally got a girlfriend who wasn't a hosepipe. Later that summer, Harry, accompanied by said girlfriend nearly destroyed several subterranean levels of Gringotts when the Death Eaters imported a clutch of Dementors, a record-breaking Basilisk and a Hydra into the lower levels of the Goblin bank. Oh, and that was the summer when Ron got off the fence and asked (well in advance) if I would be his date at the All Hallows Eve ball.

During sixth year Harry and Ginny (she was the girlfriend mentioned above) sorted out the dynamics of their relationship, given the not-quite-standard Dragon magic inside both their heads. Ron became the Gryffindor Quidditch captain, and I began an independent study focused on the detection and destruction of cursed objects. The year was capped by an invasion of Hogwarts and the death of Albus Dumbledore.

Seventh year was like sixth year, with more of the same – I was Head Girl, Ron was Head Boy and Gryffindor Quidditch Captain. When not executing our official duties, we were leading guerrilla actions against the Death Eaters, and quietly collecting the cursed objects I'd studied in the prior year. That year was capped by the great ambush on the Hogwarts Express. Harry had briefed us all on our respective roles, but preparation or no preparation; my first exposure to the Cruciatus curse was enough to last for the rest of my life.

The event of that summer's holiday was a quiet wedding for the Potters at St Simon's, followed by a reception on the grounds of the Burrow. Thereafter Harry began his first stint teaching at Hogwarts while his lovely bride finished her last year as a day student, living in Hogsmeade. I began a double Mastery in Charms and Transfiguration and Ron split his time between helping the twins open a new store and the arduous process of applying to the Auror training programme. Ron was admitted to the program just before Christmas – by New Years we were engaged, and before February was over, I was Missus Weasley. Ginny finished Hogwarts and then enrolled in the Healer programme at St. Mungo's. Harry put Ginny through the programme, and then after her residency, bought a farm in Wales where he more or less retired from public life, starting over again as a "gentleman farmer." The notion of Harry as a retired and retiring gentleman was a hoot to those who knew him.

What can I say about the next twenty years of my life? I was a wife, then I was a mum with kids at home, then I was a mum with kids at Hogwarts. Ron made it through the Auror training programme with flying colours and then began a rather successful career. Before Hugo and Rose came along, I was working at the Ministry – I worked there until the day before Hugo was born. After that, I collaborated with various witches and wizards on a number of one-off projects – things that I could work on while raising the tots. Some of them were projects I engaged simply because they were interesting, others were for hire. Neville came to me with several interesting problems in forcing hybrid magical plants to breed true. He ended up setting up two limited liability companies that took the results and applied them to magical and mundane plants. My payment was stock in each of the companies, something that Harry's solicitors arranged – I couldn't be bothered with the details – raising Hugo and Rose occupied too much of my energy to be concerned with financial matters. By the time that Rose was enrolled at Hogwarts, an opening came up on the faculty, and I began teaching Charms in the lower level, and Transfiguration for the upper level.

Life in a boarding school is odd – you have a lot of friends, but some of those friendships evaporate like dew when you leave school, some of those friendships pick up where you left off after years of separation, and a very small number carry on without interruption. Our very first flat was fortified with Auror-grade security on its wards, but Harry, Ginny, Neville and Luna could come and go with impunity – only manners and a healthy desire to avoid embarrassing situations prompted them to knock before opening the door. It's not like we all lived in each other's laps – Ginny took a residency in America which lasted for almost three years and Neville and Luna both were abroad on expeditions searching for rare flora and fauna – sometimes together, sometimes apart. Theirs was an odd relationship, but it worked for them. By law and consanguinity, the Potter children and the Weasley children were cousins, but they might as well have been an extended network of brothers and sisters, spending almost every holiday together once the oldest ones were able to toddle. After a series of flats that we outgrew, Ron and I settled into a house north of London, Harry and Ginny had their farm in Wales, Neville and Luna bought a cottage in Hogsmeade, but between private Floo connections and Apparation, the distance was insignificant; the only thing to consider when popping from one location to another was the weather.

Family life has its seasons and rhythms – by the time I started my third career, teaching at Hogwarts, I had a small flat at the school, which I would take advantage of from time to time. I guess some niggling part of me noticed that Ron and I were drifting apart, but he was doing spectacular work as the Chief Auror, and I was finding myself all over again in the classroom.

Then came the day that Ginny invited me over for tea – the invitation asked that I clear the afternoon, which I thought a bit odd, but we were close enough that I didn't give it a second thought.

## Ever After Tea with Ginny

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Chapter 2 - Tea with Ginny

I suppose I can now fit all of my life neatly into two categories – before “that day” and after. Ginny had scheduled a week in advance for a luncheon date – something that was not all that unusual – we were both busy women. Now that the children were, for the most part, grown and launched, the relationship we’d started back when we were mere slips of girls at Hogwarts continued to set down roots. We could go a month or more without seeing the other and restart a conversation as if we’d been apart for mere minutes. Ginny seemed out of sorts when I arrived for tea, but that wasn’t all that unusual; she’d been out of sorts most of that year, starting sometime shortly after Christmas. When I arrived, the house was tidy and the table already set. I paid no particular attention to the fact that the Floo was deactivated, and a number of charms were activated that would make our conversation difficult, if not impossible to interrupt.

“I’ve got to bring you in on some secrets,” she said, opening the conversation.

*Secrets? I thought – we’ve known each other for decades – what’s not to know?*

“The summer after sixth year at Hogwarts – your sixth year, my fifth,” she said, smiling as she explained. “I spent a lot of that summer with Harry’s old tutor.”

“Abelard,” I replied, dredging the name up from memory. “But I thought you were working with Jasmine.”

“I worked with Jasmine for part of the prior summer – combat stuff, mainly. By the next summer, Jasmine had moved out. No, I spent most of my time with Abelard,” Ginny narrated.

“Working on Occlumency?” I asked.

“Hardly; the dragon magic took care of that nicely. Abelard was a Seer – I was his last pupil – not a proper apprentice, but he taught me what he could in the time he had left. If he’d lived longer, I would have done the whole course, but as it was, he was forcing his body to keep going until he saw Jasmine and then Harry married off,” she said with a knowing smile.

“I never knew,” I said, racking my memory for any clues I might have missed.

“After the war, Harry wanted nothing more than a normal life – no secrets, no conspiracies, no fame. We did what we could to keep my training secret without telling outright lies to friends and family,” she said, suppressing a wince.

“So, what was the lie?” I asked.

“It was misdirection, more than a lie,” Ginny said. “My residency in America?”

“At the Tulane School of Magical Medicine?” I volunteered.

“A year of that time was spent in the residency – most of the remaining time was spent with another Seer – someone who doesn’t want their identity known, otherwise I’d tell it to you.”

“And the balance?” I asked, noting the careful phrasing of the words.

“The balance was spent with M’lau,” she said.

“Harry’s dragon?” I asked, tapping the side of my head.

“The original, not the copy,” she answered.

The number of people who knew about Harry and Ginny’s dragon magic was pretty small – limited, I guess, to the immediate Weasley family and Headmistress McGonagall and the late Headmaster Dumbledore. The Weasleys were incredibly protective of their own – they might mercilessly tease each other at Christmas dinner but next to nothing leaked out – ever. Harry and Ginny almost never spoke of the dragons after our sixth year, and at the moment, I couldn’t remember them ever raising the topic after we left Hogwarts.

“Why the secrecy?” I asked.

Ginny smiled. “You know better than to ask the question – when dark Wizards rise to power, the smart ones co-opt or assassinate the Seers

aligned with the opposition. Grindelwald did it, and Voldemort did it too, in the first war. The real Seers have learned to keep their gift a secret.”

“So what have you done?” I asked.

“This and that, not much, actually,” Ginny replied with a sly smile. “I’ve helped the Ministry a bit from time to time.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Ron’s had some amazing breaks in his career – some of it was due to being a really good Auror, and some of it was due to information from a ‘confidential informant,’” Ginny said, hooking her fingers when she said the last two words.

“Did Ron know?” I asked.

“I don’t think so – he might have had suspicions – he’s really quite sharp you know,” she answered.

“So why tell me now?” I asked.

“Because it’s the only way I can explain this,” Ginny answered, flicking her hand towards a cabinet. None of the doors in the cabinet opened, but a grey stone bowl materialized on the table in front of us.

“A Pensieve,” I said, regretting it the moment the words left my mouth.

“Yes, a Pensieve – it holds a fragment I wanted to show you.”

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I’ve visited my share of Pensieve memories, but this one was different – the colours were off – they had a sepia tone that I’d never seen in a Pensieve memory. The scene was familiar – if it was Ginny’s memory of a vision, then she was approaching her house, the one I was sitting in at the moment, entering the house through the kitchen door and proceeding to the sitting room where we were having tea. The sounds were muffled, but as she approached the sitting room I heard the sounds of a couple being intimate. As the observer rounded the corner I saw myself – more tanned and toned than I was at the moment, engaged in some very vigorous lovemaking with Ginny’s husband - Harry Potter. The Pensieve memory came to an abrupt halt and I was back in the here and now, sitting in the same room.

I was mortified.

“Ginny, I have never,” I began earnestly.

“I know,” she replied serenely. “Yet this is something that I saw a number of times – it’s a very likely future – I’d peg it at having a greater than 90% probability.”

“That Harry and I would have an affair?” I gasped.

“Nothing of the sort, *Mrs. Potter*,” she replied.

My mind raced while Ginny kept silent.

“As you might guess, I was shocked when I had the first vision – I tried to capture the memory in a Pensieve, but I was sick, violently retching up everything I had in me, which made the capture a bit difficult. I captured the next vision – one rather like this one, only from a different angle. I needed to discuss it with someone, but you can imagine my reluctance to talk to Harry about this.”

“Yes,” I replied obviously.

“It was Harry who caught the clue,” Ginny explained.

“Clue?”

“In the vision, Harry was wearing a wedding ring – but it wasn’t the one that I put on his finger,” Ginny said.

Ginny began to talk, the words pouring out of her like an overflowing rain barrel. She explained a number of things that I’d had always known in some way, but we’d never discussed, which now, in hindsight, made perfect sense. Then she tackled the real story, breaking down several times until she got through the recriminations, the confessions, the absolutions and the assurances. In summary, Ginny had slightly more than a year left to live; Ron had a similar amount of time. No, she wasn’t sick; she was in good health, actually, notwithstanding the contextual depression she’d been weathering. Learning that your husband is soon going to become a widower tends to take the bloom off of the rose, don’t you know.

I cycled through the usual stages, trying at first to reckon this like a particularly stout puzzle, but in the end, I accepted it. Before that day, my relationship with Ron had slid into a lazy groove, each of us living our lives in parallel, checking in from time to time to a familiar comfort. After that day, the status quo wasn’t good enough any more.

Ron hadn’t minded – once I got my head around the new reality, our love life was terrific. Ron started coming home on time; even leaving early so we could catch a show, or have dinner with friends.

Ron put his finger on it succinctly: “When you know that you can only put so many things on the list, you dare not put junk on it.”

And so I lived that year with a short list. It was bittersweet when Autumn came – knowing that by this time next year, I'd be a widow; but Ron took more leave from work that year than he'd taken in the prior five years. We made the most of the time. I'd considered taking a Sabbatical year, but Ron sensibly pointed out that I loved teaching almost as much as I loved him; so now I could teach like I was living with a short list.

Spring was the usual sweet and sour combination of rain and crocuses; but I saw both with new eyes. June and July were crowded and hectic, but the first of August came with the realization that summer was almost over.

I had a tingle of regret when I went away on a day trip to Switzerland for an educator's conference, knowing with awful clarity just what the jangling of my bracelet meant when the terrier began to glow with a terrible red light. The charm next to the terrier was a portkey, prepared in advance for the occasion. I wasn't surprised in the least when the portkey opened up into the shock-trauma ward at St. Mungo's. I was surprised, however by the cold glare I received from Harry on her arrival.

"I'm sorry," he said, meeting my eyes for a moment before looking away. "He passed quickly – but not so quick that he didn't have time to remind me to tell you on his behalf that he loved you."

What little light remaining in Harry's face extinguished as he said those words. He bit his lips, nodded to me as to a vague acquaintance, and then left the room.

It was only then that I realized how alone I was in the world.

I'd reached the end of the short list.

## Ever After Running on Empty

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### Chapter 3 - Running on Empty

It was probably a good thing that I was living and teaching at Hogwarts. If I'd had to subsist on my own cooking after Ron's death, I'm fairly certain that I would have starved because in the immediate aftermath I didn't want to do anything, including cook. As it was, I was extremely grateful for the order that Hogwarts imposed – my first class met at 9:00 a.m., five days a week, and my second class met at 2:00 p.m., Monday, Wednesday and Friday. As far as I can remember, I made it to all of my classes, and thanks to very detailed outlines from the prior times I'd taught each class, I had essentially nothing to prepare. I almost never made it to breakfast, skipped lunch more often than not, and would be dragged to dinner by one or another faculty member. I can't really tell you what I did when I wasn't in the classroom – I was in a rather robust fog most of the time, the exceptions being the times when I'd become a wrathful, raging lunatic.

It was the latter condition that earned a visit from Madam Pessary, the matron of the Hogwarts Hospital Wing. I'd chided some student in the hallways and what began as a mild correction ended up as a screaming harangue; it wasn't one of my finest moments as an educator.

Word of this got around, I'm sure of it. After my last class of the day, Madam Pessary was standing nonchalantly in the hallway.

"Do you have a few minutes, Mrs. Weasley?" she asked.

"Am I in trouble?" I asked. An unprovoked vision of me being summarily tossed out through the gates of the school came to mind. Part of me thought that wouldn't be an entirely bad thing.

"Probably not – at least in the sense that I think you mean," she responded quietly. She moved nimbly to a seat across from my desk, taking out a portfolio and a biro. One of the creeping innovations in the Wizarding world since my time as a student is that, aside from a few fossils, no one uses quill pens any more.

She asked me a series of question – which I answered. Part of me tried to think ahead to where these questions were leading, but it was too much effort to do anything other than answer the questions asked.

"Do you want to kill yourself?" she asked with an air of finality.

That question took some thinking.

"No," I replied. "Sometimes, when I think about it, I want to die, but I have no desire to kill myself," I elaborated.

Madam Pessary did some quick sums on her writing pad.

"You score a solid 45 on the Goldberg inventory," she announced.

"Is that good?" I asked.

She smiled and shook her head.

"It means moderate to severe depression."

"Are you going to give me a Cheering Charm?" I asked bitterly.

"No, Mrs. Weasley – you're not sad, you're depressed – there's a difference," she replied firmly.

And so began my involvement with modern Muggle psycho-pharmaceuticals. In a story too tangential to this one, I was evaluated by a mediwitch. She prescribed a course of medicine which was fulfilled at the Muggle chemist shop in Hooper. The bottle of pills sat on my dresser for two days before I relented and took one of the pea-sized pills before breakfast. By lunchtime the fog had lifted as if burned off by a bright summer day.

I wasn't happy – far from it – but I could think again.

Once I could think again, I wondered how Harry was getting along. Part of me felt shame that I'd gone months without thinking of him, having been mired in my own sadness and fog.

Ginny had died the same day that Ron died. Rival gangs had been involved with smuggling – both magical and Muggle contraband. The younger, upstart organization decided to liquidate the competition, which sent some of the survivors into St Mungo's. Ginny had been up to her elbows in a wizard's chest, repairing all sorts of vascular damage, when a member of the rival gang got into St Mungo's, apparently to finish the job he'd begun

that morning. According to the security monitor, Ginny successfully fended off several magical attacks while completing the surgical repair. She failed to notice, however, that the assailant was dressed in the latest fashion in explosive vests, armed with a “deadman” switch. The operating theatre became an inferno when the device exploded; death was instantaneous for everyone involved. Ginny’s last action had been to push her patient’s gurney out of the operating theatre, into the recovery room.

Ron had been aware of the investigation that was targeting both gangs, and agreed to step in for a week while the lead Auror assigned to the taskforce took enough leave to get married. Ron had often taken other Auror’s shifts to allow them to attend to their families; it was one of the things that earned him rather fierce loyalty among the Auror corps. When the news of the gang battles hit his desk, he took a crew of Aurors to arrest the known members of both gangs. The survivors were successfully apprehended – all but one – and that was the one who managed to kill Ron.

Ginny was buried in the churchyard at Godric’s Hollow – she was a Potter after all. Ron was buried in the family plot in Ottery St Catchpole. I’d attended both funerals; Ron’s was in the morning and Ginny’s was in the evening. I suppose I saw Harry at both funerals, but I was so dazed I have very little recollection of the events. After the funerals, I wouldn’t see Harry again for months.

After coming out of my fog, I put off doing anything about Harry for another day. I’d developed an amazing proficiency in procrastination over the past few months, so it wasn’t entirely surprising that I stretched it out that long.

It was Friday, and I’d just finished with my last class of the day. The students seemed to have noticed that I was back in my right mind again, rather than going through the motions of teaching, and some of the more eager upper level students would stay after class. Some of them were just inveterate brownnosers, and others were kindred spirits to a certain buck-toothed girl who’d come to this school what seemed like a lifetime ago. Ordinarily I’d stay as long as they wished, but I had plans for the evening that didn’t include matrix calculations of energy consumption in advanced transfiguration.

My plans, it seemed, did not survive contact with determined swots.

I wasn’t able to leave Hogwarts until well after dinner. It was dark by the time I left the Great Hall, and part of me wanted to call it a day and go back to my flat, not because I was tired, but because I was afraid of the reception I was going to get – or not get, as the case may be.

## Ever After Connecting Again

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### Chapter 4 - Connecting Again

It was warmer that evening in Swansea than it was at Hogwarts, but in early December that's not saying much. The Apparation point was next to a covered walkway that led into the kitchen, so even in inclement weather, guests could arrive without too much exposure. The entry at the kitchen was called their "back door" but almost no one entered through the grander "front door" that opened into a foyer before the great room that was used for everything the other rooms couldn't accommodate. I remember that I'd helped Neville plan the small formal garden by the kitchen; no matter the season, there was always something that was fragrant – that night it was an especially hardened Locust tree that had been cajoled to blossom year-round.

The door was unlocked, but I felt a slight tingle in my hand before I turned the door's lever. None of the outside doors at the Potter's house had the typical knobs found on most doors. The only light on in the kitchen was the light under the ventilation hood above the stove. If Harry was following his normal routine that meant that he was still awake. I wasn't at all sure what I would have done if the kitchen had been dark. I suppose I was making all this up as I went along.

I could see firelight in the living room, so that's where I headed. Harry met me wordlessly at the door, first taking my cloak, and then enveloping me in a very welcome hug.

"I'm glad you came," he said in a voice barely above a whisper. "I was expecting you."

Only then did I notice a side table set with a tea service and biscuits, including some of my favourites. I chuckled – a sound I hadn't made in quite a while.

"What?" Harry asked as he poured me a cup of tea.

"It's so difficult to surprise you, Harry," I said.

"I had help on this one," he replied. "Ginny left a note."

"That I'd be here tonight?"

He nodded.

"Then you know why I'm here," I said – not quite as a question.

He raised an eyebrow in reply.

"I've had enough time wallowing in the dark," I said.

Harry nodded.

"So is this the part where we discover the raging passion we've always had for each other, you propose and make me an honest woman?" I asked.

That query got two eyebrows raised in reply.

"I don't think I have a lot of raging passion in me right now," he finally said, reaching out to pour more tea in his mug.

"So it's entirely out of the question?"

"For tonight, yes," he said, smiling at last.

"We've been friends since we were eleven, how are we supposed to fall in love?" I asked.

"I've loved you for years," he said.

"I know that, but I mean – I mean the *other* type of love, the sweaty kind," I said, strangely flustered.

"I guess we start by taking care of each other," Harry said, giving me a conspiratorial wink.

"That's a start," I said, kicking off my shoes and placing my feet in his lap.

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Taking care of each other – it seemed so simple when you put it that way. Over the next few weeks, we spent time together – a lot of time together. When I was at Harry's, I'd pull his calendar together – he could do the financial books for the farm in his head, but for some reason he was almost helpless when it came to juggling everything into his datebook. When Harry visited me at Hogwarts, he'd often help me correct papers – a necessary evil when you're a teacher – which then gave me time that was free for other, less academic pursuits.

Being a little too old for Hogsmeade weekends, courting in my forties didn't resemble dating in my teens at all. I thought I knew all there was to know about Harry, but when we spent time together, it became obvious that I didn't.

Harry and I played what I called 'the question game' in which we'd ask each other questions – the type of questions that would probably not ever come up in mundane conversation. We each had the right to 'pass' on answering, but if Harry ever passed, I can't recall it. One particular early answer particularly floored me.

"Harry, what was it like being married to Ginny with the dragon bond?" I asked.

Harry gave me a quizzical look.

"I guess the answer is 'I don't know,'" he answered. "The bond died when Voldemort died."

"But," I sputtered. "Ginny, she always knew..."

"The bond we formed at the end of the summer died when I died," Harry explained.

"How long were you really gone?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"I'm not sure – probably three years or so, I don't know if the years then were as long as the years now," he replied.

"You died?" I asked. I remember years ago Harry explaining something about time travel and dragons and burning up Voldemort's essence as the two of them were flung backwards in time. Why hadn't I followed up on this?

Harry looked at me in reply to my question, giving a shy nod.

"You died?" I asked again.

Harry chuckled. "The answer is not going to change, dear Hermione, no matter how many times you ask the question."

"Died as in physical death?"

"Died as in my body was burned away – all that was left was a disembodied spirit – don't ask me to explain the how of it, I don't know how it worked," he said calmly.

"But you came back with a body," I protested.

"Yes, and a decent body it's been," he said, pausing to point at his forehead. "No scar – Harry Potter version 2.0 – a tribute to sound genetic engineering."

You can guess where the rest of that conversation went – I was torn between correcting my notions of Harry's life post-Voldemort and launching an inquiry into the nature of time and mortality. I suspect that I didn't make a whole lot of progress on either front.

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Fleming said it first – nothing propinks like propinquity. It didn't take me long to look forward to the time we'd spend together – and I began to feel flutters that I hadn't felt since I was a school girl. But I'm getting ahead of my story.

It was a well known fact that Harry was the executor of Ron's estate, so when he first showed up at Hogwarts, no one thought much of it – no one, that is, apart from Harry's rather sizable fan horde at Hogwarts, some of whom were jealous of me, and others who thought that Harry could do so much better than a run-down widow cursed with a sharp tongue and an impaired sense of humour. Neville alerted me to the storm of gossip triggered by Harry's three appearances at Hogwarts within the space of a week.

If there's anything constant about Harry, it's his love for privacy. The gossip spooked him - he didn't "show up" at Hogwarts for the rest of the year. This, of course, prompted another round of conflicting and mutually exclusive strands of gossip to explain the disappearance. Those too died down within a week.

We put our heads together on how we could publicly spend time together without the Wizarding world at large (and our respective families) intruding. After a great deal of discussion, I reluctantly agreed to try Harry's suggestion.

I remember it as a Thursday – I had no duties at school after my morning class, so with the Headmistress' permission, I left the grounds, walked to Hogsmeade and took the Floo to Diagon Alley, where I met an old friend, Dora Lupin, known in her previous, single life as Tonks. If anyone had followed us, they would have seen two matrons sharing lunch followed by a spot of shopping. At the end of this adventure, we carried the assorted bags and parcels to Number 12 Grimmauld Place, which had for years been rented to the Lupins for the sum of a Galleon a year, payable on the first day of the year. Dora grabbed two of the bags and excused herself to her bedroom.

An entirely different woman out of the bedroom, a tall, muscular woman, blonde with flat grey eyes. I heard a voice behind me before I felt familiar and very welcome arms wrap around me from behind.

"Very nice, Dora," Harry said.

The woman smiled briefly and then assumed the pout favoured by fashion models. She turned and strutted back and forth, looking for all the world as if she were displaying next year's fashions. In a way, I suppose she was.

"I can't wear heels like that," I objected.

"But Hermione, darling, it's part of the look," Dora replied in a posh drawl.

"I can't, and I won't," I said resolutely.

Dora looked to Harry, who nodded. She then looked down for a moment, her face twisted in concentration. Before our eyes her legs began to stretch, adding another three inches to her height.

The height did a lot to what was already a very formidable figure.

"You find that attractive?" I asked Harry.

"Not particularly – she's good looking, but not exactly my type – what's important is that she's flashy and unforgettable," he replied.

Dora smiled. Harry let go of my waist and walked forward, placing a thin gold chain around her neck. Dora purred "Oh, Harry" as his fingers brushed against her cheek.

"Quiet, you," he replied.

"Just trying to keep in character," she said huskily.

Harry stepped back – the necklace glowed with a fierce red light that flared and then winked out. Dora reached behind her neck and undid the necklace, handing it silently to me. The necklace was a sophisticated bit of mixed magic that managed to pull together a constellation of transfigurations similar to what Dora could do since she was a child. She called it "Metamorphagus in a can."

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Standing before the mirror without a stitch of clothing, I wondered to myself what Harry saw in me. I looked like a tired, middle-aged mum who'd given birth to two children and raised them, more or less successfully, to adulthood. Shrugging, I closed my eyes and snapped the closure on the necklace. The only way to describe the feeling would be that, for a moment, my bones were on fire. If this was what Dora felt when she morphed, I was at a loss why she didn't scream every time. The only reason I wasn't yelping was that Dora had warned me ahead of time that it would be 'a bit uncomfortable – no, make that bloody unpleasant.'

When I opened my eyes and looked into the mirror again, I was looking at the tall, muscular blond model.

"Oh, my goodness," I said, turning to the clothing laid out on the bed. This was suddenly exciting, a grown-up version of playing dress-up at a friend's house.

I was glad I'd insisted on wearing flats – it was hard enough to walk with longer legs and a different centre of gravity. The new shape had a bit more bust than I was used to, but smaller than I'd been when nursing my children.

I opened the door a little harder than I'd intended – it smacked into the wall with a clang, which ruined my dramatic entrance, but I made the best of it, striding out into the room. Dora and Harry gave me polite applause.

Harry came up to me, slightly surprised as he placed his hands on my waist. In flats I was a good three inches taller than he was. He leaned forward kissed my cheek.

"I greatly prefer the original," he whispered.

"Thank you," I replied.

That was the first time he'd kissed me in this chapter of our lives – later that night I thought about it and it rankled – he could kiss the blond, but he hadn't (yet) kissed the brunette. I put my resentment down to a bit of ancient bimbo-envy.

And so we began a long-running operation to convince the world that the previously reclusive Harry Potter was now making selective appearances with a woman who was referred to in a broad spectrum of terms, ranging from 'an elegant unknown' to 'the Amazon princess.' Dora was particularly proud of that last appellation.

It was surprisingly liberating to be able to appear with Harry without anyone knowing who I was – the public believed me to be a woman named Greta Englebrecht, but try as they might, the background of the mysterious Miss Englebrecht yielded precious little in hard facts. Whether it was this sense of liberation, or the growing infatuation I was experiencing with Harry, I didn't know and didn't care. The only difficult aspect of this was not blabbing everything like a manic idiot when I was back at Hogwarts garbed in the dowdy form of Hermione Weasley, academic and widow in mourning.

## Ever After Bumps in the Road

Ever After

Chapter 5 –Bumps in the road.

For the most part, we got through the courting-while-incognito issues in time for another minor conflict.

Make that a series of conflicts.

Some of them were obnoxiously ugly, others were merely obnoxious.

Harry's estate, for it truly would be misleading to call it a mere farm or a country house, is a collection of various operations – an apple orchard, several large stands of nut trees, and his latest project, a horse stable. Each of these operations was designed to be self-sufficient after an initial investment period. Harry's goal was to leave the farm to his heirs as a multi-purpose concern that would be gentle on the land, provide enough income to cover operating costs, and as a bonus, provide employment for the local inhabitants.

Having grown up in Leeds, I was rather remote from the horsey equestrian set. I thought that riding horses was an affectation of the idle rich. Little did I know that there was an equestrian subculture made up of a number of people of meagre means who would scrimp and save to earn enough for riding lessons, and when possible, would buy a horse of their own, said horses requiring a place to be stabled.

It was only after Harry and I started down the road of "taking care of each other" that I belatedly observed that the overwhelming majority of these proletarian equestrians were women – young, unattached women.

There is a breezeway that connects to the house by way of a hallway close to the kitchen. It contains the usual accoutrements of a "mud room" with racks for wellingtons and various tools, and a shower area, allowing family members to leave the various varieties of farm filth outside before invading the Potter homestead.

Arriving a bit earlier than scheduled, I found the house empty, but heard the sound of running water coming from the shower in the mud room. I walked through the breezeway and pushed the bathroom door open. Feeling particularly brazen, I called out "do you need me to scrub your back?"

It was a bluff, of course. Our relationship had not advanced beyond the occasional peck on the cheek. As an old married woman, now recovering widow, I thought this a meagre repast in the affection department, but Ginny had warned me about this, so I was letting Harry take the initiative, no matter how frustrating that might be.

There was no answer from the shower apart from hearing the water shut off, followed by various post-shower sounds.

To say that I was surprised when a tall, elegant woman in her early twenties pushed the door open, one towel wrapped around her middle and another around her hair would be an understatement. She had skin the colour of strong brewed tea and the thin nose commonly portrayed in Indian art from the Chandragupta period. (Seven years living with a self-styled Indian princess gave me a passing familiarity with Indian culture and history.) She smiled when she saw me, holding the towel closed around her bosom with one hand while extending the other to me.

"You must be Hermione. Harry's told me so much about you," she said, shaking my hand efficiently before disappearing behind a dressing screen. "My name's Johanna, Harry asked me to tell you that he would be delayed."

"Oh really?" I replied, for lack of anything intelligent to say.

The mysterious Johanna mistook this reply as an inquiry.

"Our normal Ferrier is a trifle indisposed, it being that time of the month, and Harry had to re-shoe a horse that managed to break an iron shoe while her rider was trotting by the river bottoms," Johanna explained.

When next she appeared from behind the screen, she was dressed in tight-fitting jeans and a rugby shirt that nicely displayed her thin waist, flat belly and generous, perky bust. She was pulling her now dry hair into a twist behind her head. Her hair was dark brown, almost black, except when red highlights appeared as the light hit it just so – sleek and straight; altogether a marked contrast to my frizzy hair, which was now streaked with gray.

As I work around teenagers, including some with stunningly precocious beauty, I'm not normally disposed to fits of raging jealousy, but then again, in my defence, I'm not used to finding beautiful twenty-something women taking advantage of my – for lack of a better word – beau's shower facilities. Her familiarity with the mudroom made me wonder if she was equally familiar with any other rooms in the house.

With impeccable timing, Harry arrived, which probably saved me from an ugly scene. He used the washroom to scrub his hands, and then pulled

his shirt off, tossing it into a hamper before pulling a fresh shirt from a drawer.

"Find everything okay?" he asked Johanna.

"Yes, thanks," she replied, giving him a shy smile.

"Give your family my regards," Harry said, not batting an eye when Johanna dipped her head to kiss his cheek before leaving.

"Mum says you need to come to dinner," she said as she went out the door.

"Have her Floo me," he called to her departing, shapely backside.

Harry then turned his attention to me.

"Hey," he said, giving me a grin.

Ten minutes previously, that grin would have sparked a flutter in my stomach. Now my stomach just had acid churning in it.

"Who is Johanna?" I asked, trying to keep the frosty tone out of my voice.

"Her?" Harry asked.

"Yes, her," I snapped.

"She's my goddaughter," he said, as if that were a complete explanation.

"Pull the other one, Harry, it's got bells on," I said.

Harry said nothing – which was infuriating.

"She looks like a Page Three girl, how am I supposed to compete with that?" I asked rhetorically.

A flash of anger passed across his face, and then he gave a pained smile. He gestured with his hand to follow him into the house. He led me silently into the sun room, a room where, in happier times, Ginny held court. Harry pulled an album from the shelf, opening to the first page which displayed a couple in traditional English wedding attire. The second page showed the same couple in Indian garb.

"The Guptas," Harry said flatly.

"Who?"

"Jasmine and Beckman," he said, peering into my face, looking for some sign of recognition.

"That's Jasmine?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes, she cleaned up nicely," Harry said with a proprietary pride.

"She married during the war – about a year after the Lupins," he narrated, flipping the pages until he reached a group shot, posed in a church by a baptismal font. It was Harry, Ginny and the couple from the first photograph. Jasmine was holding what appeared to be an infant girl, dressed in a baptismal gown. "Here's Johanna – the only picture taken that day, I might add, where she's not crying. He leafed through the album, which was arranged chronologically, showing various shots of the Gupta family, in scenes with and without Ginny and Harry and any combination of their respective children. By the end of the album Johanna had transformed from a babe in arms to a skinny, very active girl, and finally into a slightly younger version of the woman I saw coming out of Harry's shower in the mudroom.

"Harry," I said, my face flushing with embarrassment. "I'm – I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For thinking ill of you – for being jealous," I said, wishing that the earth would open up and swallow me at that moment.

"You thought?" he began, stopped himself, and then laughed.

"Why not?" I asked. "You're a very eligible widower, and I'm sure you don't lack for women trying to ensnare you."

"Yeah, well there is that," Harry said thoughtfully. "There's a reason I stay out of the horse barns."

"What?"

"There's a species of teenaged girls who seem to gravitate to the stables – they call themselves 'barn rats' – they work at the barns, mucking out the stalls and grooming the horses to pay for riding. Most of them are harmless, but a few get the notion that they can barter *other* services," he said with a grimace.

"Oh," I said.

It wasn't much of a problem when Ginny was alive," he explained. "But after she – died – a few of them thought that I needed – comfort."

"And?" I prompted.

"As usual, I didn't pick up on most of the clues," he said. "Luther, my Farrier, set the two most obnoxious ones straight, and the others gave up interest after that."

"Johanna mentioned something about it being his 'time of the month,'" I said.

"Yeah, he's a werewolf," Harry said nonchalantly, "and one of the best Farriers that we ever had here. I'm lucky to keep him. So, ever since then, I've stayed out of the stables, but Luther was out today, and one of the mares desperately needed to be re-shoed, so I did the best I could."

"You know how to do that stuff?" I asked.

"Yeah," he answered. "I'm nowhere as good as Luther, but I can do it at a rudimentary level – Luther can do it all with fire, tongs and a hammer, but I have to use a surreptitious bit of magic to get everything to fit."

"So," I said.

"Yeah?"

"You're not scrubbing her back when she's lathering up in your shower?"

"Uh, that would be a 'no,'" he replied. "It would be like me scrubbing Rose's back."

I grinned. I felt stupid and vulgar with a dash of self-loathing, but I covered it all up with a grin.

"She rescued Lucy this morning – that's the horse whose shoe I just installed – Lucy had been wandering in the bottoms, and the two of them were a frightful mess by the time they got back to the stables."

"Does she come by much?" I asked.

"With any luck, Johanna will take over the stables and supervise our training programme for young riders," Harry said. "She thinks that 'Uncle Harry' is just showing favouritism, but she's really the best one I've interviewed yet."

"'Uncle Harry?'"

"Yeah, I am her godfather, after all. And to answer your earlier question, you're not competing – not with Greta, not with Johanna; it's just Harry and Hermione."

I felt like a blooming idiot at that exact moment, but as embarrassing as the moment might have been, it was also comforting in its own awkward way. Harry knew at some level that he could get almost any woman's attention, but he didn't consider himself available.

~+~

The next bump manifested itself a week later – we were in Harry's study, I was once again balancing his appointment calendar on the computer when I discovered that I couldn't touch anything on a particular Thursday.

"Harry, is there something wrong with your date book program? It won't let me do anything with tomorrow's appointments," I said.

Harry hesitated before answering. "I'm away from the farm tomorrow – on a trip," he replied.

"Anything I need to know about?" I asked, trying to stifle a pang of resentment.

"Not yet," he said, not meeting my eyes. "I'll tell you everything when I get back."

"Will it be dangerous?" I asked.

Harry chuckled.

"About as dangerous as going out into the fields to pick peas," he replied. "Actually, once I get there, I'll have more protection than the King."

It took some effort to not try to wheedle more information from him.

We had a pleasant evening that night – I was dressed up as the mysterious Ms Englebrecht, Harry was dressed in basic black. We had dinner at a café in Marseilles and then attended a concert. Harry's taste in music was broader than mine – he could enjoy what I called "head-banging music" and then move on to baroque music played on period instruments. That night's concert was somewhere in-between, a concert of Spanish guitar.

Harry's manners had improved over the years; which isn't all that remarkable, given the fact that he essentially raised himself while enduring neglect and abuse from the Dursleys. He opened doors for me, pulled my chair away from the table, and a host of other polite conventions. Up to that point in time he'd held my hand (or rather Greta's hand), proffered an elbow when we were walking together, and usually would give me a warm hug before we'd part at the end of the evening. If given my choices, we would have moved faster on that front, but as I said before, Ginny had warned me about this.

We returned to my flat at Hogwarts and I took off the necklace, dropping several inches in height when I assumed my proper form.

He seemed a bit odd when he hugged me at the end of the evening.

"You worried about tomorrow?" I asked.

He nodded and then leaned forward to kiss me on the lips. I saw a sly smile on his face and was about ready to grab the lapels of his coat to force another kiss when he disappeared.

That kiss, meagre as it was, provided a lot of warmth for the rest of the evening. He'd finally kissed Hermione, not Greta.

The next day went without much of note – I taught classes, including a guest visit to the DADA class, demonstrating the Patronus charm. When I returned to my flat, the passbox on my desk was lit, announcing a waiting message from Harry.

When we began seeing each other he'd crafted a smaller passbox than the ones we'd used years ago. This one was about half the size of a cigar box, just large enough to hold a conventional Muggle envelope.

I dashed over to my desk, opening the box with anticipation. Inside was a folded sheet of paper (Harry almost never used parchment) bearing a very short message.

*H,*

*Can you come here tonight, after dinner?*

I jotted "of course" on the foot of the note and popped it back into the passbox. By subjective time, dinner was in an hour, but it seemed like the time dragged by in extreme slow motion. When the hour arrived, I strolled to the great hall and ate a quick meal, taking time to answer questions from two of my students and one of my colleagues before I walked back to my quarters. Those who followed my movements knew that I would usually go for a walk on the grounds after dinner, deviating from this pattern only when the weather was either frightfully cold or raining.

Most people probably assumed that I walked to Hogsmeade for a drink – something I did from time to time, but not as often as imagined. Instead, I walked through the gates and a bit down the road towards the village until I was certain that I was out of sight from both town and school, Disapparating with crack.

I approached the garden outside the kitchen – honeysuckle was the most fragrant smell that evening.

Harry was waiting, in the study of course, with a lovely porcelain sculpture of a dragon sitting on the side table, next to the tea service and a plate of biscuits.

Examining the exquisite detail in the luminous red sculpture, I picked a biscuit off the plate.

"It's lovely," I said. "Is it new?"

"It's rather ancient, actually, but it's new here in the house," Harry replied.

"Did you get it on your trip?" I asked.

"Yes."

"So it was successful?"

"Umm, fairly," he said, moving to pour a cup of tea for me.

"So, what was the big mystery trip?" I asked.

"I went to Nepal," he said tersely.

"Dragon business?"

"After a fashion," he said, motioning to the couch. Taking the hint, I carried my cup and saucer to the couch.

"You're not very good, beating around the bush, Harry James Potter. You'd best get straight to the point," I said.

"I love you, Hermione Jane Weasley," he said, piercing me with his eyes. "How do you feel about acquiring another familiar?"

"What? Wait!" I sputtered. "I love you too, Harry, but what's that have to do with dragon business and familiars?"

"Answer the question," he urged.

"I've had a cat, I married a husband and then raised two children, I'd rather not be responsible for anything that I have to feed, clean or pick up after in any way," I blurted out.

"Does that apply to me, too?" he asked with an impish smile.

"No," I said suddenly. Then I laughed.

"What's the familiar, and why do you want me to have it?"

Harry turned to the sculpture, uttering a throaty word that sounded like 'haw-rat.'

The sculpture shimmered a bit and then slid off the side table like an otter sliding into a stream. Before I knew it, it was on my lap, butting my hand with its head.

"It's alive," I exclaimed.

"*He's* alive," Harry corrected. "Hr't, meet Hermione, Hermione, meet Hr't."

"How's that spelled?" I asked, giving the dragon's head an absent minded scratch.

"With difficulty," Harry replied, giving me a wink. "The best I can approximate, it would be H-R-apostrophe-T. It's not a language that has much need for vowels."

"You want me to have a dragon for a familiar? Are – you-- insane?" I asked.

"Yes, and probably not," he said, trying to keep a straight face, "although opinions vary on that question."

"Why do I need a dragon?" I asked. The dragon pushed my hand away as it turned in my lap.

"The question, I suggest," the dragon said in a crisp, clipped accent, "is why you don't have a dragon already."

"He talks," I said in surprise.

"Obviously," the dragon said. "Aside from my intrinsic usefulness and companionship, I am more than qualified to protect you when you are away from your consort."

"Harry's not my consort," I snapped, feeling slightly foolish to argue with something the size of a housecat.

Hr't snorted, glaring at me with luminous yellow eyes. A puff of steam escaped from his snout when he snorted.

"He's not my consort yet," I corrected.

The dragon stirred in my lap again, coiling into a circle until his tail covered his snout.

"Why do I need protection, Harry?" I asked.

"Call me selfish," he replied. "I'm falling in love again – with you, and I don't think I could survive losing another mate."

It's hard to argue with logic like that. Harry had just declared in rather unequivocal terms exactly where we were heading in our relationship, I'd been prepared to move into high dudgeon mode, complaining about patriarchal, overprotective males, but that statement took the proverbial wind out of my sails, which was regrettable, as I'm really good at high dudgeon.

And so I obtained a familiar during the waning years of my fifth decade of life.

I quizzed Harry on the care and feeding of snow dragons (it amounted to 'don't step on them' and 'they clean themselves and feed irregularly – about once a month'). I was intrigued to learn that they were not related to any of the known dragon species, could turn invisible, change size and shape, and apart from not having thumbs in their native shape, were probably superior to humans in every way that I could imagine. In light of this new knowledge, I felt honoured with Hr't's presence, although I felt that Harry was being a bit extreme about my need for protection.

Acquiring a familiar was not the highlight of the evening, however. That was also the night that Harry gave me a proper kiss. Having been an old married woman for quite some time, you'd think that would have been old hat, but it wasn't. I'd known that Harry loved me for ages, but the notion that he might find me kissable; much less desirable was, well, flattering. I'd considered him fanciable for ages, but moved him into the 'off-limits' category once it was clear that he was interested in Ginny Weasley, much as he'd moved me into the 'off-limits' category for much the same reason.

There were down sides to having a snow dragon familiar – Hr't had no sense of personal space, draping himself on my lap or shoulder when I was sitting or standing still. After a while, I could sense when he was invisible in my immediate presence – don't ask me how I did that, though. We had discussions on modesty (I did not want to dress or undress in the presence of a sentient, male creature, thank-you very much) and decorum. He would rearrange into the shape of a fox coloured tom cat when he would accompany me in public at Hogwarts, occasionally jumping up on the table to join me for meals in the great hall, becoming a fixture in my classes. The witches, each and every one, thought he was darling; the wizards split evenly between those who cared for cats, and those who preferred to avoid them. He managed to frequently rub up against members of the latter category, although he didn't leave any tell-tale fur on their trouser legs. When I was going out in public, off the school grounds, he often went inert, shrinking to the size of an acorn. When he was inert, I could wear him as a charm on my bracelet, or as a pendant. After the first few times of arranging him in this fashion, he was able to conjure his own necklace, which meant that I'd occasionally find myself wearing a pendant in the middle of the day when I hadn't put one on that morning.

Oddly enough, most of the time he would disappear when Harry was about.

Getting back to the kiss we shared the night I acquired a familiar; as noteworthy as I found that kiss, it paled in comparison to the next one.

The most profitable part of Harry's estate was the apple orchards. When he'd first bought the estate the orchards had not been tended for a number of years. The first order of business was pruning back several years of small, unproductive branches, what Harry called "the massive haircut." After the original orchard were producing again, Harry introduced some new stock, some of which was heirloom fruit, to encourage genetic diversity, and others were more popular hybrids and newly developed varieties. A good deal of the annual harvest was sold locally, but the finest fruit was exported abroad. I was shocked when I first learned the price of apples (and other fruit) in Japan. The notion of anyone buying an apple for £ 2.00 shocked me, but the high-end stores in Japan were selling the fruit from Harry's orchards at twice that price. "The Japanese market is willing to pay for quality, and for that money they insist on extremely high quality, rejecting apples that Sainsbury's would regard as first rate," Harry told me years ago. The upside of this was that the revenue from fruit sales had made the estate as a whole profitable from almost the very beginning. The downside of this was that Harry ended up every year in Japan for what I regarded as an interminably long time.

Objectively it was a week and a half, but by my calendar it felt like months. I'd succumbed to a cold almost the day he'd left, and was just recovering from it when he returned. My classes had been particularly obnoxious during that period, the result of a feud between some of my more capable students. We had a date on the calendar for that Saturday, but he was returning to England on Friday afternoon. I was waiting at his house a few minutes after my last class, startling a few at Hogwarts by my hasty departure.

I made a pot of tea and debated baking something in his kitchen when I heard the sound of a lorry on the gravel drive that leads to the house. I'd prepared a sultry and sophisticated greeting, making eye contact with him from across the kitchen as he came through the door. All of that went out of the proverbial window. Harry opened the door, put down his bag, and I was in his arms. We hugged, and then I got a chaste peck on the lips, and throwing caution to the wind, I kissed him properly.

The colour shift at the edge of my vision should have tipped me off, but I usually close my eyes when I kiss, so maybe not. As kisses go, it was verging on fantastic. I loved Harry and he loved me, and however wretched I'd been when he was gone, he was here now. I could feel Harry's warmth and his desire for me, which ignited a blaze within me. Next I felt Harry's awareness of my desire, which was met by a flicker of surprise and another wave of desire from him. To this day I don't know how long that kiss lasted, which, in hindsight, is reasonable, because while I was trying to pierce his soul with my lips, I passed out.

## Ever After Odds and Ends - an explanation from the Author

Ever After

Odds and Ends – explanations from the author

A bit about Ever After – when I originally sat down to write the story that became The Letters of Summer I was in a particularly trying time in my life. For a variety of reasons I wanted to write a good long chaptered story, and decided that fan fiction would be a good sandbox in which I could determine if I still had my storytelling knack. TLOS, per the original outline, should have ended at the end of the chapter entitled “Cooking with Harry.” For those of you without encyclopaedic recall of the story, it’s this scene:

Ginny stopped as they entered the herb garden. Harry stood still. She was still holding his hand, but she was facing him now, until she dipped her head, resting it again on his chest. She shivered slightly, then looked up, staring into his eyes. “You said you’d like to get to know me better,” she said softly.

“Yeah, I did.”

“I’d like that,” she said, “I’d like that a lot.” She gave him a brief hug before she peeled away to dart into The Burrow’s kitchen door.

But, by the time I reached that point in the story, I had a number of bits and bobs of plot that needed to be resolved, so on I went for two long chapters before I could draw TLOS to a close.

By then I’d grown fond of my characters, including the OCs that I’d fashioned and my own not-so-faithful clones of JKR’s characters, and I had plot lines that I wanted to resolve, but I didn’t want to write another 200k word long story. I also wanted to write other types of stories. So, I left the H-G sandbox and wrote a slew of other stories. I also continued the TLOS arc in Stories from Sixth (and Seventh) Year. In SFSY I introduced yet more OCs and tried different methods of storytelling – my goal in SFSY is that each chapter could be a stand-alone short story – most of them work that way, a few don’t. When HPDH was given a release date, I summoned my waning desire to write fanfic and finished SFSY with a chapter that was markedly different from the others – some people liked it, some people didn’t.

The Letters of Summer is a coming of age story – which is fine and good, but after writing about moody teenagers for several hundreds of thousands of words, I wanted to write a different story – a story still using the TLOS characters and settings that was an adult story – where the characters are living with issues that are common to those in their 40’s and 50’s. I’d given hints throughout my H-G phase of writing that I was going to write a story where TLOS Harry ended up with TLOS Hermione.

I have little sympathy for the shipping wars. People who shell out their own money to archive fan fiction on the web are entitled to set criteria for what they publish. The Harmonians look at my large body of H-G fiction and sneer that I’m somehow defective. The Canonistas look at my non-H-G stories and declare that I’m a damned heretic. I just wanted to write stories – and I think that both sides of that argument were taking themselves way too seriously – it’s supposed to be fun, right?

So, I put Ever After on ice as I decided that I was going to get out of the fan fiction business – my family needed my attention more than my readers did. Notwithstanding my retirement, I still poked at the story in my idle moments. Then I got asked to contribute a story for a charity fund raising auction – and rather than writing a one-shot, I tried to distil the essence of Ever After, writing the bare bones. I wrote five chapters for Brad (who won the auction) and had a sixth chapter partially written when my personal flash drive went kaput, zorching the story along with 3.5 GB of other data.

So, what happens next in Ever After? Here’s a synopsis: the planned chapter to follow *Bumps in the Road* was titled *Guess who’s coming to dinner?*

This chapter opens with a discussion between Hr’t and Hermione, explaining why she passed out when smooching her beloved. It seems that Hermione is a bit of a natural Occulmens as a side effect of how her brain works. This has stood her in good stead up to now, except at that particular moment she was run down from being sick for a week, and she really, really wanted to be with Harry, which had the effect of bringing her natural shields down – and a variation on the feedback effect that Harry and Ginny had in TLOS.

Harry and Hermione have an interesting discussion thereafter. Harry explains that the answer is not installing Snow Dragon magic inside of Hermione (she’s too old for that to work) but instead to learn how to control the feedback. Hermione has rather mixed feelings about this, as she doesn’t want to pass out again, but the feeling of intimacy inherent in the feedback loop is very intense, and Hermione, at this point in her life, really wants intense.

Various odds and ends fill up the chapter until the end scene, which has a joint Potter/Weasley family meal during the Easter Break – Rose & Hugo Weasley are in attendance, along with James, Sirius and Lily Potter (in this universe it’s Sirius and Lily that are twins, unlike Deathly Hallows epilogue). Up until this point, the Potter and Weasley children have not learned that their respective parents are courting each other. Hermione

Finally learns the Potter secret for making a really good soup stock, and at dinner time manages to end up with a bay leaf in her soup bowl. Rose, channelling her father, starts up a round of “kiss the cook!” (a peculiar custom, in which the discoverer of a bay leaf in the soup is obliged to kiss the cook). Hermione gives in to the chant and, hitching up her skirts, straddles Harry and gives him a rather thorough kiss. The chapter ends with Lily saying to Hugo “Blimey, I think they’ve done that before.”

A few chapters later, there’s an adventure scene in which Hermione is kidnapped. H’rt rescues her, but does so in a manner that everyone thinks that Hermione has rescued herself. Word goes out in certain circles that she still has that old mojo, so if you want to live to collect your pension, you don’t mess with that particular witch.

In another chapter we have Hermione having a long chat with Father Martin. Hermione was raised as an agnostic by two parents who’d abandoned the faith of their respective families (dad was Jewish, mom was a lapsed Catholic). Realizing that if she’s going to be Harry’s wife, she needs to come to grips with Harry’s religion, she rings up the good priest. Father Martin has a long chat with Hermione, trying to engage her own beliefs. After a long exposition, he asks the direct question “Hermione, what do you believe?” Hermione is caught short by the question, and says the first thing that comes to mind: “I believe in Harry.”

Several chapters follow, dealing with teaching at Hogwarts, marriage counselling, discussions between Harry and his children, Hermione and her children, and Hermione with Harry’s children.

A chapter follows dealing with wedding planning for a second wedding in later life.

A few chapters follow, examining the reaction of Wizarding England to their relationship, which becomes public – needless to say, the relationship provides a lot of grist for the tabloid mill.

Hermione keeps her composure through it all until the reception after the wedding, where she has a major panic attack and locks herself in the bathroom at the church. Neville convinces the guests that Harry and Hermione have left for their honeymoon, which encourages the guests to wind up the reception. Harry sweet-talks Hermione out of her panic, and the newlyweds spend the night at Harry’s house (everyone else thinking that Harry and Hermione are in the Mediterranean for their honeymoon – a bit of Longbottom orchestrated misdirection.)

Hermione takes a Sabbatical year from Hogwarts.

After the Sabbatical, Harry and Hermione have a press conference, having been convinced by Neville and Luna that a real interview would quash some of the vile and contradictory rumours that continue to fly through the tabloids. The story ends with the following scene:

~+~

My anticipation of facing a press conference was only slightly better than Marie Antoinette facing the guillotine, or maybe Harry facing the dragon during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. We’d reserved a ballroom in a hotel in Penzance for the event – there was a lottery in place to provide slots for one hundred questions. We didn’t know the questions in advance, and frankly, I was surprised at the banality of some of them. Yes, Harry had a better than average grasp of who was favoured in the English Quidditch Cup, but three questions on the relative merits of the bench for the Tornados versus the Harpies? What were these people thinking?

Some of the questions were just plain boring, but very predictable.

“Mrs. Potter!” a slim man said, stepping up to the microphone. “Will Garrison from the Rockville Rocket – will you be going back to teaching this fall?”

“Yes,” I answered, tallying in my head that this was question number ninety-seven.

“So you’re not pregnant?” Will asked, his face incredulous. Evidently he’d already had a story ready to go with what he expected was the answer.

“I don’t believe that you had another question allotted,” I answered with a mischievous smile. I squeezed Harry’s hand and looked at him. A dozen cameras clicked as one. “No, I’m not pregnant. Harry and I love our grown children, and if more come our way, that would be marvellous, but I for one am not particularly eager to get back to nappies and middle of the night feedings right now.”

Harry took the next three questions, and I was mouthing the words I was going to say to close the conference.

We’d made it, we’d run the gauntlet and now we could return to our lives again.

“Mrs. Potter?” a short woman asked, pulling the microphone down so it would point towards her mouth.

I looked at Harry, who nodded. Apparently I’d miscounted. I hate it when that happens.

“Emily Grebasch, Church Times – do you have a favourite bible verse?”

Other than the sound of one shutter clicking, there was a robust silent in the hall. Thinking quickly, I put an answer together.

“Yes, Emily, I do,” I answered. “The Gospel of John, chapter two, verses nine and ten.”

I let the silence resume as many of the reporters turn to face Miss Grebasch for an explanation. Miss Grebasch arched an eyebrow and looked at me for elaboration.

Explaining things was like teaching, so I was comfortably back in my element.

In this chapter of the Gospel, Jesus attends a wedding in the town of Cana, and when the wine runs out, he quietly turns water into wine. The steward calls to the bridegroom and says something to the effect of 'everyone serves good wine at first, and then when the people have drunk freely, brings out the cheap wine.'

I allow a storyteller's silence and then continue.

"But you have saved the best for last." I then turn again to look at Harry and smile at him.

Miss Grebasch began the applause, which quickly became rather loud.

Standing up, I pulled Harry to his feet and walking hand in hand, we walked out of the room to the tumult of shouted questions and the snicking of camera shutters.

My life has been full and I am rich in family and friends, but as good as my life has been until now, I expect that the rest will be better; chaotic and unexpected for sure (I am married to Harry Potter, after all) but I do believe that the best has been saved for last.

FINIS

So, thanks to Jeconais, for the excellent fiction archive that is funded entirely from his own pocket.

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Lastly, thanks to JKR for graciously allowing thousands of scibblers to play with her settings and characters.

It's a small world, we'll probably see each other again.

JEC

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