

# A Second Chance For Happiness

*by star\_girl*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

## Chapter 1 – The Headmistress Remembers

*Chapter 1 of 29*

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### Chapter 1 The Headmistress Remembers

Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts, gazed out of the window of her office and was greeted by the sight of a beautiful May morning. The bright sunshine reflected off the lake and a few small, fluffy white clouds hung in an otherwise clear, bright blue sky. There was a slight breeze rustling over the tops of the trees of the Forbidden Forest. Here and there, she could see pupils dotted like ants on the grounds, sitting in small groups. Some were studying; others were spread out on the ground with their robes loosened, hands behind their heads and enjoying the warmth of the sun. Minerva thought the scene was very peaceful and tranquil, and could not have been more different from the fateful events that had unfolded at Hogwarts just over ten years previously.

Ten years! Minerva shook her head ruefully. The time had gone so quickly, as it did when one aged, she reflected, and yet the memories were still raw to her. The Battle of Hogwarts, and the awful aftermath, haunted her still. Of course, she had been a key figure in rebuilding the castle and ensuring both the school and the education of magical children had got back to normality as quickly as possible once Tom Riddle had been finally vanquished. And as much as the work she had thrown herself into was a kind of healing process, the pain she felt in her heart from those she'd lost in the battle never truly went away. Her eyes flicked to the beautiful marble war memorial that stood near Dumbledore's tomb, etched with the names of all who had fallen.

She sighed, turning from the window. She was now eighty-two and was starting to feel her age. Albus Dumbledore had been well over a hundred years old when he was headmaster, and he could have undoubtedly kept going for another thirty years at least, had he been able to live out his natural life. And eighty-two was comparatively young in wizarding terms. But Minerva felt very tired and seemed to carry a perpetual stone around in her stomach since the war, and she had the sneaking suspicion it had nothing to do with her duties at Hogwarts.

With another sigh, Minerva took her seat at her desk and peered over the wire-rimmed frames of her spectacles, her lips set in a disapproving purse as she sorted through the morning's mail. An invoice from Madam Malkin. The minutes from the school governor's tri-annual meeting. A copy of the latest *Daily Prophet*. Yet another letter from Mrs. Diggon-Clarke, probably once more bemoaning how her precious son Tarquin had been unfairly overlooked at the Hufflepuff Quidditch trials. And a whole host of Hogwarts-related administration. Yes, the owls had brought her plenty of post to be getting on with, but not the one thing she was waiting for: an envelope bearing the spiky, neat handwriting of Severus Snape.

She frowned as she tossed the mail onto her desk. It wasn't as if she was expecting a reply; he never replied to any of her letters. He was as stubborn as a Hippogriff when he was at Hogwarts, and she was quite sure that was a trait he would take with him to the end of his days. However, Minerva herself was blessed with her own fair share of obstinacy, and so she had written to him every year for the last ten years on the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts. The message was simple: *Come home*. But it seemed that Severus no longer regarded either the castle or the wizarding world that he had almost died protecting as his home. Everyone else in the wizarding world assumed he was dead, of course. But only Minerva knew the full truth.

It was Minerva herself who had found Severus clinging to life on the floor of the filthy Shrieking Shack, tipped off by the portrait of Albus Dumbledore. Albus had urged her to hurry and find Severus, and although she had protested vehemently, at that point still believing him to be on Riddle's side, Albus had been insistent and had told her that all would be revealed later. Trusting Albus, she had transformed into her Animagus form and dashed across the grounds as fast as she could, dodging rogue spells from the battle, falling stone from the battered castle and the trampling feet of giants, and had finally reached the edge of the Forbidden Forest, where she had transformed back into herself and Apparated into the Shrieking Shack.

She had not expected the mess that lay before her. There had been a dark bundle sprawled at her feet in black robes, who she had recognised straight away to be Snape, surrounded by thick pools of blood, which seemed to have permeated the whole floor. As she had glanced at the deep, ripped wound in Snape's neck, and the seemingly lifeless black eyes gazing up at the ceiling from his chalky, alabaster face, she feared she was too late. No matter what Severus Snape had done, he didn't deserve to be killed in such a brutal way. Avada Kedavra was, at least, clean and quick. Whatever had injured Severus was not human, and the fearsome beast must surely have been poisonous, judging by the yellowish tinge trickling from the gash in Snape's neck. This sight, on top of the sound of all the chaos still raging at the castle, had almost tipped her over the edge, and she had felt sick to her stomach. What kind of creature could have done such a thing? What kind of creature could have overpowered the formidable wand skills of Snape?

Realising she had no time to think but instead had to act, she had hastily bent over the former headmaster, putting her ear close to Snape's open mouth, listening for the sound of his breath over the loud tattoo of her own heartbeat and the distant screams and crashes from the war thundering up at the castle.

She had felt the slightest warmth tickle her ear and had heard the faintest rattle of breath and almost could not believe it. He was alive! But what could she do to save him? She knew that, as Potions master, he had always kept a bezoar on his person in case of emergency. Of course, he had not held that position for nearly two years, but surely, old habits die hard? She had begun searching his pockets frantically with shaking hands, patting them down, trying to feel the outline of the unmistakable stone. But alas, there had been no bezoar to be found, which had led Minerva to believe either that he had already taken it, or he'd not had it on his person in the first place. And even if she could have found it, Snape was hardly breathing. He would have surely choked to death if she'd tried forcing it down his throat.

Sitting back on her heels in frustration, she had cursed herself inwardly for not bringing essence of dittany or Blood-Replenishing Potion or anything else of use. But she wasn't to know what state Snape would be in when she had found him, and she hadn't had time to prepare. Drawing her wand, she had begun muttering a spell to stop the blood flow and then another to siphon off whatever poison which had still been leaking from the wound. These had been basic, perfunctory measures, and Severus had urgently needed further medical attention immediately, but what else could she have done? She had not thought she would have had the strength to Apparate with him by herself to St. Mungo's. And she had needed to get back to the battle. But she had also known that she couldn't have just left him there.

Then, out of absolutely nowhere, an idea had struck her. She had seen a group of house-elves running towards the battle and preparing to fight as she'd skittered towards the Forbidden Forest. Maybe, she had thought, there was still hope.

'Winky!' Minerva's voice had called firmly.

The crack of Apparition had ripped through the darkness with the violence of an expletive, and a small elf with enormous brown eyes and a nose like a tomato had stood before Minerva, dressed in a dishevelled Hogwarts tea towel and shaking with fear. The elf had taken one look at the bloodied figure of Severus Snape lying on the floor, and her eyes had opened even wider.

Before Winky had even drawn a breath however, Minerva had continued.

'Winky, you must go to Professor Slughorn's quarters and bring back all the essence of dittany, anti-venom and Blood-Replenishing Potion you can find, and administer them to Sev' She had paused, catching herself; the bizarreness of the situation had made her lose her usual formality. She had taken a steadying breath before continuing. 'And administer them to Professor Snape. Stay with him until I return.'

'But Headmistress,' the elf had squeaked fearfully, winding the bottom of her tea towel between her fingers, 'We knows Professor Snape is a bad man! He is with... with You-Know-Who!' she had finished in a whisper.

Minerva had swallowed hard. She too had been fighting with her own turbulent feelings regarding Snape's loyalties, but she had trusted Dumbledore. Dumbledore had wanted him to be saved, for whatever reason, and she had decided that she would not let Dumbledore down.

'Winky, there is no time for discussion! Get the potions and return here immediately!' Minerva had instructed firmly, and with a quick bow, the elf Apparated with another sharp crack.

Not a minute later, Winky had returned once more, bearing the phials of potions as instructed. Minerva had told the elf how to administer the potions and had once again reiterated that the elf was to stay by Snape's side until she returned. Then, after one last glance at the dreadfully pale face of Severus Snape, she had Apparated out of the Shack and had thrown herself back into the midst of the battle.

Dumbledore's motives for saving Snape had become quite clear once Harry had revealed the truth about Snape's alliances in his final showdown with Riddle. Minerva had felt all kinds of feelings wash through her then: guilt at believing only the worst of Severus and for their fight the last time they had faced each other, anguish at the pain and pressures of spying that Severus had borne alone for so many years, and fear that she had arrived too late and he was now lying dead, still on the floor of the dirty old Shrieking Shack.

But when Minerva had returned to the Shack later that morning, the body of Severus Snape had gone. The floor had still been covered in a carpet of crimson, but aside from that, there had been no evidence of what had happened to him. Not even the little empty potion phials had remained.

Winky, who had not been in the Shack either when Minerva had arrived, had faced intense questioning when summoned, but the little elf, who could not remember being called to assist Snape at all, had obviously had her memory modified. And so Minerva had come to the conclusion that Snape had survived and had somehow managed to leave the Shack, with or without Winky's assistance.

Why he had run away, she could not say. He would have surely been treated like a hero had he stayed. But Severus was not the kind of man who would have relished his personal life known by all and sundry. He had always been a private man. Perhaps, knowing that his obligations to Lily, to Dumbledore and to Hogwarts were finally fulfilled, he had run away to escape everything that he had been chained to for so long and to start afresh. Either way, Minerva would not deny him the chance for freedom after a lifetime's service to bring down Riddle. So, she had kept quiet about her own theories about his body's disappearance, instead pretending to agree with the majority view that Riddle or one of his cronies had disposed of it during the battle.

But the real giveaway for Minerva that Severus was indeed alive was the absence of his headmaster's portrait within her own office at Hogwarts. It had been clear after Harry's revelations that Snape had never deserted Hogwarts, even when he'd taken flight after his argument with Minerva. His loyalties had been very firmly to Dumbledore and, by association, to the school. If Snape had died, he would indeed have had his own portrait, right next to that of Albus Dumbledore. This was some comfort, to know

he survived his terrible injuries. But still, her guilt gnawed at her, like Bowtruckles on Doxy eggs. She wanted Snape to realise how important everyone thought he was. She wanted him to come home to Hogwarts, the place he'd nearly died trying to save. And, most of all, she wanted to apologise for the appalling way she had treated him.

Minerva knew that Severus was getting her letters, even if he never responded. Her owl always came back empty-beaked. She often wondered where he was, what he was doing now, but knew better than to go looking for him. She had to resign herself to being happy with the knowledge that, wherever he was, Severus Snape was alive and well and enjoying peace and freedom at last. But she would not give up on him, and so every year she wrote him a letter, on the anniversary of his "death", trying to make amends, trying to show him somebody out there knew he was alive and cared about him.

One day, she hoped, Severus Snape might feel ready to respond.

## Chapter 2 – Happy Families

*Chapter 2 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 2 Happy Families

Ginny Potter was sitting at the large, old oak table in her kitchen, scribbling away at a piece of parchment with a bright pink quill, her daughter Lily gurgling away happily in her high chair beside her. She was frowning slightly in concentration, which made her look more than a little like her mother. Her long, flaming red hair was scraped away from her face in a makeshift ponytail, and she looked pale and tired.

*Bread. Milk. Teething potion. Book vets appointment.*

She dusted the quill lightly against her chin, pausing to think for a moment before scribbling away once more.

*Birthday card for Percy. RSVP for Luna's wedding. Wand wipes.*

'Pretty, pretty kitty,' a small voice chirped happily from the other side of the kitchen, interrupting her thoughts.

Ginny looked up and saw that her youngest son, Albus, was currently sprawled out on his stomach, tickling their Kneazle, who was sleeping peacefully in the bright ray of sunshine streaming through the glass door, behind the ears. The Kneazle was nearly the same size as Albus, with thick, dark fur which was speckled all over with light flecks. She did not react to Albus' pestering, save for flicking her ears occasionally in annoyance.

'Al, leave Nyx alone, she's trying to sleep,' Ginny told him gently as she turned her attentions back to the list she was writing.

*De-gnome the garden. Scourgify bathroom. Tidy. Ron & Hermione for dinner tomorrow. Chicken.*

'Mummy, when's Daddy coming home?'

James, Ginny's eldest son, had padded his way in from the lounge, carrying his *Quidditch 2008 Annual* in one hand and looking decidedly glum.

Ginny put her quill down on the table with a small sigh and turned to James.

'Daddy's at work, sweetheart. Remember, he told you yesterday about how he has to work very hard this week because he has nearly caught the bad wizard he has been after for five years? He will be home as soon as he can. But Mummy has to work tonight, too, so you'll get to stay with Granny and Granddad, and that will be fun, won't it?' she said with a smile.

James, however, wasn't convinced. 'I want to see Daddy!' he said with a scowl, hopping from one foot to the other.

'Darling, Daddy is working very hard right now. But Auntie Hermione and Uncle Ron are coming for dinner tomorrow and Daddy will be home then. We're going to have chicken for dinner, and trifle for pudding. It's your favourite. You'll get to see Daddy tomorrow,' she said gently, reaching for her son to give him a cuddle.

But James was having none of it, pulling away from her. 'I want to see Daddy NOW!' he yelled impatiently, causing Nyx to wake up with a jump and hiss at a hurt-looking Al before shooting off through the cat flap with a noisy clatter. Lily, startled by the shouting and the hubbub, began to cry.

Ginny took a deep, calming breath, trying to keep her voice even.

'You do NOT shout at me, young man,' she said sternly over her daughter's anguished wails, her eyes flashing. 'We all miss Daddy but there is nothing we can do about it. Granny and Granddad will be here in an hour, so you better go and pack your toys away in your trunk before they get here.'

James stared back gloomily at his mother.

'James, don't make me tell you again,' she said in a low, warning tone, and reluctantly James trudged dejectedly out from the kitchen, his Quidditch annual still gripped tightly in his fist, as Al followed after him.

Ginny swiftly picked up her agitated daughter from her high chair and cradled her in her arms, rocking her and shushing her gently. *I want to see Harry, too,* she thought to herself, stroking the downy red hair on her daughter's head as her cries subsided. *I miss him, too.*

Since Harry had got his promotion as head of the Auror Office last year, he had been spending more and more time away from the family. Ginny knew how much the promotion had meant to him, and how Harry still felt as though he had something to prove to the world. Even though the hype that had surrounded him had died down, his name would be in the history books forever. But Harry had wanted to forge his own career through his own hard work and achievements, not live off the back of the tale by which he was most well-known.

Despite the numerous conversations they'd had regarding Voldemort and Harry's part in his downfall, Harry still thought it was something he hadn't done alone and was therefore not really responsible for, no matter how many people thought he was the hero of the story. And so, Harry had instead worked harder and harder at the Ministry, earning merit for his own efforts and finally being recognized for something which he felt he actually had control over.

Ginny had been pleased for him, of course. She could see that, by gaining respect as an Auror, he had been, in a way, reclaiming his identity. He was no longer the "Boy Who Lived" or "Voldemort's destroyer". Instead, he was now Chief Auror Harry Potter, responsible for the incarceration of many of the wizard world's most wanted criminals and head of a dozen Aurors. He was a man in his own right and could feel pride knowing that he'd made it on his own.

But still, even though she understood her husband's motives, Ginny could not help but feel as disgruntled as her son, James. She had always tried very hard to be supportive of Harry, but she missed her husband and the way things once were between them. If she were honest, Ginny felt like they were more like brother and sister these days, rather than husband and wife. They had barely spent any time together as just the two of them once the children had arrived, and they were so tired most of the time these days that the only activities going on in the bedroom were snatches of much-needed sleep.

It was never going to be easy, balancing a family with their own careers, Ginny had known that. And being a mother meant sacrificing certain things for her children. As soon as she had found out she was pregnant with James, she had retired from the Holyhead Harpies straight away after four brief but dazzling years, with ten England caps to her name, at the age of just twenty-two. Quidditch was a dangerous sport, and there was no way she would have put an unborn baby at risk, no matter how much she loved playing.

After James was born, she found she had been reluctant to get on a broom again. What if she had got injured? How could she have looked after her baby properly if she had been risking life and limb on a broomstick? She had known she could not continue playing Quidditch once she had a baby, and that had broken her heart. Ginny's bright career had abruptly come to an end, and this time it was she who worried about loss of identity. But she'd had someone else to put first, now. And that was one of the hardest lessons Ginny had to learn about becoming a mother.

Ginny had been offered a position as Junior Quidditch Correspondent at the *Daily Prophet* when James was just three months old, and she had jumped at the chance. Her deep love of the sport coupled with her in-depth insider knowledge and various Quidditch contacts made her perfect for the role, and it was both immersive and rewarding. Once more, she had a name for herself, and her fears about losing her identity were banished.

It had been hard work, having to prove herself as a journalist, but within a year, Ginny had shed her "Junior" title and had become Quidditch Correspondent for Wales & Northern Ireland. And just last month, Ginny had got her own major promotion, as Senior Quidditch Correspondent. The promotion had meant coverage of the highest-profile games, including internationals, as well as managing the other correspondents. She often had to speak on the WWN for post-match analysis of games and interview some of the top stars in Quidditch, all of which, ironically, made her more high-profile than her famous husband.

But guilt was starting to gnaw at her insides. Ginny felt like she was being a bad mother for needing and enjoying her work, especially since Harry had got his promotion last year. Harry was around less and less these days to babysit and no matter how much her mother and father insisted that they loved looking after the kids, Ginny could not stop the nagging doubt that maybe she could not cope with being a working mother after all.

As far as Harry was concerned, everything was just fine. She did not know how to begin to tell him that it wasn't. That she missed her husband and their children missed their father. That she felt like she had so much on her plate that she never had time to stop. That it felt like he was slipping away from her when he lay next to her at night. That she needed him to take some of the pressure off her and help her.

It wasn't his fault, Ginny reminded herself. He loved her and he loved his kids, she knew that. But he wouldn't rest until he felt he had proved himself. And wasn't she herself guilty of doing exactly the same thing? So how could she even approach the issue?

The feeling of Lily struggling in her arms brought Ginny crashing back to the present, and she checked the clock. Half three. She needed to dress, make herself look presentable and pack the kids' overnight things before her mum and dad came to fetch them to take them to The Burrow, and then grab a bite to eat before heading to the Appleby Arrows versus Wimbourne Wasps match this evening. The report needed to be in for next morning's publication, and she still had all the things on her list to get. Merlin knew when Harry would be home tonight, if at all.

Sighing, she rose from the table, with Lily still cradled in her arms, and headed for the bedroom.

## Chapter 3 – The Hermit

*Chapter 3 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 3 The Hermit

The bright, Cornish morning sunshine flooded through the small, dirty windows of an otherwise cosy-looking cottage. All was quiet except for the faint susurrations of the sea in the distance and the odd repetitive cry of the gulls that wheeled and soared overhead. There was no roar of cars or chatter of people. The only sounds that ever punctured the air around here were the sounds of nature. And that was exactly the way Severus Snape liked it.

He was now sitting in his favourite armchair, nursing a steaming cup of Earl Grey. To anyone who had known him in his former life, he looked pretty much as he always had: stern, with penetrating black eyes and jet black hair that hung in curtains around his pale face. He was still lean and still moved with a quick, graceful gait. The only thing that looked different about him was that he now bore an angry-looking, gnarled scar on one side of his neck, a scar that he kept hidden with his trademark high-collared shirts.

It had been over ten years since he'd got that scar, and as ugly as it was, Snape found he could live with it quite happily. After all, he had never been a vain man. And the circumstances in which he got the scar had, perversely, led to his escape. Because Severus Snape had always planned to escape the life he had been dealt, once his obligations to Lily and defeating Voldemort were completed. It just so happened that the incident with the snake actually saved him the trouble from faking his own death.

He had been planning his exit from the Wizarding world for many years and had begun to do so in earnest once his Mark had begun to burn again and he had realised Voldemort was growing stronger. He had drawn up his will so that, if he died, all the money from his Gringotts account would be left to a false name in a Muggle bank

account. He'd even bought the cottage, in an isolated part of Cornwall, in which he could disappear once Voldemort was finally brought down.

Being rescued by the house-elf therefore wasn't just a life-saver; it had given him the perfect alibi for escape. He could not return to Spinner's End, of course; too many people, Death Eaters and colleagues alike, knew of its location. Apart from a few books and trinkets he wished he'd had the time to salvage, he didn't miss the old place much. It was filled with bad childhood memories and loneliness. Whereas with the Cornish cottage, Snape felt that he finally had something of his own which was not tainted by baggage and he could start afresh. The sea air and the remoteness of the location all helped to soothe his troubled soul.

Snape realised just how lucky he had been to have survived the snake attack, however. The injury to his neck had narrowly missed his main artery and through a sheer miracle had not punctured his oesophagus; otherwise he would have choked to death on his own blood. His vocal chords were also, mercifully, undamaged. He had, however, lost a great deal of blood, but it had been the venom from the viper that had posed the greatest danger of all. It was so deadly and immobilising, even if he'd had a bezoar on him, he could not have moved to use it. If the elf had waited even another minute or two, he would have surely died.

The elf had done well, though, in administering the potions. The anti-venom had started to work almost immediately, and the Blood-Replenishing Potions rejuvenated his tired body quickly. When he had come to, he had found himself still on the floor of the Shack in darkness, with the elf's large, orb-like eyes staring down at him. His neck had felt both sore and itchy, as the dittany set to work in knitting together his ripped flesh.

It had taken Snape a few moments to piece together what had happened; all the while the chaotic sounds of battle echoed around him. He had thought through his options and realised that if he had been left for dead, he could use the situation to his advantage and flee. Who would care about the traitorous former headmaster anyway? Most people would believe the Dark Lord himself had disposed of his dead body.

Grateful to find that he had still got the use of his voice, he had commanded the frightened elf to Apparate with him to his Cornish cottage, despite her protestations. The elf had had no choice but to comply, however, and after making sure the empty potion phials were retrieved, they had departed without further argument.

The elf had stood trembling in the middle of the lounge as the still blood-soaked Snape had lit a fire in the hearth and then collapsed in the arm chair. He had needed to think quickly about the future and how he was going to survive. His will would be sorted by the state. He would be able to live modestly from all the Galleons he had squirreled away over the years. And he'd already packed the pantry full with food, held fresh under a stasis charm, enough to last him at least a month, as well as a wardrobe full of clothes and some potion equipment and ingredients. What he had needed now was to make sure his new haven was kept a secret, with a spell stronger than the perfunctory measures he had taken so far. He had needed some way to make it untraceable. Unplottable, even.

Thanking once again his luck, his Slytherin cunning and his sharp wits, Snape had forced the elf to participate in a Fidelius charm in order to make the cottage Unplottable in much the same way the Order headquarters had once been. Once the charm had been completed, with his remaining energy he had cast a Disillusionment charm on himself before modifying the elf's memory. The elf, who had been clearly confused about her surroundings, had Disapparated immediately from the cottage, leaving Snape finally alone.

And his plan had worked. No-one had found him due to his inspired use of the Fidelius charm, and the Prophet had reported that he was amongst the fallen in the war. And no-one had even tried to contact him. Until, one year to the day after the Battle of Hogwarts, he had received a letter from Minerva McGonagall. He had been both surprised and annoyed that she had not simply assumed like everyone else that he had died. But Minerva had always been a stubborn witch, and she didn't give up too easily. And so he had received a letter from her every year since.

At least through her letters, he'd found out that it was she who had sent the elf. He had presumed it was Potter, but he hadn't dwelled on it too much. Why would he? He'd left that world behind him.

Snape now spent his days in solitude, either working on his own personal potions projects, reading, fishing, cooking, or studying. He was, more or less, happy. A quick glamour charm and some plain, dark Muggle clothing allowed him to wander into the village to withdraw money and buy groceries. Very occasionally, he might stop at the pub for a snifter of whiskey. But apart from those limited snippets of interaction with other people, Snape was essentially a hermit.

It was not often that he felt lonely, however. He was used to his own company and there were very few people, if any, whom he considered to be friends or whose company he wanted to be in. But he did want to keep up with the events that were going on in the Wizarding world, regardless of his absence. And for that reason, he had taken out subscriptions to both *Potioneer Magazine* and *The Daily Prophet*, using an alias.

Snape knew he'd never go back to living amongst wizards ever again. He did not want any supposed glory from his part in the war from Potter-fans or any comeback from pro-Voldemort supporters who had escaped doing time in Azkaban. He would certainly face a trial himself and could be put in Azkaban for Dumbledore's murder, no matter how necessary it had been for their plan to succeed. He was not going to risk incarceration when he had been incarcerated for the majority of his adult life by two masters.

He saw what had happened at Lucius Malfoy's trial through the reports in *The Prophet*. Of course, the slippery git would have got off with a few well-placed bribes thrown here and there, riding on the back of his wife's bravery during the battle. But Snape himself was convinced he would never have such luck. No matter who defended him or what witnesses were called to the stand, his record spoke for itself: a supposedly "reformed" Death Eater, let off once from the testimony of Albus Dumbledore, who then went on to kill the only person who had trusted him and who had, by all intents and purposes, been on Voldemort's side. Murder was murder, no matter what the circumstances. Even for the "greater good", he thought to himself with a curled lip. Harry Potter had tried defending him in the press, but Snape knew that the majority of people would be against him.

The scraping and tapping at the front window disturbed Snape from his reverie. After placing his cup of still-steaming Earl Grey down on the coffee table, he rose quickly, crossed the room and pushed open the tiny, dusty window. Two large, yellow eyes stared back at him, and Snape could not help but give a small smile. Just as he had expected, it was the delivery owl from *The Daily Prophet*; the same owl that had delivered his paper for the last two weeks in succession, in fact. He took the paper from the little owl's beak and pushed the window open yet further, inviting the owl to come in.

With a grateful hoot, the owl fluttered inside on to the window sill, where Snape always left a cup of water and leftover scraps from his breakfast for the occasion. This time, the owl was treated to some bacon rind, which she hastily devoured, and then took a long drink from the water Snape had provided. Once the owl was satiated, she ruffled her feathers and hopped back on to the outside ledge of the open window, allowing Snape to stroke the soft plumage of her head for a few moments before she took flight. He watched the owl soar up into the sky and away over the cliff tops before closing the window and returning to the comfort of his arm chair to settle down and read.

**TRUNK-LOAD OF ILLICIT WANDS SEIZED IN MONTENEGRO**, the headline announced on the front page. Snape frowned. Voldemort had spent much time in Albania over the years and had gained some influence in that part of Europe. Over the last couple of years, various Dark artefacts had been confiscated from the surrounding areas, and he wondered if it was part of a bigger picture somehow.

Still frowning, Snape turned the paper over to sports pages, wanting to catch up on the Quidditch news before sinking his teeth into what looked to be a very interesting front-page story indeed. Shaking the paper straight, he began to read.

#### **AMAZING ARROWS SILENCE WASPS' BUZZ**

*It was near-perfect Quidditch conditions on Tuesday night for the match that everyone had been talking about since the start of the season: Lincolnshire's plucky Appleby Arrows seeking revenge for their last thrashing at the hands of long-term rivals, Dorset's mighty Wimbourne Wasps, writes Ginevra Potter, Senior Quidditch Correspondent.*

*The Arrows certainly looked relaxed with the advantage of playing at home, and the sell-out crowd was positively charged with expectation on what turned out to be a bright, crisp November evening.*

*After a shaky start and an early onslaught of goals by Wasps' rising star, Chaser Felicity Luckett, the Arrows soon settled into their stride and matched the Wasps goal for*

goal. The frantic pace showed that the Arrows have indeed upped their game since last season, undoubtedly bolstered by the Galleons invested by their new sponsors, the energy drink Avada Colada. New signings this season for the Arrows, Beater Marshall Mitchell and Chaser Ariane Smallwood, really began to show their worth after Mitchell's sterling defence against a volley of Bludgers from the Wasps almost threatened to interrupt the rally of goals. Some quick thinking and even quicker flying from Smallwood ensured the Arrows stayed on track.

A heart-stopping moment at around thirty minutes into the game saw Wasps' Seeker, Cho Chang, perform the Wronski Feint, but Arrows Seeker, Jono Abbott, impressively remained on his broom throughout. Shortly after, an accidental Bump by Wasps' Beater Riley O'Reilly, currently on loan from the Ballycastle Bats, resulted in a penalty for the Arrows, easily taken by Lockett.

The match concluded after just under an hour's play, with Arrows Seeker Abbott turning out some spectacular flying, stealing the Snitch from under a frustrated Chang's nose, leaving the final score at 170-250. Arrows fought bravely for a well-deserved victory, and all eyes must surely be on the return fixture at home to Wasps next Spring. The competition for the cup is certainly hotting up, and the Arrows have proved that, if their luck holds, they are certainly one to watch this season.

Snape gave a faint snort, his lip curling involuntarily as he stared at the slow-motion picture of the two Seekers replaying the dramatic Wronski Feint. He still found it hard to believe that Ginevra Potter, the youngest of the Weasley clan he'd taught at Hogwarts, was the new Senior Quidditch Correspondent for *The Daily Prophet*. The girl was still in her twenties, for Merlin's sake! Admittedly, she'd had a short but nonetheless dazzling career as Chaser for the Holyhead Harpies and had been captained for England a handful of times. But still, in his eyes, it seemed wrong somehow that someone so young could be called "senior" at anything.

Of course, he thought sourly, lip curling even more, once she had agreed to start churning out offspring, sired by her tedious and now thankfully less famous husband, there was no way she could maintain the physically demanding role of a Quidditch player. It seemed to Snape that Ginevra Potter took after her mother in her eagerness to squeeze out filthy, mewling urchins. Three before the age of thirty. What a waste.

Oh yes. Snape knew about the Potters' children. He knew about their wedding, too. He might be living away from the Wizarding world but, thanks to *The Daily Prophet*, he could keep up to date with everything that was going on, including births, marriages and deaths. *Potioneer Magazine* indulged his hobby, but *The Prophet* was like a life-line to him, his only link to the world he'd left behind. *The Daily Prophet* had become his substitute for real human contact. *The Prophet*, however, was soon to play a far bigger role in Snape's life than he ever imagined, and the hermit life he had enjoyed over the past decade would never be the same again.

Snape, blissfully unaware of the events to come, sipped at his tea and continued to read in peaceful solitude.

## Chapter 4 - Dinner Party At The Potters'

*Chapter 4 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 4 Dinner Party At The Potters'

Ginny had been grateful for the relatively short Quidditch match yesterday. She had managed to owl her report off to the Prophet before ten o'clock that night and had gone to bed shortly afterwards. She had not even heard Harry come in, so deep was her slumber. But she had obviously needed the rest: she awoke the next morning feeling refreshed for a change, and with the children still at her parents, she was free to spend the day doing chores and preparing for dinner with Ron and Hermione that evening.

She chose to make roast chicken with herbed butter, onions and garlic, served with seasonal vegetables and crispy roast potatoes. The dish was easy to prepare; it was in fact something she had been taught by her mother to make, and it also happened to be incredibly delicious. It was warm and comforting, just what was needed on a chilly November evening. For dessert, Ginny had made a trifle that very morning. So, by the time Ron and Hermione showed up, everything was under control, and she finally started to feel like she could relax and enjoy the company of her husband and their friends.

Hugo, Rose, Lily and Al were at The Burrow again for the night, giving the four friends a rare chance to catch up. James was told he could join the meal on the express condition from Ginny that he behaved himself. James could not resist his favourite meal, coupled with the chance to spend time with his dad, and subsequently had chosen the seat next to Harry. James was being as good as his word, carefully eating his food with his fork and trying hard not to interrupt the adults' conversation.

'Great chicken, Ginny,' Ron managed to mutter between mouthfuls. 'Almost as good as Mum's.'

Ginny grinned as she watched her brother shovelling his food into his gullet as fast as he could. There was no bigger compliment from Ron when it came to food than him devouring it as quickly as possible. The faster he ate, therefore, the more he enjoyed it.

Hermione, however, was less than impressed. 'Ron!' she admonished. 'It's one thing eating like a pig when we're at home, but we're in company now!'

Ron gave a muffled reply through his full mouth, with a comment that sounded suspiciously like 'air amily,' and narrowly avoided spraying food all over little James.

Harry chuckled and topped up everyone's wine glasses. 'Is it me, or does it feel like AGES since we've done this? You know - just get together, eat and catch up?' he asked the table at large.

'It has been ages,' Hermione answered sadly. 'Just before Hugo was born, actually. Goodness, that was ten months ago!' she added with surprise.

'Time has been flying,' Ginny agreed. 'And I don't know what your workload is like at the moment, but it's just crazy for us. I'm just grateful it's not a World Cup year, or I have no idea how we'd cope.'

Hermione nodded eagerly in agreement. 'The last few weeks have been such a flurry at the Ministry! It's all over *The Prophet* now, of course, but I'm sure either Harry or your dad have told you all about the Montenegro situation.'

Ginny and Ron's father, Arthur Weasley, had been the head of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects since

1996. However, due to the increase in all kinds of fake magical goods from far Eastern Europe and the Middle East in recent years, the department had changed its name to the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Spells and Magical Objects, in order to encompass all illegal activity in fraudulent magic.

'Well, it gets even fishier,' Harry said after a sip of wine. 'Let's just say the character that Ron and I have been busting our Gobstones trying to catch for the last few months might just know one or two things about what's been happening in Montenegro.'

Ron put down his fork with a clatter and burped gently with contentment, patting his stomach. 'Can we not talk about work?' he pleaded. 'Merlin knows I'm sick of it at the moment. No offence, Harry,' he added quickly, looking over at his friend and boss. Harry, however, was nodding in agreement.

'Roll on Christmas, I say,' Harry said cheerily. 'I could do with some time off.'

'Oh, God,' whined Hermione. 'That's another thing to think about. I've usually done all my Christmas shopping by now. I haven't even started yet!'

Now it was Ginny's turn to laugh. 'Tut, tut, Hermione. Middle of November and no Christmas presents yet? You're slipping!' she teased gently.

Hermione rolled her eyes good-naturedly and took a sip from her wine.

If there was one thing Ginny had noticed most about Hermione becoming a mother, it was her ability to loosen up and be able to take a joke, even one that was aimed at her. Ginny understood the reasons why Hermione had been so sensitive and uptight at Hogwarts, but those traits had lingered a little after Hermione had left school and had sometimes threatened to overshadow what a deeply warm woman she actually was. Having children had softened Hermione somehow, and Ginny loved her even more for it.

'Oh, that's what I meant to ask you,' Ginny said suddenly, leaning in towards Hermione. 'Have you had your invitation to Luna's wedding yet?'

'I got it yesterday!' Hermione replied excitedly. 'It was a really nice touch, making those fairies appear. Looks like it's going to be a big do. The Scamanders are really wealthy.'

Ginny smiled. 'I'm so happy for Luna. Rolf seems like such a lovely guy, and he's just perfect for her.'

'Bet you ten Galleons they'll be going to Sweden for their honeymoon to chase Crumple-Horned Snorkacks,' Ron muttered to Harry, who stifled a snort.

The clattering of the cat flap signalled Nyx's arrival to the party. She mewed loudly as she wound around the assembled friend's legs, the smell of chicken evidently driving her crazy.

'Okay, Nyx, we heard you the first time,' Ginny grumbled, rubbing the now-purring Kneazle on her head. 'You'll get your chicken in a minute.'

As Harry cleared away the plates, fed the ever-mewing Kneazle and served up dessert, conversation turned inevitably back towards the Ministry and the mystery surrounding the activity in Montenegro. However, conscious that James was listening, Harry could not go into too much depth regarding his theories of their origins and how it linked with his case of his most-wanted wizard.

After devouring a huge helping of Ginny's trifle, James had started to nod off at the table, but he was not the only one feeling sleepy. Only fifteen minutes after putting him to bed, Ron and Hermione apologised profusely for being so tired and left shortly afterwards amidst much hugging and promises to do it again soon, with Hermione firmly insisting that it was their turn to play host next time.

Shortly after, Harry and Ginny retired to bed themselves. Harry curled up behind Ginny like a spoon, burying his face at her neck and kissing her softly, making ripples of pleasure shudder through her. The knowledge that James would sleep right through the night, along with the fact that there was no Al or Lily to disturb them, was clearly an aphrodisiac.

Ginny sighed gently as Harry's hand traced the slight curve of her belly before moving up to cup her full breasts. It had been so long since they had shared a moment like this together. Ginny felt her passion flame at his touch, and her body responded to him almost immediately. She needed this; she needed the contact. Each touch and caress felt as if it was somehow repairing the tattered tapestry of their relationship.

Just as she was succumbing to the delicious ministrations of Harry's hands at her breasts, Harry murmured sleepily in her ear, 'Night, love. Sweet dreams.'

Ginny felt the shivers of pleasure being replaced by the creeping tendrils of dread as Harry rolled over on to his side of the bed. The coolness from the absence of his body against hers reflected the sense of rejection that had washed over her. Of course he was tired, her mind reasoned. So was she. But she could not help the tears silently falling onto her pillow or stop the feeling of loneliness that gnawed at her heart. And, once more, Ginny felt as though the fabric of their marriage was frayed and falling apart at the seams.

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Author's note: Thank you to my beta Agnus Castus for all of her enthusiasm and endless patience.

## Chapter 5 - November Spawned A Monster

*Chapter 5 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 5 November Spawned A Monster

The end of November had flown by with increasingly bitter temperatures, and once more, Harry and Ginny had found themselves caught up in a flurry of activity from being back in their old routine of juggling their children with work, which had again left them with no decent quality time alone together.

Ginny's moods would swing from morose to white-hot rage whenever she thought of the seemingly impossible situation that she and Harry were in. When she was younger, Ginny had never been one to hold her tongue when something had angered her. These days, as a mother, she was acutely aware of the damage that arguing parents could have on the impressionable children witnessing them. And she'd had no real time alone with Harry to be able to voice her concerns. This led to Ginny repressing her anger, which made her tired and even more miserable, and feeling evermore resentful, like a pressure cooker that could explode at any second.

Meanwhile, many miles away in Cornwall, Snape happened to be feeling very pleased with himself. He'd just finished a paper for *Potioneer Magazine* on the effects of the lunar eclipse on the brewing of Wolfsbane Potion. The paper had taken him over six years to complete, owing to the rarity of total lunar eclipses and the need to replicate his experiments in order to guarantee consistent results. It had been complex work, and Snape had needed to use his Astronomy skills as well as his Potions expertise in order for the potion to be successful.

Although he'd not had a werewolf to try out his completed potion on, he was deeply confident that Wolfsbane, when brewed at a lunar eclipse, would be several times more potent than normal Wolfsbane. This meant that a lower dosage would be needed when treating the afflicted. He'd also concluded that Wolfsbane brewed under these conditions, if contained correctly, could be stored in the same way as a medicine. Currently, Wolfsbane had to be brewed from scratch for each lunar cycle in order to treat the lycanthrope, and any remaining potion could not be stored for future usage.

Snape had sent his paper to *Potioneer Magazine* signed with his usual pseudonym. The irony was not lost on him that this work had the potential to be as great a discovery as Wolfsbane itself, and if his hypothesis were correct, his name, or rather, his pseudonym, would go down in the history books forever. No-one would know who the true creator was.

For Snape, this was just another bitter pill he'd have to swallow. At the very least, it echoed the pattern of the rest of his life to-date. When he had been a part of the Wizarding world, no-one, except Dumbledore, had known who he really was. No-one, except that old, manipulating wizard, had known the true cause of his hostility and anger, and all he had sacrificed on a daily basis to avenge Lily and defeat the Dark Lord. And now, in his chosen exile from that world, no-one would know that it was he who had potentially discovered one of the greatest potions of the twenty-first century.

Snape was choosing to celebrate his finished paper with a bottle of very expensive French elf-made wine, some rich, creamy cheese and a copy of the day's *Daily Prophet*. He allowed himself a satisfied smirk as the delicious berry notes from the wine danced on his tongue, merging with the velvety tones from the cheese. The taste of success, indeed. Feelings of relaxation and achievement spread through him from the very first sip. Placing his glass carefully onto the small coffee table next to his favourite armchair and leaning back with a contented sigh, he settled down and began to read.

#### AUGUREY DEATHS RAISES NEW HEALTH FEARS

*The Prophet has had confirmation today from its Irish counterpart, Ogma Scéala, that several Augureys have been found dead near the Wicklow nature reserve, located over forty miles south of Dublin.*

*The mysterious deaths have occurred just over a year after the Nogtail Flu disaster, increasing the pressure on the Irish Ministry of Magic to find answers quickly and to prevent history from repeating itself.*

*Nogtail Flu is widely believed to be the worst thing to have happened to the Wizarding world in the last century after the return of Lord Voldemort. Dozens of victims died, and as the infection spiralled out of control, the virus crossed over to the Muggle population. It is estimated that forty Muggles died in the UK alone as a result of the disease, which was named "Swine Flu" by the Muggle media. Many still feel anger over the way the Nogtail Flu situation was handled by both the management of St. Mungo's and the British magical government.*

*Ardal O'Flaherty, the Irish Minister for Magic, has called for calm whilst the Irish Ministry investigate the as-yet unexplained bird deaths further.*

Snape quirked his eyebrow. He remembered the Nogtail Flu debacle all too well. Miles Bletchley had been one of the many in the Wizarding world who had been killed by the virus, and for some reason his untimely death had resonated with him. Miles had been a student in Snape's own House when he had been Head of Slytherin, and the Bletchleys were one of the few Wizarding families who had not been on Lucius Malfoy's payroll in some way. Personally knowing someone who had died from the illness had made it all the more real.

Snape remembered feeling angry about how slowly the Ministry of Magic had reacted to the crisis. St. Mungo's Healers and potion-makers had come up with an antidote quickly, but the bureaucracy at the Ministry of Magic had meant that there had been acres of red tape to wade through, and it had taken weeks for the medicine to be approved by the Office for the Regulation of Magical Remedies and Potions. This had resulted in needless deaths and because the illness was not contained, it had spread into the Muggle world, causing more devastation.

The Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, had certainly had his work cut out from that point, hiding the truth from the Muggles and liaising with the Muggle Prime Minister on how to tackle the epidemic. Luckily, Muggle healthcare seemed to be better organised than the Wizarding world's, as their own medicines had been highly effective at halting the spread of the disease.

The Ministry of Magic had been restructured once the virus had finally been controlled. A furious Shacklebolt had instigated a whole new branch of government called the Department of Magical Healthcare Services, which had taken St. Mungo's self-regulatory powers away, and he had drawn up emergency plans should another pandemic happen again.

It was no wonder that the pressure was now on the Irish Ministry of Magic to locate the source of the Augurey deaths as quickly as possible and rule out the threat of infection, Snape mused. Had he realised at the time what a tragic farce the Nogtail Flu would have turned into, he would have brewed the cures and issued them himself.

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The last Sunday in November saw torrential rain in Godric's Hollow, forcing the Potters to stay indoors and relax. Ginny welcomed the prospect of a lazy Sunday with relief. Her mother had left her a crock-pot full of delicious lamb casserole for dinner, so all Ginny had to do was whip up some mashed potatoes and steam some vegetables to serve with it.

The house did not look like a bomb had hit it, for a change, and the boys were in the lounge watching black and white cartoons on a Muggle television that Harry had insisted on purchasing for these very occasions. Harry himself was having a very rare lie-in, which Ginny could not begrudge him. Lily was in her high-chair, gurgling quietly to herself.

And so, finally, Ginny had some much-needed "me" time. She was currently sitting at the kitchen table with Nyx purring contentedly on her knees and a steaming cup of tea, sorting through old photographs and arranging them into albums, which was one of the many odd tasks that seemed important to do but which she never had time for.

Ginny smiled as she picked up a photo from Ron and Hermione's wedding. Harry and she were best man and bridesmaid, respectively. Hermione was smiling broadly, her eyes shining, looking absolutely beautiful in a long, pale ivory gown. Ron kept tugging at his dress robes self-consciously, looking flustered, but breaking into a huge grin whenever he looked at his glowing bride. Harry and Ginny were also grinning and waving happily, their arms around their friends. It was a truly wonderful and unforgettable day. Her brother George had presented Hermione and Ron with a prank present of a gnome in a box at the reception, which had then gone on the rampage, skittering under the guests' feet, scaring Muggle guests and climbing onto the buffet. The gnome had managed to eat half a plate of vol-au-vents before George had managed to capture it and stow it safely back in the box before presenting the happy couple with his real present (a beautiful magical clock, not dissimilar to the one in the kitchen at The Burrow).

Ginny smiled to herself once more as she placed the picture neatly into the photo album. She had just picked up a picture of Al's first birthday when, all of a sudden, a familiar bushy-haired head began to spin inside the middle of the fireplace.



'Morning, Ginny!' Hermione said brightly, after a delicate coughing fit. 'I hope I'm not interrupting anything. Got time for a chat?'

Ginny grinned. 'I was just thinking about you! Was going to Floo you later. You alright?'

Hermione blew a strand of bushy hair out of her face. 'Ron's visiting your mum with the kids today, so I've had a chance to get the chores done. Honestly, I have no idea how I would cope if I had to do it the Muggle way!'

'I've got no idea how I'd cope without Mum, either. She's so good, she made us a casserole for dinner tonight,' Ginny replied, tickling Nyx behind the ears.

'Molly is a superstar; she's always doing stuff like that for me and Ron, too,' Hermione agreed. 'How's your weekend going?'

'It's quiet. I'm sitting here arranging old photos into albums whilst the boys are busy watching cartoons. Harry is having a lie-in, and Missy here,' she said, gesturing to Lily in her high chair, 'is as quiet as a dormouse. It's bliss!'

Hermione grinned back. 'Lazy Sunday all round then.' Her tone suddenly became more serious. 'Look, I won't keep you, but I wanted to tell you something.'

Ginny's brow furrowed. 'What is it?'

'You know The Prophet has been going on about Augurey Flu after those Augureys were found dead in Ireland last week?'

Ginny nodded.

'Well, it's been confirmed. Leopold Volksgeist, who is one of the officers within the Spirit Division in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, was taken ill to Saint Mungo's late last night. Kingsley Shacklebolt has sent owls to all heads of departments this morning confirming the news. Harry and Arthur should be getting an owl about it any moment.'

Ginny looked shocked. 'Merlin's beard, that's terrible! Is he alright? What about the rest of the Ministry?'

Hermione sighed. 'It's too early to tell yet, but Kingsley will be making a formal announcement to The Prophet this morning before meeting with the Irish Minister for Magic, so expect it to be all over the news by the end of the day. Kingsley's advice to us is to keep calm and keep it business as usual. We're all expected to go into work tomorrow. Leopold had apparently just come back from a meeting in Ireland with the Grogoch Control Office on Friday night, so there should be no risk to the rest of us.'

Ginny gnawed at her bottom lip with her teeth. 'This doesn't look good, Hermione.'

Hermione nodded slowly. 'I know. But I wanted to let you know the facts as soon as I'd heard, rather than *The Prophet's* speculation. No offence,' she added quickly, flushing slightly as she realised she was slighting her friend's employer.

Ginny, however, did not seem to notice. 'Thank you for telling me. I'd better go and wake Harry up before the owl does.'

Hermione gave her a reassuring smile. 'Don't worry, Ginny. Kingsley has taken steps to make sure a pandemic like Nogtail Flu can never happen again. He'll be issuing symptoms and advice in his Prophet announcement later.'

Ginny smiled weakly in return and bade Hermione goodbye, watching the fire long after Hermione's head had gone. How could she not worry? Her father, her husband, her brother and her best friend all worked at the Ministry. As much as she had faith in Kingsley's emergency plans, she could not help but feel anxious. Nogtail Flu had rocked the foundations of the Wizarding world, and the thought of that happening again sent shivers down her spine.

Leaving her still-steaming cup of tea and the piles of photographs on the kitchen table, Ginny carefully removed Nyx from her lap, left the kitchen and set off up the stairs to wake Harry and tell him the news.

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Author's note: The title of the Irish newspaper, Ogmha Scéala = Ogmha is a God from Irish mythology, one of Tuatha Dé Danann. He is the God of Eloquence and Runes. Scéala is one of the Gaelic words for news.

Grogoch - a half-human, half-spirit entity which originated in Scotland and settled in Ireland.

Thanks to my Betas, Agnus Castus and Apple Blossom, for their patience, enthusiasm, and hard work.

## Chapter 6 - Hagrid's Lament

*Chapter 6 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 6 Hagrid's Lament

'Please, Headmistress. There's got ter be another way!'

Hagrid, the Hogwarts Groundskeeper, was looking down at Minerva McGonagall, distress written all over his huge, bushy face. He was wringing his impossibly large hands together, each as big as dustbin lids, in anguish.

'I'm sorry, Hagrid,' Minerva answered, her voice firm but with a note of compassion in it nonetheless. 'This is in the Ministry's hands now. We cannot jeopardise the school by housing these animals in the Forbidden Forest any longer.'

'But they ain't hurtin' no-one! Look at 'em! They're wild animals! They shouldn' be caged up like that!' Hagrid argued, pointing passionately as the man from the Department

for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures huffed and puffed, lugging cage after cage of Augureys on to the back of his truck. The Augureys, whilst usually sorrowful-looking birds, seemed more mournful than ever, huddled up together on their perches, their greenish-black feathers ruffled. Now and then, they would cry dolefully, and Hagrid suspected it had little to do with the impending rain clouds which were gathering overhead.

'I'm sorry,' Minerva said again, a little harder this time. 'There's nothing we can do.'

'He's... He's gonna kill 'em, ain't he?' Hagrid asked roughly, his voice breaking as he fished for his tablecloth-sized spotted handkerchief from his jacket pocket.

Minerva patted Hagrid's arm awkwardly in an attempt at a comforting gesture, but didn't answer the gamekeeper.

'Poor, innocent birds,' Hagrid choked. 'N-Never done no harm to no-one,' he stuttered, tears leaking from his crinkly, beetle-black eyes.

'There, there, Hagrid,' Minerva replied briskly. 'I know how hard this is for you. But we have to obey the Ministry. We just have to hope to Merlin that the scare will blow over quickly, unlike the whole Nogtail farce,' she sniffed. 'I am sure there will be Augureys in the Forbidden Forest again soon once the hullabaloo has subsided.'

Hagrid seemed to be placated by this and blew his nose thunderously into his vast handkerchief, as they both watched the man from the Ministry stow the last Augurey cage on the back of the truck and walk slowly towards them.

The Ministry official was wearing goggles, a mask that covered his mouth and nose, and a robe that looked to be made out of plastic. 'I won't come too close,' he called to them cheerfully. 'Best to be safe. Think that's the lot of them. Had to get rid of the nests as well, see, in case other Augureys decide to set up home.'

The birds, which were looking more despondent than ever in their cages, wailed forlornly behind him.

'If you see any others in the Forest, mind, you call the Ministry straight away,' he continued. 'I'm just going to use a quick *tergeo* spell on you both now. Not that you're at risk, because you haven't handled them. But you can never be too safe!'

After performing the spell on Hagrid and Minerva, and some brief words of thanks from the Headmistress, the man from the Ministry gave them both a friendly wave before boarding his truck and starting the engine.

'Well, I think this calls for a wee dram of Firewhisky, don't you?' Minerva asked crisply as she and Hagrid watched the truck slowly trundle across the grounds before disappearing from view. 'I always keep a bottle in my office in case of emergencies. And, Merlin knows, this has to be one of the worst emergencies I've seen in recent years.'

Hagrid, touched by Minerva's offer of hospitality, dutifully followed the stern Headmistress across the chilly, deserted winter grounds of Hogwarts in silence and on through the maze of corridors in the ancient castle. The students had been sent home the previous evening after Kingsley Shacklebolt's decree was announced in the *Prophet* that all Augureys inhabiting areas of Wizarding population would be "removed" with immediate effect, which meant that the castle was just as deserted as the grounds. It felt unnatural for the castle, which usually thrummed with activity and increasing anticipation as the Christmas holidays drew ever nearer, to be so still, and the shimmering Christmas decorations in the Great Hall looked somehow forlorn without the throng of excited pupils to marvel at them.

Hagrid followed a weary Minerva slowly up the winding spiral staircase that led to her office and through the old oak door. He somehow managed to squeeze himself into a plush, red armchair, noticing yesterday's *Daily Prophet* still lying on her desk.

'S'not right, though,' Hagrid grunted as Minerva busied herself with conjuring two crystal tumblers of Firewhisky out of thin air and sending one soaring towards the Gamekeeper. 'Augureys naturally avoid humans. Shacklebolt didn't 'ave ter get rid of 'em like that.'

Minerva took a healthy sip of Firewhisky before replying. 'The Ministry had to be seen to be doing something, Hagrid. I can't say I agree with sending pupils home unnecessarily and disrupting their education.' Minerva pursed her lips in disapproval. 'However, prevention is better than cure. Three more un-named people were taken to St. Mungo's yesterday, one of which was another Ministry employee! I had no choice in the matter.' The Headmistress looked at Hagrid with a pained expression now. 'You understand, don't you?'

Hagrid nodded sadly and then drained his shot of Firewhisky as if it were water. 'Course I do. Just doing yer job. Woulda been uproar if yer refused. And if one of the students got ill...' He trailed off. He didn't have to finish the sentence. The thought was too horrific to even contemplate.

'Who do yer think it is?' Hagrid asked Minerva as she refilled his tumbler to the brim this time. 'The Ministry fella who got taken to the hospital yesterday?' He was trying to keep his composure, but Minerva could see his bottom lip quivering. 'I keep thinking, if it was Harry, Ron, or Hermione, I don't know what I'd do with meself.' Hagrid's voice broke, and he fumbled once more with his huge spotted handkerchief.

'We shouldn't speculate, Hagrid,' Minerva replied quietly. 'The *Prophet* will release names in due course. But for now, we just have to hope the Ministry have got their pandemic plans right this time. The reports say that so far, everyone who has been admitted to St. Mungo's has responded to the potions. Although, being kept all cooped up in the hospital quarantine ward can't be much fun.'

Hagrid stared glumly at his Firewhisky. 'S'pose the *Prophet* would report it straight away if one of them three got ill,' he mused, swilling the amber liquid around the glass.

'Exactly,' Minerva agreed with a sense of finality and downed the rest of her Firewhisky without as much as a wince.

\* \* \*

Throughout December, life at the Potters' carried on regardless amidst the drama of the unfolding Augurey Flu scare. Ginny had decided that one of the advantages of Harry, Ron and Hermione working at the Ministry of Magic was that they often heard the facts before anyone else. For example, the Potters had discovered that the second Ministry official to be admitted to St. Mungo's was an old, methodical kind of wizard called Humphrey Harbottle, who worked within the Department for Magical Games and Sports and responsible for co-ordinating the British Gobstones League. Harry had told Ginny once that a practical joke played on Humphrey had gone down in comedy legend when a junior clerk had swapped a set of his regulation Gobstones for Dungbombs during the finals of BGL Cup a few years ago.

But, Ginny had to admit that Shacklebolt's pandemic plans seemed to be working so far, and the illness seemed to be contained. It didn't stop her worrying about her friends and family at the Ministry, however. The news of Hogwarts pupils being sent home and the Augureys being taken away from the Forbidden Forest had saddened her, too, and she vowed to herself that she and Harry would try and find time over the Christmas holidays to pay Hagrid a little visit with the kids to cheer him up.

She herself was currently at home in Godric's Hollow writing Christmas cards whilst listening to the WWN. The familiar sounds of Celestina Warbeck's *All I Want For Christmas (Is A New Broomstick)* and the smell of freshly-made mince pies was making her feel quite festive, and she was soon singing along as she scribbled away at the cards with her bright pink quill.

'Mummy?'

A small, tired voice interrupted Ginny from her card-writing. Standing before her was her youngest son, Al, who looked as pale as a ghost with dark circles around his bright green eyes. Any Christmas cheer she had been feeling evaporated instantly at the sight of him.

'Al, are you okay?' Ginny's forehead creased in worry; he looked absolutely dreadful. She got up and knelt in front of him, feeling his forehead. It was on fire; he clearly had a raging temperature. His small body shook as he sneezed, and he looked pitifully up at his mother, swaying slightly from the effort of standing up.

'Mummy... I don't feel very well,' was the last thing Al managed to murmur before he fell forwards and collapsed in his mother's arms.

# Chapter 7 - St. Mungo's Fire

Chapter 7 of 29

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

## Chapter 7 St. Mungo's Fire

Ginny's blood turned to ice as her son's weak body flopped into her arms. She could feel every inch of him burning up through his thin, Snitch-covered pyjamas. Her mind reeled. *Not Al. This couldn't be happening. Not to my precious Al.*

Ginny knew it was wrong to admit it, and indeed she would admit it only to herself, but out of all of her children, Al was the one she had bonded with most closely. To say "favourite" would not be fair; Ginny loved each of her kids, of course. But James was headstrong and they often clashed, and he'd always been Daddy's boy at heart. As for Lily, although she was a happy baby, she was still too young to fully show her personality yet. Al, on the other hand, was a sweet boy: serious, thoughtful, and gentle. He was almost the polar opposite of James in many ways. The thought of losing Al sent another shudder of ice-cold dread through her and snapped her into action.

'Harry!' she yelled, scooping Al up into her arms and rushing from the living room into the hallway, clutching him tightly. 'Harry! Quickly! It's Al!'

The sound of shouting caused Lily, who'd been asleep upstairs, to start crying. Within seconds, Harry appeared on the landing and made his way down the stairs towards his wife.

'Love, what is it?' Harry had never seen his wife so distraught. Just the look on her face made something in his stomach drop like a stone.

'Al's burning up. He's got a fever and he just collapsed on me. We have to get him to St Mungo's right now!'

Harry ran his fingers through his characteristically messy black hair whilst taking in the news, his eyes scanning the limp body of his son lolling in Ginny's arms and his mind racing. As if on cue, Lily began to cry even louder.

'You should take him,' Harry muttered quietly after a second, glancing back up the stairs to Lily's nursery. 'I'll take Lily and James to your mum's and then follow you to St Mungo's.'

Ginny nodded. Her eyes were wild with panic, and her breathing was shallow. 'What if it's...' she began, but Harry cut her off.

'There's no time to think about that right now,' he told her, surprising himself at the calmness of his voice. 'Use the Floo in the kitchen and take Al straight to St Mungo's. I'll be there as soon as I can.'

Ginny and Harry looked at each other for a few moments before Ginny raced through into the kitchen. Balancing Al on her hip, she scrambled frantically for the little pot of Floo powder kept by the grate, grabbed a handful of the iridescent silver dust and threw it into the fireplace. The spectacular emerald flames rose up immediately, and ensuring she was holding on to Al tightly, she stepped into the fire and called shakily, 'St Mungo's hospital!'

As the familiar sensation of spinning began, Ginny cupped Al's head with one hand to stop him being thrown around like a rag doll as the other supported his bottom, holding him even tighter to her. She squeezed her eyes shut as hundreds of fireplaces shot past, but it didn't stop the feeling of dizziness which almost threatened to overwhelm her. Just as she'd lost all orientation of which way was up and which way down, the spinning came to an abrupt stop, and she found herself stumbling and coughing out of a marble grate.

Ginny blinked as she took in her surroundings. She was standing in a deserted reception area filled with rickety wooden chairs and outdated issues of *Witch Weekly*. Everything, from the tiles of the immaculate floor to the walls and ceiling, was of the purest, almost unnaturally hygienic sort of white. Behind a large desk sat a woman in lime green robes, who was now looking up curiously at Ginny. On her chest she wore a badge that said "Welcome Witch". On the wall behind the reception desk was a huge plaque, bearing a coat of arms of a wand and a bone, crossed.

Within seconds, the Welcome Witch had rushed over to Ginny, her eyes resting on the limp form of Al.

'Mrs. Potter, isn't it?' the witch asked gently.

'Please help me! My son...' Ginny started, finding she was shaking.

'It's okay, Mrs. Potter,' the Welcome Witch answered calmly. 'We can help your son. Just tell me his name and what happened and I'll summon the Healers out straight away.'

Ginny took a deep breath before telling the witch about how Al had collapsed in her arms.

'I see.' The witch tried not to look shocked, but Ginny could sense alarm in her eyes. 'Were there any other symptoms besides the fever, sneezing and dizziness?' she asked carefully.

'I... I don't really know,' Ginny admitted. 'He seemed fine at dinner time. Then just a few hours later, he collapsed. Please, help him!' Ginny bit her lip to stop herself from becoming hysterical and shouting at the witch.

The witch clapped her hands, and within seconds Healers had Apparated into the reception area, all clad in the same lime green robes with the St. Mungo's crest on, but wearing masks over their nose and mouth.

'The young boy here, Albus Potter, please take him to the second floor,' she instructed the Healers before turning back to Ginny. 'Mrs. Potter, if you wouldn't mind?'

The Welcome Witch gestured at a stretcher which had been conjured from thin air by one of the Healers, and Ginny carefully laid her son down on it. No sooner had Al had

been placed on the stretcher, both he and the group of Healers Disapparated.

'My son!' Ginny cried in panic. 'Where have you taken my son?'

Once again, the Welcome Witch responded with a calm, measured voice. 'Albus has been taken to the second floor, where Magical Bugs are treated. He'll have a few tests done, nothing painful, and then we'll be able to make him better.'

'Can't I go with him?' she pleaded. Her eyes were frantic with desperation.

'I'm afraid for the time being, whilst the Healers are performing their tests, I will have to ask you to wait in a separate area.'

'But'

'Mrs. Potter, I know this must be very hard for you,' the Welcome Witch cut across Ginny, her voice a little firmer this time. 'But your son is in the best place and receiving the best care available. I will update you as soon as we know what is making Albus ill. But for now, I must ask you to follow me to the waiting area.'

Ginny's shoulders slumped with defeat. The Welcome Witch was right, of course. Ginny would only be in the way whilst the Healers did their tests. But Al was so young and so vulnerable, that as his mother it almost felt like a physical ache to be away from his side when he was suffering.

Ginny followed the witch through a set of double doors and into a long, sparkly-white, deserted corridor. Ginny was surprised that they had yet to encounter anyone else in the hospital. The other times she'd been to St. Mungo's, it had usually been bustling with people, from Healers rushing here and there to patients with various bizarre maladies in the reception waiting to be seen. It was so quiet today, however, that all she could hear was the witch's patent shoes clicking on the highly-polished floor as they walked.

At the bottom of the corridor they turned left and continued through another set of double doors, until they reached an area on the right-hand side that appeared to have thick, clear plastic sheets stretched across the doorway. On the wall to one side was a sign which read, *Quarantine Holding Area*.

Ginny looked at the Welcome Witch in horror as the reality of the situation dawned on her.

'Mrs. Potter, I'm afraid we can't take any chances whilst your son is being tested for Augurey Flu,' the witch explained apologetically. 'This is standard procedure. Please go through. I will be back with information as soon as I have it.' The witch gave a small, sad kind of smile to Ginny as she gestured for her to step through into the holding area.

With a heavy heart, Ginny pushed her way through several of the heavy plastic sheets until she reached what looked like a make-shift seating area. In one corner sat a frail-looking old woman with tweed robes and a big brown leather handbag, who nodded at Ginny in a cheerless sort of way. Ginny nodded back as she took a seat, glad that the old woman had not tried to engage her in conversation; her mind was so full of thoughts she didn't think she'd be able to speak.

Augurey Flu. The Welcome Witch had voiced Ginny's worse fear, the words that neither she nor Harry wanted to hear. All of the people who had been diagnosed with the virus and treated so far were adults. If Al tested positively, he'd be the first child to be diagnosed. What did that mean for his treatment and his recovery? Would his immune system be able to fight the illness? He was just a little boy. Where could he have even caught it, anyway? The last person confirmed to have Augurey Flu was Harbottle, just a few days ago...

Ginny balled her hands into fists. Harbottle was a Ministry employee. And that meant that the only way Al could have surely caught it would have been through Harry bringing the germs home with him from work. A hot flash of anger surged through her. If Al was lying here in St. Mungo's because of Harry...

She squeezed her eyes shut against the frustrated tears that threatened to spill down her face and shook her head to clear her anger at Harry. She knew she shouldn't blame him. She mustn't. It was completely irrational. It was not Harry's fault, her rational mind told her. Of course it wasn't. They needed to stick together now, more than ever. But she could not stop the nagging feeling in her gut that it was indeed Harry's fault that her youngest son was now unconscious, lying in a hospital bed, seriously ill.

## Chapter 8 – Heartache At The Hospital

*Chapter 8 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 8 Heartache At The Hospital

Harry gathered his children and took the Floo to The Burrow as soon as he could after Ginny had set off for St. Mungo's. This was no small feat, as Lily was still distressed and would not be placated after being awoken from her slumber. James, meanwhile, had insisted on packing a bag full of toys and was dithering about whether to take his roaring dragon or his miniature Gobstones for at least five minutes. Plus, travelling by Floo with two small, agitated children turned out to be very tricky indeed. There was no chance of using Apparition, as there was a big risk of Splinching with small children. And, whilst James had got used to the Floo and enjoyed it, the short trip just made Lily scream all the louder. By the time Harry had arrived in the Weasleys' fireplace, his adrenaline levels were so high that he felt as highly-strung as his daughter.

Emergency pandemic measures had been issued by Shackbolt in the *Daily Prophet* and stated that anyone with suspected exposure to Augurey Flu needed to stay in their homes, and if symptoms developed, should go straight to St. Mungo's. Harry, however, had figured that Molly, who saw the children nearly every day, would be in no greater danger than she was already. Taking the children to Molly's was the only option available to him.

Harry hurriedly explained the situation to Molly, who instinctively took the wailing baby from his arms and began to shush her whilst listening in horror. Molly said she would contact Hermione and Ron and tell them to stay at home, too; Hugo and Rose spent a great deal of time with their cousins and were also potentially at risk. After reassuring Molly that he and Ginny would update her with news once they had it, Harry stepped into the grate once more to take the Floo to St. Mungo's.

The Welcome Witch swiftly and politely greeted Harry on his arrival and explained that Al was on the Second Floor undergoing tests in the Magical Bugs ward and that his wife was currently in the waiting area. As she escorted Harry down the sparkling white corridor that led to the Quarantine Holding Area, Harry's mind began to buzz with

thoughts.

Becoming a father had been one of the most challenging things that had ever happened to Harry, second only to defeating Voldemort. As he'd never known his own father, he had no frame of reference of what to do or how to act. Sirius and Dumbledore were the nearest father-figures he'd had in life, and they had only been around for a fleetingly short amount of time. Uncle Vernon could hardly be described as a role model when it came to fatherly behaviour, spoiling Dudley rotten whilst treating him like mud. The Weasleys, of course, had always been like a second family to him and indeed now were his own family by marriage. And as much as he loved them dearly, it wasn't exactly the same.

Harry found that he had been in no way equipped for the feelings that had overwhelmed him once baby James had come into the world. He had felt the urge to protect and care for his child, but it had also stirred up many unresolved feelings about his own relationship with his father, and his father-figures.

For a short time after James' birth, Harry had the almost surreal feeling of actually being his father and holding himself, Harry, as a baby. From what he had been told, James Potter senior had been a good and loving father. Would he, Harry, be a good father, too? Could he provide his son with the love, care and guidance he deserved?

As little James had grown older, the relationship between them had flourished. Harry found that he took to fatherhood like a Grindylow to water. James could be stubborn at times, but he was also loyal, funny and inquisitive, and liked nothing better than to be with his father. James was a Daddy's boy, and they would always share a special bond together. He felt as if he was completing the circle somehow, by being the kind of father to little James that Harry had imagined his own father would have been to him. And Harry, to his shame, could not help but feel some small shred of relief that it was not James that was now lying in St. Mungo's.

As the sound of his clicking boots echoed down the deserted corridor, Harry felt like the worst father in the world for admitting that to himself. Of course he loved Lily and Al, unquestioningly. He would fight to the death to defend them, and the mere thought of Al lying in a hospital bed when Harry was helpless to do anything nearly made him roar aloud in frustration. But occasionally he wondered if he and Ginny had taken on too much in starting a large family at such a young age. He could see Ginny was struggling sometimes, but he didn't know what to do to make it better. If he confronted her about it, she would think he was being disparaging of her mothering abilities, and he already knew that was a sore point for her after the arguments she'd had with Molly after James was born. Molly had been well-meaning, of course, but to Ginny she had come across as interfering and critical, and Harry had taken a stance of "Ginny knows best" when it came to raising their children thereafter.

Harry had been very supportive when Ginny had been offered a job at the *Daily Prophet*. He could see that, like him, she needed to strive to prove herself. Harry assumed it had something to do with being the youngest of seven successful children as well as the loss of her bright yet brief Quidditch career. Something in Ginny had changed since she had become a mother though, Harry had noticed. The playful, spirited side of Ginny seemed to have diminished, somehow. He did not know whether that was a natural part of becoming a mother, or whether it was a reaction against giving up on playing Quidditch. Either way, the children arriving had certainly altered the relationship between them. Gone were the days of romance and spontaneous al fresco sex and long holidays abroad. Harry loved Ginny very much, but often she felt more like a friend than a wife these days, and he didn't know what he could do to change that.

But they had to be strong together now, Harry reminded himself as the Welcome Witch gestured him through the plastic sheets that covered the entrance of the Quarantine Holding Area. Al, their youngest son, was critically ill. They had to pull together, for his sake. But the question of how Al had managed to catch the virus in the first place was something Harry could not explain. The last confirmed case was Harbottle, a Ministry employee. Harry couldn't really remember the last time he saw him at work. Could there be a remote chance that he, Harry, was the one who had potentially infected his own son with Augurey Flu? He shuddered at the thought.

Harry glanced around the shabby seating area and immediately saw Ginny sitting forwards on one of the rickety chairs, her head in her hands and her long, flaming red hair cascading down in front of her face, obscuring her from view like a veil. He was relieved to notice that the only other inhabitant of this rather grim and isolated room was a tweed-clad old witch, who currently had her nose stuck in a rather battered-looking copy of Gilderoy Lockhart's autobiography, *Magical Me*.

Harry approached his wife slowly, eventually coming to stop a few paces in front of her. If he was feeling anguish about Al, he could only wonder what it must be like for her, as Al's mother. A mother's bond with her children was a curious thing, after all. It was that very bond which had saved him from Lord Voldemort when he was just a baby, and that same bond which had forced Molly Weasley to strike down Bellatrix Lestrange at the Battle of Hogwarts when her only daughter had been threatened.

'Ginny,' he whispered, surprised to hear that his voice sounded hoarse.

Ginny's head shot up, and she tossed her mane of hair behind her, unflinchingly meeting his gaze. Harry was not prepared for the depth of anguish which reflected in her chestnut eyes. She looked wan and drawn, and the rims of her eyes were pink from where she had been crying. Harry was very unused to seeing Ginny cry. In fact, one of the things he'd always admired about her was that she rarely did. She had always been strong; a fighter, just like her mother. But seeing her now... she looked nothing short of broken, and it crushed him to see it.

'Love,' he croaked and sat beside her, his arms outstretched to pull his distraught wife to him and embrace her. He wanted to comfort her, to do something to take away her pain and make this horrific situation right. But to his shock and dismay, Ginny flinched and pulled away from him as if burned.

'Don't touch me!' she hissed, and Harry saw that the grief in her eyes had given way to a fierce glare of pure anger.

Harry's eyebrows knotted together in confusion, and his mouth gaped open for a few moments at Ginny's unexpected outburst. 'Love, what's the matter?' he managed to whisper once he'd regained the use of speech.

'What's the *matter*?' Ginny repeated, her voice trembling with barely-concealed rage. 'Our son is lying here in hospital, critically ill, because of the germs ~~you~~ brought home from work, and you dare to stroll in here and ask me what the matter is?' She had now begun to shake in cold fury.

Ginny's accusation stung Harry like a branch from the Whomping Willow, and she was now looking at him with the kind of contempt she'd usually reserved for Draco Malfoy.

Harry reeled. He, too, was concerned that he was to blame for Al's illness. In truth, it could just as well have been Hermione, Ron, Arthur or Percy. Or even Molly, as she had the most contact with her extended family. But Ginny, for whatever reason, had already made up her mind that it was all Harry's fault. It felt as if he'd been hit in the gut by a Bludger.

'Ginny... Don't you think I blame myself for this, too?' he murmured slowly, trying to keep his voice low and unchallenging as Ginny gave a derisive snort. 'Yes, it could have been me. And I will never forgive myself if that's the case. But we don't know that for sure. It could have been anyone.... Ron. Percy. Even your mum.'

If he'd thought this would pacify Ginny, he was sorely mistaken. Ginny looked, if possible, even more incandescent with rage.

'Don't you *dare* blame my family!' Ginny said shrilly, before her face contorted into a grimace. 'I can't even look at you anymore. Get away from me,' she ground out through gritted teeth.

'Ginny...' Harry began. He had to make her see sense. He'd never seen her so angry.

'I mean it,' Ginny growled, her hands balled so tightly into fists that her knuckles had whitened.

'Ginny, please...'

When looking back on this moment, Ginny would not be able to remember it with any kind of clarity. All she knew was that all the frustrations and pent-up emotions she had been keeping a lid on for so long seemed to spill out of her like a burst water main.

A red mist had descended upon Ginny. The force of rage which she directed towards a stunned-looking Harry was so intense that it actually made the ends of her hair crackle. It all came out in a non-stop, angry tirade: Harry's workaholic tendencies, Ginny's juggling of the kids and her own high-pressured job, and Harry's lack of interest

in Ginny romantically. The old woman was now poking her nose over the top of her book, watching the pair of them intently, her eyebrows raised in surprise. She stared from Ginny to Harry in amazement and only retreated behind her book when Ginny glared at her pointedly.

By the time Ginny had finished her tirade, Harry felt as if he'd gone three rounds with a Hungarian Horntail. He couldn't understand where all this resentment had come from. Harry found himself dumbfounded by the sheer force of her rage. There was absolutely nothing he could say to defend himself, not when she was so worked up. Her accusation about Al's illness was one thing; Harry supposed it was natural to try and look for someone or something to blame. But her allegations about their relationship and Harry being a lousy husband and father cut Harry to the core.

Harry gazed in shock his wife. How had it come to this? Where did it start to go wrong? And why hadn't he approached Ginny before? Whatever happened to Gryffindor bravery, confronting difficulties head-on? When he'd first stepped into St. Mungo's, his main concern was the possibility of losing his son. And now, it seemed as though there was a very real possibility of losing his wife, too.

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## Chapter 9 – The Calm Before The Storm

*Chapter 9 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding, and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 9 The Calm Before The Storm

Severus Snape's morning had started out well. He'd donned his plain Muggle clothing and taken a brisk dawn walk along the coastline that led from his cottage, eventually winding his way down to the tiny village harbour to watch the winter sun rise across the sea. The few boats that were moored there bobbed gently on the iron-grey waters to the melody of the clinking of rigging and the cry of the wheeling gulls. The clump of cottages that surrounded the bay looked like crooked teeth in an overcrowded mouth.

He had returned to his own cosy cottage with an appetite and a wind-nipped face and had breakfasted on some warming porridge with cinnamon and honey and strong, black coffee. Shortly afterwards, the unmistakable scratching and hooting at the window signalled the arrival of two owls. Snape rarely got letters, so it was certainly an unusual occurrence to see more than one owl vying for his attention. But there was one letter he'd been hoping for, and so he swiftly opened the window to let both owls in.

The first was instantly recognisable as the owl from the *Daily Prophet*: a small owl with large, yellow eyes and soft, grey plumage. The second was a tawny owl, her black eyes glinting with clear disapproval at the smaller owl. She was carrying a letter tied to her leg. Snape retrieved the mail from both owls and invited them onto the window ledge to take a drink before departing. The *Prophet* owl accepted the invitation, as usual, but the tawny merely clicked her beak and glared at the other owl, as if scolding her for being unprofessional, before taking flight.

Once both owls had departed, Snape crossed the lounge and sat in his favourite armchair. He turned the letter over in his hands. The addressee on the envelope was made out to his pseudonym, and the wax seal on the back bore the *Potioneer Magazine* logo. He felt his stomach swoop as he unfurled the thick, yellow parchment.

A smile began to form on his face, broadening with every line he read. By the time he'd finished the letter, there was a fully-formed smirk of victory etched upon his usually stern features. *Potioneer Magazine* had hailed his Wolfsbane discovery as nothing short of brilliant, and with his permission, would be applying to the Ministry of Magic for funding to begin experimental trials on lycanthropes next year. Moreover, they had invited him to their annual conference to announce the discovery in person. Of course, Snape would politely decline to attend, but he was thrilled to have such recognition of his work. Finally, he'd achieved something he could feel proud of without obligations to anyone else.

His self-imposed exile had given him the opportunity to live without fear of retribution, essentially free. The life he had chosen for himself after he had escaped from the Shrieking Shack would undoubtedly be deemed as no life at all by those who relied on other people for their own happiness, or who based their wealth solely on material things. But Snape had learnt self-reliance at a young age and that skill had become invaluable when he had been tethered to two masters. It was that very skill which had allowed him to act as a spy so successfully during the war, and which now allowed him to live in relative contentment with no one but himself for company.

But underneath his resolute independence ran a strong sense of justice and stubbornness. Snape wanted his pound of flesh. Snape wanted to claw back the long years that had been taken from him through incarceration, firstly from his own mistake of taking the Dark Lord's brand, and then from his allegiance to Dumbledore in order to defeat him. Snape felt that if he could live out the same amount of years in total freedom, doing whatever he wanted to do, then he could finally look death in the eyes without regret. Ten years he'd been free; another ten and his "life debt" would be repaid.

Although, in actuality, it had been three masters Snape had been in servitude to, not two. Lily Potter had undoubtedly been the catalyst for and the meaning of his actions throughout his life until his supposed "death", even as he'd walked the fine line between pleasing Voldemort and Dumbledore. And when Lily had died, he'd clutched on to the memory of her like a rosary and venerated her as the Madonna herself. He'd held on to every smile, every kind act and every sweet recollection, and crystallized them into the pure white diamond of his guiding light. He'd cherished her memory so vehemently that he'd banished any negative thoughts he had about her, instead deflecting his bitterness and anger onto everyone else and, especially, onto himself. She was the only good thing he'd ever had, and he couldn't let anything tarnish it.

Once the war, and essentially his reason for living, was over, Lily's hold on him had slowly begun to diminish. It was only after he'd removed himself from the Wizarding world that he had allowed himself to think about Lily as something other than perfect. He retraced his old memories and found in them the pain of rejection, the anger from her abandonment, the loneliness of losing his best friend, and the humiliation from her choosing James Potter over him. And by allowing himself to feel those negative emotions towards her, instead of blocking them out or channelling them elsewhere, he had therefore allowed her grip on his heart to lessen.

Snape unwittingly reaped the benefits of re-examining his emotions. He'd always thought that his love of Lily defined him so inexorably that any change in his feelings towards her would tear a hole in him that could not be repaired, leaving him bereft and empty. But it did not. Life went on. His nightmares faded along with his bitterness and anger. And, finally, he was able to be the master of his own destiny. There would always be a part of him that loved Lily, of course, but that love was no longer all-consuming, obsessive and idealistic.

With the smirk of success still traced on his thin lips, Snape carefully folded the letter from Potioneer Magazine, tucked it into his breast pocket, and picked up the *Daily Prophet*.

*POTTER'S SON IN AUGUREY FLU DRAMA*, the headline screamed.

In his past life, Snape would have felt a wave of triumph at any Potter-related misfortune. He was therefore surprised to find that the news of Potter's youngest son potentially contracting a serious illness did not stir any kind of happiness or vengeance in him. There was no glee, no joy to be had in the news. But neither was he saddened or concerned. He supposed indifference was an improvement of sorts.

His eyes flicked down to the picture of four-year-old Albus Severus Potter, staring shyly out from the paper with a finger jammed in his mouth. He had Potter's shock of black hair and facially he looked very much like his mother, but it was the shape of the eyes that caught Snape's attention. Lily's eyes. The eyes that had haunted him for so many years; the eyes that had mocked him when staring out of James Potter's features in the shape of Lily's son, now staring out of the face of her grandchild.

Albus Severus Potter. Named, Harry had said to the press, after two of the bravest men he ever knew. Snape personally thought it was a ridiculous couplet, even though he understood what Harry had been trying to achieve. But putting Snape's own name alongside Potter's still rankled him, no matter how noble the gesture.

And now the unfortunately named boy was lying seriously ill in St. Mungo's, undergoing all kinds of tests and suspected to have Augurey Flu. Snape shook his head. Shacklebolt's pandemic measures appeared to be for the most part successful in comparison to the Nogtail Flu outbreak, but there were always going to be some residual casualties, no matter what precautions were put in place. Still, the St. Mungo's Healers seemed to be coping and there had been no fatalities as all the afflicted had responded to treatment.

Snape felt confident as he turned the page that this was just another storm in a Nose-Biting Teacup, and an opportunity for the *Prophet* to use the Potter name to shift more newspapers and create more hype about Augurey Flu. The press seemed to desperately want a death as a result of the virus. After all, "person gets a cold and then gets better" was not really a headline that demanded too much attention. The boy would undoubtedly be fine and none the worse for his misadventure, unless one counted the dreadful hospital food he would no doubt have to endure.

Yes, from where Snape was sitting, he was sure this would all blow over in a day or so.

He couldn't have been further from the truth.

## Chapter 10 - The Knife's Edge

*Chapter 10 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in *Deathly Hallows*.

### Chapter 10 The Knife's Edge

The hundreds of Christmas shoppers who hurried their way daily through the crowds of London's busy Oxford Street were usually too preoccupied with buying bargains or gazing at the twinkling Christmas decorations to pay much attention to a rather strange, dilapidated red-brick department store that was squeezed between two of the rather more fashionable kind of shops. It was named Purge and Dowse Ltd, and what was strange about the store was that it appeared to be always "under renovation" and never seemed to be open. Also, the dummy in the window had been wearing the same outfit for the last few decades. But neither the city workers nor the thousands of tourists who visited this part of central London over the years had noticed this peculiarity. In fact, no Muggles had noticed anything at all odd. Only witches and wizards knew that this shabby-looking shop was actually the front entrance to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries and a few words spoken to the mannequin would gain them entry.

Harry Potter had been to St. Mungo's several times before, both visiting patients and as an expectant parent. He'd always associated visits to the hospital therefore with a feeling of great anxiety; even the excitement of impending fatherhood was laced with apprehension and concern. But none of the tension of his previous visits had compared to the wretched, sleepless night he'd just spent in the Quarantine Holding Area, waiting for news of Al, his youngest son.

His wife Ginny, who had vented her rage at him in a tirade so fierce it could have shamed a Chimaera, had sat huddled in one corner whilst adamantly refusing to look at him. She'd not spoken a word to him since then, even when he'd asked if she wanted a cup of tea from the meagre refreshment trolley that had been provided. She'd merely shaken her head, her lips pursed into a thin line and her jaw set, still avoiding eye contact. Harry, wary of provoking her anger once more, had chosen to sit on the opposite side of the room. Now and then he'd glance at the pathetic tinsel-clad clock and back at his furious wife, but neither was giving him any solace. Time seemed to be going so slowly, he'd been convinced the hands on the clock had actually moved backwards at one point. The snakes of dread in his stomach and the old rickety chair he'd been sitting on added further to his discomfort.

The room's only other occupant, an old woman who'd had her nose stuck in one of Lockhart's awful tomes, had been escorted from the waiting area hours ago. She'd apparently been given the all-clear. Harry couldn't help but grimace at the irony; Lockhart himself was a permanent resident of St. Mungo's, having his mind irrevocably damaged due to the backfiring Memory Charm he'd tried to use on Harry and Ron in the Chamber of Secrets. Nonetheless, this hadn't appeared to halt his muse and despite never fully recovering, he had published many more books since his incarceration in hospital. Harry supposed he should feel in some way responsible for Lockhart's malady, but as far as he was concerned, he'd deserved everything he'd got.

Eventually, after fidgeting and pacing for what had felt like days but which had only really been a few hours, a Healer dressed in lime green robes appeared, looking grave. Harry immediately got up from his chair and crossed the room to join his wife's side.

'Mr and Mrs Potter,' the Healer began slowly, clasping his hands in front of his stomach. 'There is no easy way to say this, I'm afraid. Albus has been diagnosed with Augurey Flu, but as yet he is failing to respond to treatment.'

Harry's insides suddenly turned icy cold. He felt as if there was a Dementor in the room, sucking all of the joy out of him. His heart began to race as he processed what the Healer had just said.

'Not responding to treatment? Why?' Ginny voiced the question first. She was still resolutely not looking at her husband, and only the slight waver in her voice revealed how upset she was at the news.

The Healer sighed. 'I'm afraid we're not really sure. Your son is the first child to contract Augurey Flu, so we have no basis for comparison. Our medicines are regulated and adapted for children, but the potion does not seem to be working. We've already exceeded the highest dose, and Albus hasn't responded to the treatment. We risk an overdose if we try using it again.'

Ginny shook her head in disbelief as Harry gripped on tightly to the armrest of his chair.

'So what happens now?' asked Harry, eventually finding his voice.

'Well, we are in the process of conducting more tests. Albus may have contracted a new, more virulent strain of Augurey Flu, which could be why he is not responding to conventional treatment.'

'And if he has?' Harry fired back.

'Then we will try to amend the potion accordingly,' the Healer replied calmly. 'However, we are against the clock with this. Flu can cause all kinds of problems, from respiratory failure and pneumonia to dehydration and kidney failure. These can be fatal. The longer Albus goes untreated, the more danger he'll be in.'

Ginny looked as though she'd been slapped in the face at this news.

'How long before things get dangerous?' Harry asked quietly.

'Again, it's difficult to say,' replied the Healer. 'The incubation period for Augurey Flu is much quicker than standard flu; within twenty-four hours, as opposed to two days or more. Therefore, from what we have seen, the illness itself is accelerated. In normal flu, pneumonia and other complications can develop around five days after the first initial symptoms in adults. But as Albus is only a child and this is Augurey Flu, we would estimate that complications could arise within two or three days.'

Ginny at last looked from the Healer to Harry for a few moments, and then back again. 'You will be able to get him better, won't you?' she asked, her voice not much more than a whisper.

'We're doing everything we can, Mrs Potter,' the Healer answered gently. 'He's in the best place.'

'When can I see him?' Ginny continued quietly. Not being able to be by her little boy's bedside when he was suffering had given her a physical ache. Being away from him was a kind of pain she had never known before.

The Healer breathed deeply through his nose. 'I understand how hard this is for you, Mrs Potter. You will be able to see Al once he has responded to treatment and is recuperating. It would put you and your husband at risk if we let you see him before that time. I do hope you understand.' He paused, giving a tense sort of smile. 'And how are you both feeling? Have you had any flu-like symptoms?'

Harry and Ginny shook their heads.

'Good. Well, as a precautionary measure, you should both take this Vaccination Potion.' The Healer pulled two little phials of clear, light-blue liquid from his robes and passed them to Ginny and Harry. As they both uncorked the phials and drank the potions, the Healer looked around, taking in the makeshift and unfriendly room. 'We can at least make things a little more comfortable for you in here whilst we undertake some more tests on your son.'

He withdrew his wand and Transfigured some of the rickety old chairs into huge squashy sofas, each one easily big enough to curl up and sleep in. Another flick of his wand saw sandwiches, croissants, and a fresh pot of tea appear on the refreshment trolley.

'Well, I must be getting back now,' the Healer said briskly, stowing his wand back inside his robes. 'I will be down to see you with any news as soon as I have it. And if there's anything else you need, do not hesitate to ask the Welcome Witch.'

Harry and Ginny thanked the Healer sincerely and were lost in their thoughts for some moments after he'd left.

'He'll be alright, Gin,' Harry murmured, as much to convince himself as his wife.

Ginny looked back at her husband properly for the first time since he'd arrived at the hospital. 'How do you know?' she asked, her voice hoarse with repressed emotion.

'I just know,' he replied firmly. He reached for Ginny's hand, and this time she did not pull away. He squeezed it gently, stroking her fingers with his thumb. The chestnut eyes found the green, and they held each other's gaze for the first time in many long, long hours. *They would get through this*, Harry thought. *They would get through this together.*

Suddenly, a blinding flash of light issued from one of the far windows, making both Harry and Ginny shield their eyes. Harry was about to reach for his wand when he realised the light was actually the unmistakable smoky form of a Patronus, racing towards him. As the glowing white shape grew closer, Harry recognized it immediately: it was a small dog, a Jack Russell Terrier. The Patronus belonged to none other than his best friend, Ron.

The little dog opened its mouth and in Ron's voice, said: *'It's Montenegro. We've trapped the suspect. We need back-up.'*

Harry looked back at Ginny and saw the unasked question within her eyes. He'd been working too hard to let the Montenegro suspect just slip away now he was within reach. If they nailed him, he would provide them with leads for many other cases. And yet his son was critically ill, here in this very hospital. He needed to be here for his family. Harry shifted in his seat, torn between his two responsibilities, knowing that every second he delayed answering the Patronus was a delay to the biggest case of his life. Then, his decision made, he pulled out his wand in order to cast his reply.

## Chapter 11 – Ginny's Darkest Hour

*Chapter 11 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in



## Chapter 11 Ginny's Darkest Hour

As soon as Ron's Patronus appeared, Ginny knew that Harry would leave. The case was too important for him not to; it was a matter of national, if not international, security. He'd been vaccinated and was therefore deemed safe, so there was nothing physically stopping him from going, apart from his own conscience. Ginny pictured Harry's desperate face in her mind's eye; the anguish he felt at having to choose between Al's bedside and his responsibility as Head Auror was clear to see. In the end, it was Ginny who told him he could leave, if he felt it was right. But the moment Harry chose his work over his son was the moment Ginny's heart tore in two. Harry's decision shifted everything, in Ginny's mind. To her, it was the climax of all the unrest and discord she had been feeling about their relationship for months. It also proved that her instincts were right; they had been floundering for some time, papering over the cracks and pretending everything was fine. In reality, the distance had grown between them day by day. But neither of them wanted to believe it was true.

Thinking back, Ginny realised that one of the things she had always loved about Harry was his fearless Gryffindor bravery; he'd always had a knight-in-shining-armour complex and genuinely wanted to help save the world, even after the fall of Voldemort. But Ginny had never thought that his saviour issues would one day end up destroying their marriage. And for all their combined Gryffindor valour, neither of them had been brave enough to confront the other about their relationship, which had been unravelling in front of their very eyes. But Ginny now knew one thing for sure: to her, their marriage was over, and nothing could ever be the same again.

The hours after Harry left the hospital were some of the loneliest Ginny had ever experienced. Isolation seemed to tear at her insides with sharp claws. She came to realise that she was not accustomed to her own company, and furthermore, she hated it. As the youngest of seven children, there had always been someone around when she was growing up. Later, at Hogwarts, sharing a dormitory meant she had never been truly alone. Then, after the war, she and Harry had married and moved in together, with the children following shortly after. Therefore, Ginny had always had people around her when she needed them. Except for today. Except for now.

With Harry gone, Ginny's heart ached for her mother and father. But her parents were caring for Lily and James, staying at home just as Shackbolt's pandemic measures instructed. Even if Molly and Arthur arrived at St. Mungo's, they would not be allowed in the Quarantine Holding Area anyway. With mounting despair, Ginny realised that Hermione and the kids would have also been told to remain indoors, as would her brothers and their families. The overwhelming feeling of loneliness crushed her chest like a Boa constrictor, and she could not stop hot tears from falling. When Fred died, she'd had the rest of the family around for support. But right now, with her youngest son on his potential deathbed and after being abandoned by her husband and with no-one else in the world to share her troubles, Ginny felt like the most wretched witch in the world. Her anguished sobs echoed around the shabby Quarantine Holding Area for a long time until just before dawn, when she eventually fell into a fitful sleep on one of the Transfigured sofas, tears still damp on her cheeks.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, hundreds of miles away, in a small fishing village on the coast of Cornwall, Severus Snape was already awake and starting his day. He'd always been an early riser and did not require much sleep, finding the morning to be his most productive time of day. Ideas and moments of clarity seemed to strike in the early morning, and the stillness of the dawn soothed him somehow. During those brief, fleeting minutes he could find absolute peace as he went on his usual sunrise stroll around the harbour before returning to a simple, warming breakfast. His daily routine was timed perfectly. The *Prophet* owl would always turn up after he'd finished breakfast, and he'd enjoy savouring it cover-to-cover before starting work in his laboratory or engaging in his latest tome. Severus Snape was a man of habit, and ten years alone had let him hone his routine with the same precision as he could slice asphodel.

And sure enough, no sooner had he washed up his breakfast bowl than the sound of a beak tapped against the living room window, heralding the arrival of the delivery owl with the morning's *Daily Prophet*.

*POTTERS' YOUNGEST SON CRITICALLY ILL WITH AUGUREY FLU* the headline screamed. And underneath: *Healers working round the clock as Albus Severus fails to respond to treatment.*

Snape hurriedly paid the owl and sent the bird away without the usual treat and sip of water. The owl hooted reproachfully at this; it was used to receiving sustenance after a long trip from London to Cornwall, so to be sent away empty-beaked was an unwelcome surprise. Snape, however, did not notice the bird's discomfort. He was too busy devouring the article, a deep frown etched on his stern face.

The Potter boy not responding to treatment? That was indeed unusual. Snape supposed the Healers at St. Mungo's were using the same potions as they had for the Nogtail Flu outbreak, which had, up until this point, been a successful strategy. But then again, Snape reasoned, all of the afflicted so far had been adults. Snape recalled that the Nogtail Flu medication had been successful in both children and adults, so why should the potions not work for the Potter boy's Augurey Flu?

Snape breathed heavily through his nose. There had to be a logical answer to this conundrum. The Nogtail Flu medication had been analysed at length in the *Potioneer Magazine* and the ingredients dissected and discussed in a way that only advanced potion-makers could. Snape felt confident, therefore, that he could re-create the potion without too much incident. But simply replicating the potion would not help to cure Albus Severus. Snape could feel his curiosity and naturally competitive instinct beginning to stir. The irony of potentially saving yet another Potter child was not lost on Snape, but the challenge had little to do with altruism and more to do with his own sense of pride in his field of expertise. In order to solve the puzzle, he knew he must discover why the potion was failing to work on the young boy.

Snape knew that there might be a myriad of reasons why the boy was not responding to treatment; indeed, it might not have anything to do with the medication at all. It could be that the boy had contracted a different strain of Augurey Flu which was resilient to the potion, or that he was somehow immune to the potion's effects. It could even have been a bad batch of potion which had been administered. But the first place to start, in Snape's mind, was to deconstruct the potion and examine the ingredients first.

Snape felt a flash of excitement at this fresh test of his skills, the likes of which he'd not experienced since embarking on his Wolfsbane project. If the bunch of incompetents at St. Mungo's could not figure out the answer, then he would. The challenge was afoot.

\* \* \*

Snape worked tirelessly all morning, not even stopping to have his usual mid-morning tea or to go to the bathroom. He poured over his old copies of *Potioneer Magazine*, going through pages of analysis in order to construct his own method and conducting complex calculations to work out the amounts of ingredients needed for the potion. By the time he stopped for lunch, his stomach was growling like an angry Crup, but he'd successfully drafted a list of ingredients which he then needed to acquire.

Fortunately for him, his apothecary of choice for the last ten years was both discreet and well-stocked. Usually he conducted his business via post, preferring the anonymity it provided. However, there was no time to lose, so after lunch, Snape used a simple glamour charm to change his appearance, donned his Muggle clothing and Floo'd directly into the apothecary.

Snape found the visit to be straightforward. The owner, a short, rotund fellow with a wispy goat-tail of a beard, had no qualms about being handed a list, and he retrieved the items without engaging his customer in any kind of small-talk or asking any questions. These were things for which Snape was endlessly grateful. Twenty minutes later, Snape was back to normal in his cottage with bags full of ingredients and the whole afternoon ahead of him to get to work in his laboratory and begin analysing them.

For Snape, the preparation of ingredients was a relaxing and harmonious part of the ritual of potion-making. He enjoyed having everything just so, displayed in little bowls and arranged in order of usage. Roots were sliced, leaves were diced and bugs were ground up. There was no rush to complete this part, for each ingredient required special attention and needed to be precisely prepared in order to yield the best results.

It was whilst powdering dried Goosegrass that Snape suddenly had a flashback which made his blood run cold. In a Potions lesson at Hogwarts over thirty years ago, he

and Lily had been diligently preparing ingredients in order to make a Pepperup Potion. Lily had been chopping Goosegrass when, seemingly out of nowhere, her eyes began streaming and she sneezed incessantly. The reaction was so bad that a blotchy rash had appeared on her milky-white skin, and she became weak and couldn't see through the tears, and Professor Slughorn had ordered Snape to take her to the Hospital Wing straight away. Snape remembered how anxious he'd been as he'd held on to Lily's feeble form and gently guided her through the castle. Madam Pomfrey had said it looked as though Lily was allergic to Goosegrass and asked her if she'd ever taken Pepperup Potion before. Lily, being Muggleborn and therefore not brought up around magical remedies, said no, and Madam Pomfrey told Lily that if ever she was ill with a cold or flu, to avoid Pepperup Potion because it contained Goosegrass and in all likelihood would make her symptoms worse.

An idea flashed in Snape's head. Was it possible for allergies to be genetic? And if so, could allergies be passed on through a recessive gene? He had no idea if Harry was allergic to Goosegrass, but if this particular allergy was genetic it could explain why Albus' symptoms were not being cured by the potion. He knew he might be clutching at straws, but Snape's gut was telling him that the possibility was too strong to ignore.

Grabbing a fresh piece of parchment and quill, Snape began to scrawl a letter detailing Albus Severus' grandmother's allergy to Goosegrass and how he believed this might be preventing Albus from recovering. Once he had finished and had signed it with his pseudonym, he pocketed the letter and once more cast a glamour charm that rendered him unrecognisable before taking the Floo straight to St. Mungo's.

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## Chapter 12 – Ginny's Plan

*Chapter 12 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 12 Ginny's Plan

#### MIRACULOUS RECOVERY FOR POTTERS' SON

*Albus Severus to be home in time for Christmas, St. Mungo's announces.*

*Albus Severus Potter, the youngest son of Head Auror Harry Potter and the Daily Prophet's own Quidditch reporter Ginevra Potter, was last night given the all-clear after a mysterious tip-off from a stranger alerted St. Mungo's Healers to a hitherto unknown allergy. The four-year-old had previously been in a critical condition after being diagnosed with Augurey Flu and failing to respond to conventional treatment, but at the eleventh hour the Good Samaritan provided Healers with crucial life-saving information via a hand-delivered letter.*

*The correspondence, which was signed Alfric O. Nobel PhD, detailed a rare familial allergic reaction to Goosegrass, a component of Augurey Flu medication, as well as Pepper-Up Potion and other wizarding remedies. This allergy had exacerbated the flu symptoms, in effect making the illness worse.*

*"It seems little Albus Severus has a guardian angel looking over him," said Philomena Beardshaw, Welcome Witch at St. Mungo's. "The poor mite was in such a bad way. But the as soon as the Healers amended the treatment to take the allergy into account, Albus became stronger and stronger as the hours passed. We'll keep him in for another few days for observation as a precaution, but he'll definitely be home in time for Christmas."*

*Speculation is rife regarding the mysterious Mr. Nobel, who recently received acclaim for his revolutionary work with Wolfsbane. "I've never met him, but he seems to be a very private chap; likes to keep himself to himself," said Benedict Bung, editor of Potioneer Magazine. "We've invited him to speak at lectures a few times on his Wolfsbane breakthrough, but he's turned us down every time."*

*While it seems the modest Mr. Nobel shuns the spotlight, Albus Severus' famous parents are keen to offer their gratitude to their son's reclusive saviour. "I just want to offer our heartfelt thanks," a visibly relieved Ginevra Potter told us yesterday. "Without Mr. Nobel's intervention, we could have lost our son. There aren't words to describe how grateful we are."*

*St. Mungo's have confirmed that the number of Augurey Flu cases has risen to fifteen. As we reported yesterday, Minister for Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt has instructed a nationwide roll-out of vaccinations from next week.*

Snape threw the paper onto the coffee table, a smirk forming on his lips. His hunch had paid off. The boy had got better, and his alter-ego was now being heralded as some kind of benevolent enigma in the press. He was pretty sure if the *Prophet* knew the hero of the hour was a former Death Eater, he wouldn't be praised in such terms. Still, he found the description deeply amusing, and he was indeed proud of solving the riddle, but as for thanks, he neither needed nor cared for it, no matter how heartfelt the sentiment. Especially, that was, from Harry Potter.

Yes, it was true that Harry Potter had tried to clear his name after the Battle of Hogwarts. And it was also true Snape's feelings for Lily had dissipated over the years. But still, his resentment towards Harry's father was still there, no matter how faint, and Harry would always bear some of that residual resentment by proxy.

It was deeply ironic, then, that as well as spending most of his adult life protecting the boy he despised, he also happened to save his son. Somewhere in the next world, Snape thought, James Potter was probably having a laugh at his expense. But Snape did not save Albus Severus for Harry, or James, or even for Lily. He did it for himself. Because he could. And because he'd had a choice, this time.

\* \* \*

The weeks leading up to Christmas seemed to fly by at Godric's Hollow once Al had returned home at last. James was over the moon to have his play-mate back, and Al seemed none the worse for his misadventure. Both boys were getting more and more excited by the day, with tales of stockings and presents filling most of their

conversations. The Ministry's swift action meant that the majority of the Wizarding community were now vaccinated, including the Weasleys and their extended family. All this should have meant that the onset of Christmas should be a happy time for Ginny, but nothing could have been further from the truth.

Ginny had moved out of the marital bedroom amidst hushed arguments regarding Harry's decision to follow up the case in Montenegro. Harry, quite fairly, tried to explain that he'd had little choice in the matter, but as far as Ginny was concerned, their marriage was all but over, and nothing Harry could say or do could make her change her mind. It was only for the sake of the children that Ginny and Harry continued to stay under one roof. But their conversations now, during the rare times they weren't arguing, were monosyllabic and cold. And as well as quarrelling about their broken marriage, they had also found a new topic to squabble over: the identity of Al's mysterious saviour.

"He obviously doesn't want any recognition," an exasperated Harry explained for what felt like the hundredth time. "He's deliberately avoiding the media spotlight. If he won't even turn up to discuss his life's work with other professionals, he's not going to want to meet you!"

"I just want to thank him properly," Ginny retorted hotly. "Without him, our son would be dead. Don't you think that deserves some thanks?"

"Of course he does! You thanked him already in the *Prophet*. What else do you need to do? Give him a pot of Galleons? Bake him a cake?"

"I don't know," Ginny hissed. "I'd just like the opportunity to thank him face-to-face, that's all. Don't you want to know who he is?"

"Not really," Harry answered mulishly. "If he doesn't want to come forward, then it's his choice. I'm grateful for his knowledge, but I also respect his privacy, if that's what he wants."

"But he could be a relative, Harry! How else did he know about Al's allergy?"

"He could be a Healer. He could be a Seer. I don't really care, Ginny!"

"Well, I do!" Ginny yelled, her face flushed with anger. "And I'm going to find out!"

The fact that Harry did not care about the identity of the man who saved his son was, to Ginny, further proof of how far their marriage had declined and how much they had grown apart. It almost felt like she didn't recognise Harry any more. It felt as if everything he now stood for was diametrically opposed to what she believed, that every utterance that came out of his mouth she disagreed with and every conversation she entered into with him ended in a fight. It was exhausting and drove a wedge even further between them.

Ginny was actually relieved to be around people other than Harry for Christmas Day, and the sheer volume of family and friends gathered for the event meant it was easy not to speak to him too often. Being at The Burrow was comforting, as was the company of her nearest and dearest, not to mention her mother's outstanding Christmas dinner. There were many laughs, which was good for Ginny's soul. She realised that she hadn't laughed in months.

But the happiness was short-lived as life got back to normal after Christmas, and work once more dominated Ginny's life. Harry threw himself into his own work with even more gusto than usual, probably to get away from the constant bickering, Ginny assumed. So far, they'd managed to keep their fights away from the children, and as such, the kids didn't think anything was wrong. Ginny had told the boys that she was sleeping in the spare bedroom so that Daddy could get some uninterrupted sleep for work and because she would be closer to Lily's room if the baby awoke in the night. Both of which were plausible explanations which the boys accepted without question, but of course, masked the real reason.

Thoughts of tracking down the enigmatic Mr. Nobel were still on her mind at the start of January, however, and gave Ginny some form of distraction.

At first, she tried simply sending an owl, but to her disappointment the owl came back with the message unread and undelivered. Ginny supposed if he really was such a private man, he might have cast some charm which only allowed certain people to send him mail. It appeared that she would have to try a bit harder if she wanted to make contact with the evermore intriguing Mr. Nobel.

It was a bitterly cold Wednesday afternoon at the *Daily Prophet* headquarters when Ginny got her flash of inspiration. She'd been in the lift, sharing some banter with Bert, the friendly, moustachioed old wizard who worked within the subscriptions department, when the idea struck. Surely, Mr. Nobel had heard the news of Al's illness through the *Daily Prophet*? And if that was the case, surely that meant he had a subscription to the paper? And if he had a subscription, then Ginny would be able to intercept the delivery owl and send him a message that way!

The sheer simplicity of the plan made Ginny's head spin. And the first place to start was to check the subscriptions register, but in order to do that, she'd have to wait until Bert went home for the day at five o'clock.

The next few hours went by painfully slowly as Ginny tried to concentrate on researching for her report on tonight's match between Wigtown Wanderers and Falmouth Falcons. Eventually, five o'clock came and went and Ginny carefully made her way to the basement and found Bert's small, shabby subscription office.

Sure enough, Bert had left on time and luckily for Ginny, his office door did not have a lock on it. She slipped inside surreptitiously, switching the light on with a flick of her wand. Bert's desk had all manner of papers and mess on it, including sweet wrappers, a half-eaten sandwich and lots of broken quills. But it was not difficult to spot what she was looking for: the huge subscriptions ledger, bound in brown leather, sitting proudly between the clutter like a mountain above a stormy sea.

Ginny pulled open the ledger and began to search the rows and rows of cramped handwriting. The subscriptions went back as far as the late 1960s, and Ginny began to realise it might be like a needle in a haystack trying to find him, bearing in mind she didn't know how old he was. If he was ancient, he might be in one of the old, dusty ledgers on the creaking shelves above Bert's desk.

Well, there was no way around it, and she might as well start at the beginning of this ledger. Trawling through, occasionally she would smile when coming across a name she recognised. Warmth spread through her when she saw Hermione's name at the beginning of the 1990s. And her heart gave a triumphant leap when, after only thirty minutes searching, her eyes found the name she had been looking for: *Alfric O. Nobel PhD, subscription beginning 2nd June 1998*.

Now all she had to do was to intercept the delivery owl at dawn.

## Chapter 13 – A Birthday Surprise

*Chapter 13 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter

household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

## Chapter 13 A Birthday Surprise

It was true to say that Severus Snape was not expecting any kind of correspondence on his birthday; for many years now, the ninth of January was just the same as any other winter's day, and he didn't see why his forty-ninth should be any different. So to receive a letter, carefully tucked inside his morning's *Daily Prophet*, was a complete shock.

At first, he thought it might be junk mail; after all, the Prophet did sometimes come with flyers, and the New Year traditionally saw sales in some of the wizarding world's more popular shops, all hawking for trade in the post-Christmas lull. But on closer inspection, he saw that it was actually a thick piece of parchment with his name handwritten in neat, loopy script on the front. The writing was far too big to belong to Minerva and too legible to belong to Benedict Bung, the editor of *Potioneer Magazine*. In fact, he didn't recognise the handwriting at all. And there was absolutely no one else he could think of who would be sending him a letter on this day of all days. Puzzled, and more than a little curious, he unfolded it and began to read.

Dear Mr. Nobel,

I hope you do not mind me contacting you, but I felt it was important to personally offer you my thanks for the selfless way in which you helped to save my son, rather than through the impersonal pages of a newspaper.

Words alone can never express my gratitude, and therefore, as a token of appreciation for what you have done for my family, I would like to invite you to the forthcoming international Quidditch match between England and France on February 12th.

Tickets for this match sold out a long time ago, so if you decide to come, you would be joining me in the press box. I can't guarantee England will win, but I can guarantee fine wine, canapés and, if I do say so myself, the best seats in the house.

I hope you will allow me to make this small gesture of thanks, and I look forward to your reply.

Yours faithfully,

Ginevra Potter

One of Snape's eyebrows quirked characteristically upwards in surprise. Ginevra Potter was inviting him to a Quidditch match? The very idea seemed laughable. And he couldn't help but feel a little affronted at first; he'd managed to stay under the radar for so long, after all. Ginevra would have had to have done some serious snooping in order to trace his pseudonym, and that thought rankled him as an invasion of his privacy. He supposed that, as she worked for the *Prophet*, it wasn't too hard for her to track him down by looking at old subscription records. Still, he had to admit that it had taken some cunning and persistence on her part, even if the intrusion felt annoying initially. Ginevra had clearly wanted to express her gratitude to have gone to such lengths to find a way to send a letter. And what she was proposing had certainly piqued his interest, once his annoyance had subsided, because it had hit on one of the things he sorely missed about the wizarding world: Quidditch.

These days, he followed Quidditch avidly in the *Prophet*, and whilst Ginevra's reports were, dare he admit it, lively and engaging, they were no substitute from being up in the stalls, with the roar of the crowd in his ears and drama unfolding in front of his eyes, a hundred feet up in the air. It had been well over a decade since he'd been to a match and longer still since he'd seen an international game. Added to this the promise of exceptional seats and hospitality meant that Snape was sorely tempted to accept.

He ruminated on the letter for the rest of the day, finally weighing up his decision over a birthday treat of elf-made wine and soft cheese that evening. If he accepted, it would be his first outing in to the wizarding world for ten years. He wasn't used to company. Maybe the crowds would be too much for him to handle? And also, there was no way he was going to reveal his true self to Ginevra; he'd protected his identity for so long that he wasn't prepared to expose it now. But how else could he attend the match and keep his identity intact? After all, the simple glamour charms he'd been using when venturing out into the Muggle world might not be enough to render him completely unrecognisable to Ginevra after teaching her for five years at Hogwarts. He supposed he could grow a beard and tie his hair back, but even that coupled with glamour charms probably wouldn't be enough, either. He supposed he could attend the game and then modify her memory afterwards, but that seemed somewhat drastic for the sake of watching a Quidditch match. Then, the idea hit him. Of course! It was so obvious that he could not suppress the smirk that crept on his lips.

Polyjuice Potion.

Polyjuice Potion took a month to make, and he had just over a month from today to brew it. A well-prepared batch, taken and swigged occasionally from a hipflask, would see him transformed for long enough to sustain the duration of a match. He had boomslang skin, knotgrass, fluxweed, Sal Ammoniac and Antimony already in his own stores, and the lacewing flies and leeches would be easy enough to find. He had no doubt that his apothecary of choice would have all the additional ingredients he needed. Plus, it would be simple to find a hair from one of the unsuspecting fishermen down in the village.

But his acceptance of Ginevra's invitation was conditional upon him attending the match with her alone; he had no desire to be in the company of her tedious husband or any of the well-meaning Weasley clan, or to be surrounded by noisy, excitable children. Or, for that matter, to be circled by a throng of VIPs and press all vying for Ginevra's attention.

And so, after careful consideration, Snape drafted his response and sent it back with the next morning's *Daily Prophet* owl.

\* \* \*

Ginny could barely believe the letter that landed on her desk the very next day. She was fully expecting a polite but firm rejection from the reclusive Mr. Nobel, not an acceptance to her proposal under the condition that it would be her company only he would be keeping. She wrote back via the *Prophet* once more and confirmed that yes, it would just be the two of them in the press box; the opponent's press box was on the other side of the pitch and, regrettably, her family were unable to attend this particular match. She also gave him instructions on where and when to meet her at the *Daily Prophet* headquarters. A few days later, Mr. Nobel responded in kind, confirming he would be "delighted" to attend the match in that case.

Ginny was very much looking forward to the match now. Mr. Nobel had accepted her invitation and had therefore given her an honour that he had not even bestowed to his peers: the chance to meet him. She had no idea if he was thirty or a hundred-and-thirty, but she could not deny that the thought of an enigmatic man requesting her company alone was rather alluring. She knew it was silly, but she had not told Harry of this new development. Why should she? He had no interest in the man who saved his son anyway, so as far as she was concerned, Harry didn't need to know that she had arranged to meet him. And anyway, having a secret all for herself felt good and gave her something to look forward to. Merlin knew she needed it. She found herself counting the days until the match, hoping that when the day finally came that she would not be disappointed by Mr. Nobel's company.

\* \* \*

Snape himself was also looking forward to the upcoming game, despite his earlier reservations. It felt thrilling to be venturing back into the wizarding world in such an illicit manner, where no one would know his true identity. The deception excited him and appealed to his Slytherin nature. And he was just one potion away from once again

experiencing the rush of the fast-paced, glorious sport of Quidditch.

Snape had brewed Polyjuice Potion enough times in his life to barely need to follow the instructions. Still, he would brew this potion with as much care as if it were his first time. The lacewing flies had stewed nicely for twenty-one days, the leeches were unsucculated, and the horn of a Bicorn, which had been lunar extracted, was powdered to perfection. All of his ingredients except one, in fact, were prepared to be assembled into the potion, ready for the match this evening. The outstanding ingredient was also the final one which needed to be added to the potion: the Extract of The-Transfigured-Being-To-Be.

For this ingredient, Snape had to venture out in public. After casting his usual glamour charm to slightly alter his appearance and donning his usual Muggle clothing, he made his way down to the little ramshackle pub in the harbour. "The Ship Inn" was all but deserted in the early afternoon, apart from the grizzled landlord talking in a thick Cornish accent to a burly, middle-aged fisherman with tanned skin, blue eyes and dirty blond hair, swigging a pint of ale at the bar.

Snape was hoping to find someone a little more sophisticated, but beggars most certainly couldn't be choosers, especially as time was against him. He supposed it didn't really matter, after all; the fisherman was different enough in looks from himself and would have to do.

Snape ordered a shot of whisky and took a shabby seat at a table facing the bar. He'd noticed that there were several stray hairs on the shoulders of the thick navy jacket that was draped over the back of the fisherman's chair. All he had to do was wait until the fisherman went to the bathroom, and then he could seize his chance.

His plan worked ridiculously well. The fisherman drained his pint after a few minutes and headed off towards the bathroom. Seeing his cue, Snape downed his shot and quickly went to the bar and ordered another. Whilst the barman was distracted by pouring him another drink, Snape carefully retrieved the hairs from the fisherman's jacket and stowed them in a little tin inside his breast pocket. By the time the barman had served him and the fisherman had returned, no one was any the wiser.

Snape didn't really want the second whisky, as he didn't want to cloud his potion-making. So instead, he made a great show of checking his non-existent watch and cursing the time, and he bade the landlord a hurried farewell.

Several hours later, Snape was hovering above a slowly-bubbling cauldron, the contents thick and mud-like. With skilful fingers, he plucked one of the hairs from the tin and dropped it into the potion. The potion hissed and bubbled frantically before turning a deep teal colour. It reminded Snape of the ocean. Snape adeptly ladled some of the potion into a tall glass, and the rest he siphoned off into large hipflask. But before he could drink the potion, he needed to undress; the fisherman, although roughly the same height, was much stockier than Snape, and he didn't want his clothes to tear as he transformed.

Standing naked and in front of his full length mirror, Snape finally drank the potion down. It was briny, and yet not unpleasant. It tasted like the essence of the sea. Not a second after he'd finished the last drop, his transformation began. His skin started to tickle as it darkened and became tanned, his scalp began to prickle as his hair shortened and turned a sandy blond colour, and his arms, legs and shoulders all became weighty and bulkier. Pin-pricks of light stubble appeared on his chin, and his penetrating obsidian eyes changed into sky blue whilst his nose shortened and flattened. Within a minute, the man in the mirror was unrecognisable.

Snape examined his body carefully. He noticed with arrogance that the fisherman appeared to be just as blessed in the downstairs department as he was. He flexed his muscles and examined his thick, weathered hands, marvelling at the contrast to his own alabaster hue. He felt heavy and ungainly, and decided to practice walking up and down a few times. He needed to look comfortable in his skin, not like some clumsy Neanderthal, after all.

When he was confident he could move in a fluid, natural way, the next step was to Transfigure some of his clothes to fit. Snape decided his dark Muggle clothes covered by his cloak would be inconspicuous enough. As he stared at his newly-clothed form critically in the mirror, he thought that maybe his jumper was just a little too tight around the arms and his jeans a little too snug around the thighs, but there was little that could be done now. He was running out of time, and he had just twenty minutes before he was due to meet his hostess for the evening.

And so, swiftly stashing his wand and hipflask inside his cloak, Snape headed to the seclusion of his garden in order to Apparate directly to the headquarters of the *Daily Prophet*.

## Chapter 14 – A False Start

### *Chapter 14 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in *Deathly Hallows*.

### Chapter 14 A False Start

Ginny arrived early at the *Daily Prophet* headquarters, on the pretext of collecting notes before heading to the stadium for tonight's game. Both Ron and Harry were disappointed and indignant at Ginny's flat refusal to let either them or anyone else in the press box with her that evening. The game was too important, Ginny had said, and she couldn't be distracted during play. She compensated by pulling in a few favours and getting a handful of tickets in a prime spot behind the goals for Harry and the Weasleys instead. And so her father, George and Angelina, Harry, Ron, Bill and Fleur and the older children would be watching the match together in the stands whilst her mother and Hermione looked after the young ones. Percy wasn't a big Quidditch fan and Charlie was in Wales, hand-rearing baby Welsh Greens.

It was a clear, albeit cold February evening. Visibility was good, which boded well for the match. But it wasn't the chill that was bothering Ginny tonight; it was knot of apprehension that had lodged in her stomach.

Ginny didn't know why she was feeling so incredibly nervous as she climbed the steps and passed through the revolving doors into the reception area. She'd deliberately made an effort with her looks tonight, as she usually did for public appearances, but this time she had taken extra care in getting ready. She was wearing her best lavender robes and had even styled her hair. She stood anxiously waiting underneath the huge stone crest where she'd arranged to meet Mr. Nobel, which was carved with the *Daily Prophet* logo: a robed, bearded figure, with a crystal ball in one hand and a long, flowing parchment in the other. Running her hands through her vibrant red locks absently, she felt more than a little stupid for having butterflies. It felt as if she were waiting for a date. At that thought, she shook her head and laughed to herself. A date with a man of unknown age, whom she had never met, and whose only link to her was that he had saved her son's life. Was she really so desperate for male attention after the breakdown of her marriage that she had to resort to concocting a little fantasy? She knew she was setting herself up for disappointment; Mr. Nobel was probably an octogenarian. And she was married, for heaven's sake. Yes, her marriage was falling apart at the seams and she had been miserable for some months, but was that any excuse to be dreaming up fake dates with unknown, mysterious men? Hadn't she learned anything from her experience with Tom Riddle's diary?

'Mrs. Potter?'

Ginny was ripped from her thoughts by a low, rich, Cornish accent. She spun around, and instead of a bent, frail, wizened old man, she was greeted by a tall, ruggedly handsome blond wizard who was looking down at her with interest. The look of surprise must have been clear on Ginny's face, for the man raised a questioning eyebrow at her lack of response. She found her voice after a heartbeat.

'Mr. Nobel?' she asked breathlessly, extending her hand. The man studied her carefully before extending his own. 'It's a pleasure to meet you. Please, call me Ginny.'

Ginny noticed the roughness of his skin when she took his hand and how large it was compared to her own. It made her shiver. He seemed so strong and outdoorsy, not the kind of bookish academic that she had been expecting. Could this hunk really be the man who had saved her son?

'The pleasure is all mine... Ginny.' Snape paused, as if tasting an unfamiliar food. His deep Cornish accent was a surprise to him, and yet it was not unpleasant-sounding. But it did feel strange to refer to Ginny in such informal terms. 'And you must call me Alfric, of course.'

Snape followed Ginny through to the frosty little courtyard at the back of the offices where she had arranged a Portkey to take them to the stadium. As they walked, Ginny apologetically explained that she would need to rush off for ten minutes before the match, in order to meet with the Head of Magical Games and Sports and other tedious guests as part of protocol, but she promised she wouldn't be gone for very long. Snape was only half-listening to Ginny; the rest of his attention was taken up by noticing just what a beautiful woman she had grown into.

Snape remembered how the youngest of the Weasleys had looked at school: flaming red hair, a smattering of freckles on her nose, and skinny to the point of worrisome, all elbows and knees. The only thing that seemed to be the same about Ginny now was her vibrant hair. Other than that, her skin was milky-white, her eyes a deep chestnut colour, and her figure was now rounded and womanly. He wondered idly if child-rearing had anything to do with it or whether it was simply the inevitability of Molly's genes. Either way, he approved of Ginny's shapeliness and wondered just when she had turned into such a beautiful witch. He also pondered on whether she had felt the same shiver when their hands touched.

He soon shook away this foolhardy thought; surely it was nothing more than the effect of being in close proximity to an attractive witch. He'd been without female company for so long that it was highly likely that any contact, even the briefest of handshakes, would stir him. Steeling his thoughts and mentally berating himself for ogling Harry Potter's wife, he joined Ginny in taking the eighteen-minutes-past-seven tattered sock to the Quidditch stadium.

After engaging Snape in polite conversation and making sure he had a glass of expensive wine and canapés, Ginny excused herself momentarily whilst she went to meet and greet the big names attending the game tonight. This did not bother Snape; on the contrary, it gave him a chance to check out his surroundings. The press box itself was long and narrow, right at the very top of the stadium with spectacular views across the whole pitch. He wasn't expecting it to be so plush. Instead of the usual benches that surrounded the rest of the stadium, the box was adorned with two huge squishy leather sofas. It had a table laden with wine, champagne, beer and nibbles of all descriptions to one side, and the walls were decorated with portraits of famous Quidditch players throughout history, who were now currently huddled together in the closest picture frame, eager to get a view of the game.

Snape also wasn't expecting the press box to feel so private. He supposed the roar of the crowd would still be deafening from up here, but it felt somehow secluded, and he could not help but approve. The sheer amount of food and drink on offer felt rather decadent and excessive, seeing as it would be just the two of them watching from the press box tonight, but Snape supposed it was all part of the hospitality that Ginny had alluded to in her letter. Taking a sip of the elf-made wine and finding it to be exceptionally good, Snape began to appreciate the effort Ginny had gone to this evening.

True to her word, Ginny was back within fifteen minutes, by which time Snape had made himself at home on one side of an enormous, comfy sofa.

'Sorry about that, Alfric,' Ginny began, helping herself to a glass of wine and sitting beside him on the sofa. 'It's something of a ritual these days to have to meet and greet before the big games. I find it terribly boring.'

Snape watched her closely before replying. 'I am sure meeting tedious people comes with the territory of fame.'

'That is one aspect of it, yes,' Ginny agreed. 'But I am lucky enough to meet interesting people too. Like yourself.' She smiled then, before taking a delicate sip of wine.

'Whatever makes you think I am in the remotest bit interesting?' Snape enquired slowly.

'I'd say a man who has revolutionised Wolfsbane and was one step ahead of the St Mungo's Healers in diagnosing my son's illness is very interesting indeed.'

Snape said nothing to that, instead noting with astonishment the mischievous twinkle in Ginny's eyes. Was she flirting with him? He took a sip of his wine, merely for something to do.

'I'm so pleased you agreed to come tonight,' Ginny continued. 'I really cannot thank you enough for what you did.'

'You do not need to thank me,' Snape replied coolly, expertly brushing off her praise. 'It was a professional challenge for me. My pride was at stake.' He hoped this would be the end of it; he had no desire to elaborate further.

Ginny, however, clearly wanted answers. 'I have been wondering how you knew about the allergic reaction. I thought maybe you might be a distant relation, or you had once been a Healer...'

Snape turned to Ginny now and his blue eyes were as hard as stone. 'I did not come here to discuss my methods,' he said in a low, warning voice. 'How I knew is irrelevant. I have no wish to talk about it any further.'

Ginny looked taken aback by this curt answer, and she cast her eyes downwards in chastisement. Of course, he was a very private man; he wouldn't share his secrets with the potionering community, so why would he share them with her? 'I'm sorry,' she whispered, her face flushed with embarrassment. 'Forgive my intrusion.'

Snape realised just how harsh he had sounded and regretted making Ginny feel so discomfited, but at least this way there would be no further awkward questions. He understood why she was curious, but still, it was not a topic he wanted to talk about. He tried to smooth over his indiscretion and the following uncomfortable silence by saying, 'Let us move on. I have been very much looking forward to the match tonight. Tell me, who in your opinion are the stronger team?'

Relieved that the gauche moment had passed, Ginny was back on to a subject that she knew intimately, and her eyes lit up with fervour. 'Well, France should definitely not be underestimated tonight, even though we have beaten them in the last four out of five games. Their newest Beater, Pascale Chenevoy, is like a demon on a broomstick. Seriously fast and dangerous. But that said, we've got Oliver Wood, and he is a first-class Goalkeeper. Not to mention some amazing Chasers. So, my money is on England. Not that I'm at all biased, of course.'

Oliver Wood. Now, that name certainly rang a bell to Snape, but he wasn't at liberty to discuss what he knew of his burgeoning career. At the mention of Chasers, Snape recalled that this was the position which Ginny herself had played, at Hogwarts, during her time with the Holyhead Harpies and also professionally for England.

'Do you miss playing Quidditch, Ginny?' he asked after a moment.

Ginny's face fell a little, and Snape noticed how her body language became defensive and tense. 'Yes, I miss it very much. But when you're a mother, your priorities have to change. And that's all there is to it, really.'

Now it was Snape's turn to feel rather rebuked; the uncomfortable silence resumed after Ginny's somewhat irritable response. He'd obviously touched on a sore spot, just as she'd inadvertently touched on his. As he watched her take a hurried sip of wine, he considered how badly the evening was going, and the match hadn't even started yet! Maybe coming here was a bad idea. He'd never been one for small talk in his previous life; it was clear that he was just as inept as ever.

'It looks like it's my turn to apologise,' he began, placing his goblet on the little glass side table. 'It seems I've spoken out of turn.'

Ginny looked up, and a sheepish smile crept across her features. 'No, really. It's a perfectly acceptable question. It just touches a nerve, I guess. I shouldn't have snapped at you, though.' She sighed and gazed at him forlornly. 'Well, we seem to have got off on the foot, haven't we? Can we just forget that the last five minutes ever happened and start all over again?'

Snape considered this and paused for a second, before extending his hand with a smirk. 'Alfric O. Nobel, PhD. Potioneer and socially inept raconteur.'

Ginny laughed before taking his hand. Once again, the strange shiver passed through her as she appreciated his size compared to hers. 'Ginevra Molly Potter. Senior Quidditch Correspondent for the *Daily Prophet* and insufferable nosey nuisance. But you can call me Ginny.'

Snape also felt the shiver pass between them as her soft, pale hand took his. 'The pleasure is all mine, Ginny.' And, for the first time that evening, the smile that crept across his lips was completely genuine.

## Chapter 15 – A Game Of Two Halves

*Chapter 15 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 15 A Game OF Two Halves

Conversation now flowed as easily as the wine in the plush, cosy press box at the top of the Quidditch pitch. The tension broke after the pair began again from scratch, and once the awkward moments had been put behind them, they were actually getting on very well indeed. Ginny found Alfric's humour to be incredibly dry and caustic, and he made her laugh out loud several times, much to his astonishment. She decided that there was something very familiar about him, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Whatever it was, his wicked sense of humour was endearing, and Snape, in turn, was finding Ginny to be an alluring witch who could give as good as she got in terms of witty repartee.

The game of Quidditch started in earnest after a breathtaking display of fireworks, the climax of which saw the flags of both England and France shimmering in the sky in colourful flames. Snape could not help but be impressed at the magical show, and he felt the rush of excitement as the crowd swelled and cheered when the players from both teams descended onto the pitch.

As the commentator boomed the players' introductions around the stadium, Ginny fished for her bright pink Quick-Quotes Quill and a piece of parchment, sucking on the nib hurriedly before setting it down on the table. The quill hovered over the paper and began scrawling away as Ginny began reeling off the names of the players. Snape looked curiously at the quill, his face impassive.

'I only use it as a form of shorthand,' Ginny told him, sensing disapproval in the air. 'The quill records key moments of the game, and I then draft my report from the notes.'

Snape smirked at Ginny's hurried justification. 'I do not doubt your journalistic integrity.'

Ginny's eyes twinkled in response. 'You better not.'

Their eyes locked for a tantalising moment until the high-pitched squeal of the referee's whistle signalled the start of the game.

France got off to a fantastic start. Their Chasers rocketed around the pitch, causing Ginny to groan with dismay as they scored goal after goal within the first ten minutes. Snape watched in amusement when at one point she stood up and ran her fingers through her hair whilst cursing the Beaters for not doing their jobs properly. He found plenty of opportunities to swig discreetly from his hipflask full of Polyjuice potion, such as Ginny's immersion in the match.

England eventually gained possession and fought back with a volley of goals, leading Ginny to bounce up and down in her seat. As Ginny was sitting close to Snape, their thighs brushed briefly. Snape was shocked at the flash of arousal her proximity caused. Once again, he scolded himself inwardly for responding in such a way, but he couldn't deny that the feeling was very pleasant indeed. Through their brief physical contact, he could sense the magic in her, almost feel it. Being around Muggles felt different; somehow they lacked in presence, but he'd never realised it before. It was only now, in the close company of a witch, that he noticed magical people held a different kind of aura. And he was also starting to realise that he missed the feeling of being surrounded by magic.

Shrugging off these thoughts as whimsy, Snape decided instead to focus on the game in hand. And what a game it was turning in to! One of France's Beaters unwittingly committed Snitchnip at around fifteen minutes into the game, giving England a penalty which, skilfully-taken, increased their lead. France's Chasers, obviously frustrated by having their initial success overshadowed, were then consecutively pulled up for Cobbing and Blatching within the space of five minutes, giving England yet more penalties and pushing them even further ahead.

Just as France had regained possession of the Quaffle and scored a retaliatory goal, a surge of excitement rose throughout the crowd as England's Seeker hurtled off in pursuit of the Snitch, pulling into a steep dive. By now, Ginny and Snape were on their feet, craning to get a better look at what was going on, the roar of the England fans almost deafening. The commentator's voice was at fever pitch as every pair of eyes locked on to the Seeker, who swooped sickeningly fast downwards and then, moments later, skidded and rose back up in the air, his hand held aloft in triumph. He'd done it! He'd caught the Snitch!

The crowd exploded with roars of triumph, and horns sounded as every single England supporter jumped up and cheered. The stadium was awash with waving flags and banners. More fireworks whistled and banged in celebration, illuminating the sky in the white and red of England's national flag. Ginny, delirious with joy, yelled with delight and threw her arms around the neck of an unsuspecting Snape, pulling him into a tight hug.

Snape froze at first; he was unused to physical contact. But the warmth of Ginny's body against him and the sweet smell of her hair touched his senses like summer rain. Slowly, he wrapped his arms around her, marvelling at the way the soft material of her robes hugged the contours of her figure and how she seemed to fit into his embrace like a hand in glove.

Ginny, too, was instantly aware of the feelings that Alfric's proximity stirred in her. He was irresistibly manly; his broad shoulders felt deliciously firm under her hands, and

his scent was intoxicatingly masculine. She detected sandalwood and something herby and earthy, almost musky. And she was suddenly conscious of her breath catching in her throat and her heart starting to race as she pulled back a little bit, looking deep into Alfric's eyes.

Snape quickly adopted an inscrutable mask, but his eyes held her gaze, pinning her with their intensity. Ginny's eyes flicked to his barely open mouth, which looked as succulent as any fruit and ripe for the taking. And without realising what she was doing, she leant forwards slightly, closing the gap between them. Their breaths entwined for a few heady seconds, in anticipation of what was to follow. And time seemed to stand still fleetingly before Ginny seized her chance, reaching up and placing a slow, soft kiss on his lips.

Snape's mind screamed for him to pull away, to turn on his heel and run, but his body was reacting to Ginny's kiss like a light-starved plant feeling the first rays of sun and, after a heartbeat, responding with a warm kiss of his own felt like the most natural thing in the world. The roar of the crowd was soon overshadowed by the rush of blood in his ears, and his pulse felt pounding and powerful as Ginny pushed herself even closer against him.

Ginny was now totally caught in the moment; gone were her worries about her failing marriage, gone were the everyday concerns regarding her role as mother and home-maker. And gone too were all thoughts of the Quidditch report she had to prepare tonight; the Quick-Quotes Quills still scribbled furiously in the background as she lost herself in the embrace. Alfric's kisses were hot, and she felt small and feminine in his arms. Ginny was struck by just how different he felt physically, not that she'd had much experience with men in order to compare; after all, Harry was the only man she'd ever slept with. She and Dean Thomas had only ever kissed, and although she had explored heavy petting with Michael Corner, she'd saved herself purely for Harry. And whereas the first kiss with Harry had been tender and full of longing, this kiss was explosive. The attraction she felt to Alfric was almost magnetic, and by now she couldn't stop herself even if she tried.

Snape could feel his body responding to Ginny as her hands explored his neck and shoulders, running across his chest as their clinch became evermore passionate. He buried one hand in her thick red hair, the other pulling her closer as he claimed her sweet kisses. He could barely remember the last time he'd had intimate relations with a woman, and although his previous encounters had always been furtive and intense, they were certainly nowhere near as highly-charged as this. He thought briefly of the number of years he'd fantasised about taking another redhead in such an embrace, but he was surprised to find that this image no longer held any allure. Lily was long gone and none of that mattered anymore; what did matter, however, was the way this beautiful redhead was managing to expertly stir his senses with her delicious kisses, her tongue fluttering occasionally over his lips, making him growl involuntarily.

Ginny's hands were just about the slide over his stomach and venture further south when a familiar voice brought her sharply back to reality.

'Mummy?'

James' excited voice echoed up the stairs that led to the press box, and Ginny felt as if she'd been doused with water, letting go of Alfric as if burned. The sound of footsteps rang in her ears, growing ever closer.

'Don't run, James! You might slip,' said a male voice, following after her son.

Oh Merlin, here comes Harry! Ginny looked fearfully at Alfric, her feelings suddenly in turmoil. Even though guilt threatened to wash over her, her nerve endings were aflame with desire. She had no idea whether she could look her husband and son in the eyes right now. She wanted to tell Alfric to leave, but at the same time her body still yearned for him.

The rapidly approaching footfalls sealed Snape's decision. There was no way he would stay to be confronted by Harry Potter, especially not with the evidence of his arousal still clear to see. He had to get out of there. He turned on the spot to Disapparate, but just as he did so, Ginny reached out for his arm. She wanted to tell him to wait, but she was too late; before she knew what was happening, she was ripped forcefully off her feet into Side-Along Apparition. The familiar spinning sensation, coupled with fear that she could be Splinched from this accidental journey, made nausea churn violently in her stomach. Gripping tightly to his arm, she squeezed her eyes shut, hoping against hope that wherever she was going, she would arrive in one piece.

Meanwhile, back at the stadium, a confused Harry and a disappointed James entered the press box, only to find it empty. Puzzled, Harry looked around, taking in the scene before him. The only traces of previous inhabitation were two half-empty glasses of wine and Ginny's Quick-Quotes Quill, scratching away at the parchment on the table.

James, of course, started to question his father about where his mummy had gone. Harry managed to soothe him and told him to help himself to a sausage-roll from the many plates of food still uneaten, distracting James long enough for Harry to examine the evidence before him. Whispering an incantation, he halted the Quick-Quotes Quill, which flopped gracelessly onto the table, before picking up the parchment and beginning to read.

*...the crowd full of expectation on this crisp winter evening, and surely most people's Galleons are on the favourites, England, to win...*

Harry scanned down to the bottom of the page impatiently, unprepared for the shock of what he was about to discover.

*...an unbelievable Snitch capture by the English Seeker. The crowd here are awash in white and red, and the cheers are almost deafening as England fans are on their feet in jubilation. But some are celebrating in a slightly more unconventional way.*

*The Daily Prophet's beautiful Quidditch correspondent, Ginevra Potter, is showing her excitement by passionately kissing her former Potions professor, Severus Snape. And judging by the response, Snape is just as enamoured with his younger belle, responding in kind with electric kisses of his own...*

Harry stared open-mouthed at the parchment, his blood turning to ice. The Quick-Quotes Quill had spared no detail in the illicit embrace, even detailing up to the point that Harry and James had made their entrance.

Harry just could not take it all in. The Quill must be faulty, he reasoned. Ginny would never cheat on him... would she? And as for Snape... Surely this was a case of mistaken identity? Harry had seen Severus Snape die in front of his own eyes during the Battle of Hogwarts over a decade ago. Snape was dead.

Wasn't he?

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Author's note: Thanks as ever to my wonderful beta, Agnus Castus, who brings my writing alive and is a wonderful sounding board for all my plot ideas.

## Chapter 16 – Like A Moth To A Flame

*Chapter 16 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is



juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

## Chapter 16 Like A Moth To A Flame

Ginny stumbled as her feet finally touched solid ground, disorientated and shocked after her accidental Apparition. She took a few moments to steady her breathing before shakily checking that her arms and legs were fully attached to her body; there was every chance she could have been Splinched! She even ran her hands over her face to see if her eyebrows and nose were in place. Satisfied she was still in one piece and was not bleeding, she glanced briefly around the neat yet shabby living room she found herself in.

The first thing she noticed were the many leather-bound books lining every available shelf. It felt enclosed and private, which was enhanced by the soft candlelight that illuminated the room. She also noted that there were very few trinkets adorning the place. A threadbare armchair stood almost regally next to the quietly-crackling hearth, the side-table next to it laden with papers and a quill and ink. It certainly felt warm and scholarly in here, and once more Ginny considered how Alfric's appearance seemed at odds with his apparently academic existence.

She turned to him, smiling but slightly breathless.

'That was close!' she remarked with relief.

Snape, however, was less than impressed.

'You should not be here,' he said coldly, blue eyes steely and impenetrable. Ginny had breached his personal space, and he was not comfortable with it at all. He folded his arms across his chest sternly in a manner which seemed oddly familiar to Ginny.

Ginny's face fell, and she was taken aback by his sharp manner. 'I didn't come here on purpose. I was trying to stop you leaving. I needed to know whether I'd see you again.'

Now it was Snape's turn to be shocked. Ginny wanted to see him again? Was she mad? 'In case it has escaped your notice, you are married!' he snapped. 'What happened at the game was a mistake.'

Ginny shook her head regretfully. 'My marriage is over. It had been in decline for a long time, and once Albus became ill... Well, let's just say I am married in name only. I don't love Harry anymore,' she finished quietly.

Snape raised an eyebrow. That was news, indeed. He couldn't help the petty, sadistic side of him feeling triumphant. He'd told Potter many years ago that life wasn't fair; it seemed now that his charmed life was starting to wear off after all, and he was beginning to learn that bitter lesson for himself. About time, too. Potter had been strutting around with impunity his whole life. But Ginny, although reflective about her broken marriage, certainly seemed to have moved on.

'Please,' Ginny continued, taking Alfric's silence and cocked eyebrow to be disbelief, 'I'm not lying. We're staying under the same roof because of the kids. But we don't even share a bed.'

She stepped towards Alfric, her eyes shining with emotion. He watched her carefully, his eyes on hers but his face still impassive.

'The feeling I had when I kissed you is like nothing I've ever experienced before. Don't tell me you didn't feel it too.'

Snape breathed heavily though his nose. Yes, he'd never before felt the passion and intensity which Ginny's kiss had stirred in him. But as far as he was concerned, Ginny was attracted to a lie: she was experiencing feelings for a rugged blond fisherman, a mere falsehood he'd created with Polyjuice potion. If she knew whom she had really been kissing, she'd more than likely vomit, if not jinx him with the mother of all Bat-Bogey Hexes.

'You should not be here,' Snape repeated, softer this time. 'You should go.'

'Tell me you don't want me,' she said in a low voice, 'and I'll leave right now.'

She was standing so close to him that her delicious perfume intoxicated his senses, just like it had back at the stadium. Snape did not need to use Legilimency to see the need and desire in her eyes, and he was again thrown into conflict. He should shout at her, he should push her away. This whole scenario was wrong! But when she slowly raised her hand and placed the most gentle of caresses on his cheek, he involuntarily leaned into her touch. He couldn't deny it; he desired her, too.

'Do you want me, Alfric?' she murmured, her eyes searching his for answers.

Snape's heart thudded in his chest. He didn't trust himself to speak. Instead, he wrapped one arm around her, pulling her close to him, the other tilting her face up towards his own. As their faces moved closer, he relished the heady fusion of their combined breath. It was almost dizzying.

'Kiss me,' she whispered.

In a heartbeat, Snape claimed Ginny's mouth and the thrill of need set him aflame. Ginny moaned as he sought out her throat, covering her neck in hot kisses and triggering her own shivers of pleasure. She felt weak in his arms as he held her close, one hand buried in her thick red hair as he continued to draw delicate sighs and groans from her with his passion.

Ginny could feel the evidence of his arousal pushing urgently against her as they kissed, and this stirred her own ardour even more. Frantically, she tugged at his cloak, releasing the clasp and letting it fall to the floor, before plucking at his jumper.

Confident of the fisherman's toned, muscular body, Snape pulled his sweater over his head and discarded it carelessly on the floor, seeing Ginny's eyes shine with lust in the candlelight as she drunk in his form. She traced the contours of his biceps, and his pectoral and abdominal muscles, her hands moving over him as if she were sculpting him out of clay. He watched her, fascinated, as she began placing little kisses all over his chest before reaching up to seek out his mouth again.

She clung to his shoulders as their lips met in a symphony of nerve endings, and now it was Snape's turn to caress Ginny's body as they embraced. His rough hands savoured how the soft fabric of her robes hugged her curves, and he wondered idly if her skin was just as silky. Boldly, he began teasing the zip of her robes down to find out the answer to that question. But to his surprise, Ginny flinched.

'What is it?' he asked, voice thick with lust. 'Don't you want to?' He tried hard to keep the tone of annoyance from his voice, but in all honesty he was confused. Surely, she wasn't getting cold feet now? She was the one that initiated this in the first place!

Ginny blushed and looked down. She'd only ever slept with Harry; as eager as she felt, she was also a little nervous about having sex with another man. Plus, since having children, Ginny felt her figure was not what it once was. She had the tell-tale silvery threads of stretch marks across her hips and stomach. She worried he would be repulsed by her body.

He eyed her carefully as she bit her lip. She was clearly in turmoil about something. His erection was becoming uncomfortable in his already tight trousers, and his pulse was still racing, but he managed to pull himself together enough to reply.

'You don't have to do anything you don't want to, Ginny,' he whispered hoarsely as if reading her mind, surprised at how sweet her name felt on his tongue. He cupped her chin with one hand and made her look up at him. 'But you don't have to be shy with me. You're so beautiful.'

Ginny gazed into his eyes and felt the peculiar feeling of vertigo. It was bizarre, and she couldn't explain it in words, but in that very moment, she knew that she implicitly trusted Alfric and she would give herself to him totally. With shaking fingers, she unzipped her robe, shrugging it from her shoulders and letting it fall to the floor in a pool at her feet, leaving her naked apart from a pair of lacy knickers and her kitten-heeled shoes.

Snape inhaled sharply. The candlelight gave her milky skin a wonderful glow. Her breasts were small yet nicely rounded, and her flaming hair hung around her shoulders in contrast to her pale complexion.

'Beautiful,' he repeated softly, reaching out his hand for her to take. She took it willingly, stepping out of the tangle of her robes towards him. Snape pulled her close, wrapping a protective arm around her, and it was not long before their kisses had reached fever pitch for a second time.

The feeling of Ginny's bare chest against his own took Snape to new levels of excitement. Soon, they were a mass of hands and lips, the softness of her skin mesmerising him as he stroked and teased her flesh with his rough, work-shod fingers. And he wouldn't be able to recall with any clarity just when Ginny's small hands released him from the confines of his trousers and started to caress the evidence of his arousal, making him growl with pleasure. Neither would he be able to pin point just exactly when he Vanished their remaining clothes with a non-verbal spell, manoeuvred them to his armchair and lifted Ginny on to his lap. But the moment he entered Ginny would be emblazoned in his mind forever.

The heat of her body, the pungent tang of her sex and her urgent moans made fervour swell in him like a tide. He could almost smell the magic on her skin, feel it radiating off her in waves. And as they found a pounding rhythm for their lust, him thrusting upwards as she ground down upon him, he could not stop the feral groans of his own as they drove each other onwards to their peak.

Ginny's intense and noisy climax caused his own mere moments later, her sex gripping him and pulsating around him as, with a roar, he spilled his seed inside her. And when she wrapped her arms around his neck and embraced him in their post-coital glow, he could not help but stroke her hair whilst he muttered contraceptive and cleansing incantations. What he'd just experienced was way beyond anything he'd ever felt before. Curiously, the shame and guilt that usually gnawed at him after his few illicit encounters was surprisingly absent now. Instead, he felt calm and at peace. It was a peculiar sensation, but quite wonderful.

He did not have time to ruminate on this further, however, as Ginny reluctantly pulled herself from his arms and stood, fishing her discarded robe from the floor.

'I'm sorry, I have to go,' she said sadly, unable to look him in the eye whilst zipping up her robes and stepping into her shoes. 'My report has to be in before midnight and I have to pick Lily up from my mum's place.'

Snape didn't know what to say in response, but he sorely missed the feel of her body against him. He wished she would stay a little longer. He watched her getting dressed, and she seemed so fragile, so delicate all of a sudden.

'Do you regret this, Ginny?' he asked after a moment, wondering if she was feeling guilty.

'No,' she answered quietly. 'But I'll regret it if I can never see you again.'

'Who said anything about not seeing you again?' Snape asked impulsively, realising by saying this he was getting in way over his head. Ginny was beginning to feel like a drug to him, and already he was getting withdrawal symptoms.

Ginny's head whipped up, her eyes meeting his.

'You mean it?'

Snape nodded slowly, and the smile of relief that spread across her face made his heart ache.

'I'll send you an owl,' she said, suddenly feeling shy. And after one last longing glance, she turned on her heel and Disapparated.

## Chapter 17 – Playing With Fire

*Chapter 17 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 17 – Playing With Fire

Ginny felt dazed after she left Alfric's cottage. Part of her was consumed with guilt for being unfaithful to Harry, but the other part of her was dizzy with excitement. When she'd told Alfric that she was married in name only, she wasn't lying. In her heart, she knew that her relationship with Harry was irreparable, even more so now she'd experienced vertiginous attraction to another man. But she was not proud of breaking her wedding vows.

She and Harry had been together for a decade, and he'd been the only love of her life. Of course she was sad that the precious bond between them had gone, but if she were honest with herself, that connection had faded a long time ago. It didn't make her feelings of guilt any easier to bear, however. As much as they quarrelled and sniped at each other these days, Ginny would never want to see him hurt. She knew he would be devastated if he ever found out about her infidelity. Perversely, it was this very fact that made her desire for Alfric doubly exhilarating. She knew it was madness to risk everything – her marriage, her children, her family and friends, even her public reputation – on a sordid rendezvous, but the magnetic pull towards Alfric was just too strong. She considered that maybe part of the attraction was the thrill of escapism from her confines as a mother, or that she was on the rebound from her crumbling ten-year marriage. Either way, any remorse she felt was far outweighed by the duplicitous thrill from her fledgling affair.

Just as Ginny had promised, she sent Alfric an owl the very next day, asking if she could visit him on Monday night the following week, which he agreed to.

And so just a few brief days later, Ginny waited until the dead of night and then, whilst her family were sleeping, she dressed silently before creeping down the stairs and

heading to the garden in order to Disapparate. Her heart thudded in her chest when she arrived outside Alfric's little cottage and breathlessly knocked on the door. As she waited agonisingly for a response, the back of her mind filled with sudden irrational fear that he would not answer. She was tempted to turn back; it all seemed so foolish and risky. But sure enough, after a few moments, the door opened and there Alfric stood, as rugged and as handsome as she remembered.

He moved aside to let her pass, and her eyes never left his as she crossed the threshold. As soon as the door had swung shut behind her, she stepped towards him and kissed him fervently.

Snape was grateful he'd kept the rest of the batch of Polyjuice Potion he'd prepared for the Quidditch match, for it allowed him this stolen moment of passion. Ginny's lips were full of raw urgency, and his ardour flared just as quickly as the first time they'd kissed. At the same time, he tried to block out the gnawing sense of guilt which threatened to take over his rational brain. Instead, he focused upon the beautiful witch who was desperately plucking at his clothes, eager to feel her body against his as soon as possible.

The feeling of being wanted in such a basic, animal way was not something of which Snape had much experience; his dour personality and unconventional dark looks had combined to make him almost repellent to women his whole life, and what little carnal knowledge he'd gained had been procured at a much younger age, as a rookie Death Eater. In those days, erotic masquerade balls and orgies were a common occurrence which had satiated his primal need for sex. But once Lily had died, he'd locked that side of himself away. He'd convinced himself that pleasures of the flesh would desecrate Lily's memory and would be a distraction from his true purpose: to avenge her death by looking after her son and bringing down the Dark Lord. And finally, after he'd accomplished his mission and had a narrow escape from death, he'd left the wizarding world behind him and lived as a hermit. He barely interacted with humans, let alone had any form of sexual relationship.

Ginny had therefore awoken something in him that he'd thought would remain dormant for the rest of his life. And despite his misgivings about his actions being morally wrong, the pull of Ginny's desire was just too strong to ignore now the sexual being in him had been resurrected. He could not turn her down even if he wanted to, so lost was he in his rediscovered lust; reborn like a phoenix, the carnal flames engulfed them both in white-hot kisses which promised explosive sex.

Snape, however, was not going to take Ginny here in the hallway. They had got carried away the first time in his lounge, but this time he wanted to do things properly and take her to his bed.

He led her up the stairs by the hand to his sparse bedroom which was illuminated by candles and furnished with an imposing dark wooden bed that dominated the room.

Mouth found mouth once more, Ginny again tugging impatiently at their clothes and him finally relenting, removing them with a quick non-verbal spell. Snape gently guided Ginny to the bed, soaking up the vision of her draped across his crisp white sheets wearing nothing more than a smile before covering her with his body. He relished how small she felt underneath him and how her hands grabbed at his shoulders and stroked his back as their kisses became more and more heated.

He nibbled Ginny's neck, making her arch her back and sigh with pleasure, his fingers teasing her breasts and sending fresh shivers of desire through her. Her skin felt succulent on his lips, and he wanted to find out just how sweet she tasted.

With panther-like speed, he positioned himself between her legs, breathing in her heady aroma and admiring the pink, split fig of her sex. Glancing up, he could see Ginny's chest rise and fall with her shallow breathing, her eyes at once fearful yet full of need. The rosebuds of her nipples stood out proudly from her breasts, emphasising her readiness for him.

Spreading her wide with his fingers, he buried his tongue at her core, flicking and lapping and swirling, causing Ginny's knuckles to whiten as she gripped on to the sheets in ecstasy. Each moan he took from her made his own ardour swell, but it was only when she cried out with her climax that he finally covered her again and entered her to the hilt.

He moved slowly at first, with long, smooth strokes, as Ginny came down from her peak. He watched her face intently, their eyes locking whilst their bodies joined as one. But then Ginny began to move her hips too, and soon they picked up speed, and it wasn't long before they lost themselves in sexual abandon, Snape driving her onwards to another shuddering orgasm and reaching a dizzying one of his own.

Afterwards, they lay together in the candlelight; Ginny resting on Alfric's chest, listening to his heartbeat gradually slowing as he muttered contraceptive and cleansing spells.

'That was amazing,' she murmured, and she felt him smile into her hair in response.

'Same time next week?' he asked archly, and she could not help but giggle at both the bizarreness and ease of the situation.

'I believe I now owe *you* a favour,' she admitted euphemistically, propping herself up on her elbows with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

Snape raised his eyebrow at this. 'There's no time like the present.'

Ginny looked at him in disbelief. 'You think you'll be able to rise to the occasion so soon?' she smirked.

'Try me,' Snape growled, and that was all the encouragement she needed to wriggle down the bed and repay her debt.

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Author's note: Thanks again to my infinitely-patient beta, Agnus Castus, and to all the readers who have also been infinitely patient waiting for this new chapter.

## Chapter 18 – Harry's Horror

*Chapter 18 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

Thoughts of the Quick-Quotes Quill haunted Harry over the following days. He'd torn off the piece of parchment that had detailed Ginny's embrace and stashed it in his pocket, torturing himself by reading it over and over. The revelations had started to consume him, so much in fact that he couldn't concentrate on finalising the upcoming Montenegro case and had to hand over the presentation at the Wizengamot to Ron. Every time he thought of Ginny in another man's arms, white-hot lava of pure rage would bubble in his stomach with such force that it made him nauseous. But he would not confront her until he had solid proof of her adultery.

Part of him couldn't believe that Ginny would be unfaithful. He was her first lover, just as she was his. And even though he knew from his own bitter experience with Rita Skeeter how a Quick-Quotes Quill could embellish and distort the truth, the rest of the article was a highly accurate account of the match. So either the quill had taken on a life of its own and became faulty once the game was over, or it had been telling the truth. Or a half-truth, anyway if Ginny *had* been kissing another man, it could not have been the long-dead Severus Snape.

The more he thought about it, the more likely it seemed that she was having some sort of affair. The other evidence from that evening did allude to it, after all. Firstly, there was her excuse as to why her family and friends could not join her in the press box as usual for the match. Secondly, there was the all-too-cosy scene of two half-empty wine glasses and fine canapés: quite the intimate date. And thirdly, Ginny and her suitor's seemingly abrupt disappearance. Did they Apparate somewhere to have sex? Had they made love in his own marital bed? And how long had it been going on? Once more, the bile in Harry's stomach swelled as various scenarios played unbidden through his mind like a bad dream.

Although they slept in separate rooms these days, Harry was perceptive enough to know that something was amiss as Ginny had been acting strangely over the last week or so around the house. Sometimes, she was almost like the old Ginny: vivacious and happy. But then she'd suddenly changed, and her whole demeanour became anxious and restless. She barely spoke, hardly ate and looked pale and tired. It was almost as if she were lovesick, which cemented in Harry's mind that Ginny was indeed involved with another man.

Was he to blame for Ginny's infidelity? Was he a bad father? Was he a bad husband? Harry felt in his heart of hearts that the answer to each of these questions was "no". He'd only ever had eyes for Ginny, even when various witches had all but thrown themselves at him in the years after the war. There had even been a time, whilst he had been hunting Horcruxes and camping out in various locations to avoid detection, when there was a distinct moment of sexual tension between him and Hermione. But neither of them had acted on it; they had both stayed loyal and faithful to the people they loved.

Merlin knew he'd tried to make it work when times were tough in his marriage to Ginny; he'd bitten his tongue and backed down countless times for the sake of harmony. Yes, things hadn't been perfect for a long time; the relationship of husband and wife had settled instead into the comfortable camaraderie of brother and sister, but he'd always loved her, supported her and been there for her. He never treated her badly. Also, it was clearly unrealistic to imagine that their young, all-consuming love affair could continue with the same intensity once the children had come along. But that was not to say it made dealing with the reality of their changing relationship any easier.

If he was guilty of anything, Harry supposed it was denial that something was wrong in the first place. Ginny's tirade at the hospital had shown him that there was much more going on under the surface than he'd first realised. Her outburst had cut him to the core, though. Blaming him for Al's illness was one thing; it may have been irrational, but it was something he could understand. For her to have insinuated that Harry never did anything to help, however, hurt him unimaginably. His job was very demanding, but he cooked, cleaned and looked after the kids whenever he had the chance. The truth was that Molly, being the unstoppable force of nature that she was, took on many of their shared parental responsibilities whilst he and Ginny tried to juggle the demands of their careers. Molly was more than happy to do that; they were all family, after all. One big happy family. Or at least, they had been.

If Harry could find concrete evidence for Ginny's infidelity, then he felt their marriage would be irreparably over. Even through the rough times over the last few months, Harry had never stopped loving Ginny. But if she had chosen another man over him, he could never forgive her. For him, cheating was the ultimate betrayal, and there was no way in his mind that they could continue as husband and wife.

*When had it started to go wrong* Harry wondered. Certainly, things had come to a head when Al had become ill. What would have happened if Al had died? Would Ginny have pushed him away then, or would she have clung to him for support? He shuddered, not able to believe he'd actually considered for a moment that the death of his son could have somehow made a positive difference to the state of his marriage. Ginny hadn't forgiven him for having to respond to a threat to international security and leaving her at the hospital when Al was sick, but what choice did he have? And if Al had died, then surely she would have despised him even more.

Of course, Harry was thankful that his son was alive. He was grateful to Alfric O. Nobel, PhD, whoever that person was, for rescuing Al. Quite how he knew about Al's allergy was still a mystery, but Harry was just relieved at the time that his son had been saved and not really interested in how or why. Unlike Ginny, who'd argued with him repeatedly over Al's saviour once Al had recovered...

A shiver of dread ran through Harry as an unpleasant thought formed in his mind. Could the elusive and reclusive Mr. Nobel actually be Severus Snape, his former Potions master? If it was Snape, it would explain how he knew about Al's allergic reaction, if he'd seen the reaction before in Harry's mum, Lily... After all, it had been reported in the Prophet that Mr. Nobel was famed as being a brilliant potioneer... And it would mean that the Quick-Quotes Quill was actually telling the truth...

He shook his head impatiently, as if to clear such foolish thoughts from his mind. Snape was dead. He, Harry, had seen it with his own eyes in the Shrieking Shack. His name was etched on the war memorial in the grounds of Hogwarts, one of the many who had fallen in the final battle. True, there were rumours that his body had never been recovered, that Voldemort had disposed of his body personally, but even so, to think he was alive was sheer madness... wasn't it?

*Not necessarily*, the logical, Auror part of Harry's brain reasoned. Just because something seemed implausible, it did not mean it was impossible. Thinking back, Harry remembered that Snape's portrait had not appeared in the Headmaster's office when he'd gone to view Snape's memories in the Pensieve. That hadn't really sunk in at the time; there was so much going on in the battle that a missing painting was low down on his priorities. But thinking about it now, it did seem rather odd; when Dumbledore had died, his portrait had appeared in the office straight away. That was how the portraits worked. But even after the battle, when Harry had returned to the office in order to repair his wand, there was still no portrait of Headmaster Snape, even though they'd had evidence that he'd been loyal to Dumbledore all along and, by proxy, to the school. Could the absence of a Headmaster portrait be solid, conclusive proof that Snape was indeed still alive? And was Snape therefore really having an affair with his wife?

There was only one way to find out for certain if Snape was alive or dead before he confronted Ginny with his suspicions and ended their marriage: Harry had to go back to Hogwarts and speak to Professor McGonagall about the missing portrait.

## Chapter 19 - In Too Deep

*Chapter 19 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in

## Chapter 19 – In Too Deep

It was less than a week before Ginny and Alfric had their next rendezvous, but for Ginny every moment that she was not with him felt like torture. At work, all she could think about was how it felt to be in Alfric's arms, and flashbacks of their previous encounters would sear across her mind when she was doing the most mundane of chores. It was as if her libido, which had been silenced by the pressures of having a young family, was suddenly awoken with a passion that burned brighter than ever for the mysterious Mr Nobel.

Snape's thoughts, too, were consumed by memories of Ginny and the feel of her naked skin against his. He found himself staring at her name and picture in the sports pages of the *Daily Prophet*, wondering if their passionate fling had the same effect on her. It was excruciating having to wait for Ginny to find the chance to slip away and come to him, and a mixture of excitement and relief flooded his stomach when he finally received an owl from her a few days later confirming her next visit. He thanked Merlin and all the dieties that he'd created enough Polyjuice Potion to sustain several liaisons.

This time, it was the middle of the afternoon when Ginny arrived at Snape's cottage. She immediately greeted him with a kiss, and he welcomed her with an embrace before leading her once more up the stairs towards his bedroom.

Soft, gentle kisses turned into slow caresses as he lay her down on the crisp white sheets. The rain drummed against the window, and the wind howled as they unhurriedly undressed each other, and he explored every inch of her in the dull light. And when he finally covered her and their two bodies joined as one, their union was as tender as it was passionate. The sound of Ginny's climax was like music to his ears and it drove him on towards his own overwhelming peak.

Afterwards, Ginny lay in his arms, listening to the pitter-patter of precipitation and the gentle tattoo of his heartbeat, feeling totally satiated and at peace. Visiting Alfric for sex was a like an oasis for her soul; there were no expectations on her to be anything other than a woman, and to submit to the sexual ecstasy that Afric stirred in her.

Snape breathed in the sweet perfume of Ginny's hair as he cradled her against him, enjoying the afterglow from their passion and yet knowing deep down that their affair could not last. He was lying to her with each kiss and caress, yet his love-starved soul was hungry for affection. Already he knew he was in too deep. Their meetings were no longer about just sex or pure physical relief; they were as much about holding each other and kissing each other. In other words, they were about intimacy: something Snape had always shied from but which he now seemed to crave in the way a smoker yearned for a cigarette. This could not go on for much longer; he would have to put a stop to it. It was one thing to have sex with Ginny under the influence of Polyjuice Potion; it was quite another to have her develop feelings for a man who didn't exist, and for him to begin to reciprocate them. And if Snape was good at one thing, it was denying his emotions.

He sighed, and Ginny turned her head to look up at him.

'Knut for your thoughts?' she murmured, stroking his chest idly.

'Make it a Galleon and we might have a deal,' he replied dryly, to which Ginny giggled.

'You drive a hard bargain.'

'I drive a hard something else, too.' He smirked, and again Ginny giggled. He liked the sound of her laughter. She seemed to understand his humour which very few people since Lily actually did.

'Seriously, is there something on your mind?'

Snape sighed again. Yes, there was plenty on his mind, but now was not the right time to share his thoughts. If this was to be the last time he was intimate with Ginny, then he wanted them both to remember it for the right reasons and not the wrong ones. He would tell her another time.

'My thoughts are not interesting, I assure you.'

'Oh, I don't know about that,' Ginny answered, propping herself up on her elbows. 'I'm sure there's more going on up there than wondering whether or not you've run out of Gurdyroot.'

Snape's mouth twitched at this. 'If you don't stop being nosy I may well force-feed you some.'

Ginny grinned, running her fingers down his face. 'You know you can tell me anything, don't you?'

Snape's heart clenched at this, and it felt like his stomach was flooded with ice cold water. This was too much; much too much. If Ginny wanted to know about him and how he was feeling, it meant that she, too, was making the transition from the sexual to the intimate. It meant that she was starting to care about him. No, he could not let that happen. He would have to let her go. But not yet. Not today.

'Right now, I don't want to talk,' he muttered, wrapping his arm around her. 'I just want to be.'

Ginny thought she knew what Alfric meant by that. Like her, she thought, he wanted to exist in this moment, in this precious bubble they'd built for themselves, free of everyday humdrum reality and external pressures. Like her, he wanted to close the door on the world for a little while and escape to a place where only the physical mattered, where the currency was kisses and caresses.

Ginny smiled, blissfully unaware of his inner turmoil, as she sank once more into the haven of his arms.

## Chapter 20 – Back To Hogwarts

### *Chapter 20 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

## Chapter 20 Back To Hogwarts

Harry squinted up in the bright, late February sunlight at the imposing gates that guarded the path that led to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It had been many years since he'd seen them, yet they were just as he'd always remembered: magnificent wrought iron, flanked by two columns topped with statues of ugly, winged boars. As he drew closer, the gates opened, charmed by the headmistress to expect his arrival.

Making his way up the path and towards the huge oak doors, he couldn't deny that it felt somewhat surreal coming back. He could have easily Floo'd directly into the headmistress's office, but the nostalgic part of him wanted to see the old castle once more and retrace his footsteps down the long corridors, taking a trip down memory lane in the process.

The Entrance Hall, with its grand marble staircase and hourglasses full of precious gems, which kept track of House points for the four Houses, took him right back to being a student. He even felt a flash of indignation that Ravenclaw were in the lead, the blue sapphires winking almost mockingly at him.

It was half term and so the school was deserted, which gave Harry plenty of time to meander, gazing fondly at the old portraits he passed on the way. It was incredible to think that after all the damage the castle had sustained during the final battle with Voldemort, it now looked as if none of it ever happened. Loitering at the bottom of the stairwell, he was hoping he'd get a chance to see Nearly-Headless Nick and even wouldn't have minded a run-in with Peeves, for old time's sake. But unfortunately, it was not to be.

Eventually, via the various moving staircases, Harry reached the seventh floor and the gargoyle which guarded the entrance to the headmistress' office.

'Mimblewimble,' he muttered, and the gargoyle leapt aside as the wall behind it split in two to reveal a spiral stone staircase that moved like an escalator as soon as Harry put his foot on it. Round and round the stairs went, and Harry thought back on all the times he'd been summoned to this office. He thought of Dumbledore, and he could not help but smile. He still missed the old wizard, even after all these years. Then he remembered that his portrait would be in the office; maybe he'd get a chance to speak to him. But the thought of portraits reminded him again of the real reason he was here today, and his stomach clenched in anticipation.

Once at the top of the staircase, he was faced with a highly polished oak door with a brass knocker in the shape of a griffin. Taking a steadying breath, he knocked twice on the door.

'Enter,' a familiar Scottish brogue replied.

Harry pushed the door open and was greeted by his former professor and Head of House, Minerva McGonagall, who was beaming at him.

'Ah, Harry, it's lovely to see you,' she said, standing up to take his hand. 'I can't believe how quickly the time has flown. It seems like only yesterday that I'd caught you with Longbottom's Remembrall and persuaded Wood to take you on to the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Now look at you! Head Auror!'

Harry smiled, shaking the old witch's hand in return. 'Thank you for agreeing to see me at such short notice, Headmistress.'

But at this, she clucked her tongue and looked over her steel-framed spectacles. 'Spare me the formalities, dear. I won't deduct House points from you for using my first name.'

Harry laughed. 'Sorry, Minerva. Force of habit.'

'That's better.' She smiled at the young wizard, admiring what a handsome and successful man he'd turned in to. He had a loving wife, a young family and a blossoming career now, and to think he came from such humble beginnings and heartache. She could not help but feel a flash of maternal pride.

'How's the wee boy? Albus?' she asked with concern, remembering how the Potter family's tragedy was splashed across the Prophet before Christmas.

'He's just great, thanks,' Harry replied. 'He's not quite as boisterous as James, but he's a good kid. It's like the Augurey Flu never happened.'

Minerva nodded, and once more she felt a swell of happiness that everything seemed to have turned out well for Harry and his family.

After busying herself with offering Harry tea and shortbread and engaging in more small talk about Hagrid's latest wildlife project and Gryffindor's chances of winning the Quidditch Cup this year, they could no longer avoid the topic of why Harry had come back to his old school.

'So tell me, Harry, what can I do for you today?' Minerva asked eventually, taking a sip from her teacup.

Harry took a deep breath before answering. 'I've come to ask you about Severus Snape.'

Minerva's eyebrow's shot up, and she set her teacup down on its saucer with a melodic tinkle. 'Severus...' she said, her voice a little shaky with shock. 'What do you want to know?'

Harry scanned the wall behind her which was crammed with the portraits of all the former head teachers. All except for one, that was.

'I want to know why Severus Snape does not have a Headmaster's portrait here at Hogwarts.'

Minerva blinked rapidly and breathed through her nose. 'Well, no one knows for sure...' she started, aware that she would be unable to pull the wool over the young Auror's eyes. 'I have my own suspicions, however.'

'Do you think he's alive?' Harry asked quickly, cutting to the chase, and Minerva studied him carefully before responding. How much should she tell him? Should she mention how she found Severus clinging to life in the Shrieking Shack? Or should she keep Snape's secret, just like he'd kept secrets his whole life?

'Yes, I do,' she said quietly.

Harry felt a thrill of dread run down his spine. 'Have you seen him?' he demanded, just a little brusquer than he'd intended.

Minerva shook her head slowly. 'No. I haven't had any contact with him at all. But the only conclusion I can reach for his portrait not appearing here, no matter how unlikely it may seem, is that he is indeed alive.' She paused, watching Harry's jaw clench at the news. 'Harry, I know you must have lots you want to say to him, just as I do. But you should not try to find him... I believe he does not want to be found. He's not part of our world anymore.' Minerva looked down, and Harry noticed with surprise the sadness in her eyes, as if this was a fact she had a hard time processing.

Harry didn't know what to say. He certainly wasn't going to tell her his theory about Snape's double identity or air his views about his wife's potential affair. He could see she had her own issues with Snape; most probably, she felt guilty, as they all had, about the way Snape had been treated and all he'd sacrificed to bring Voldemort down. She probably wanted to apologise to Snape and make it up to him somehow and assumed that's what he, Harry, wanted too.

'Have you tried contacting him?' he asked after a while.

'I tried to send letters,' Minerva admitted. 'He never responded.' She sighed, before threading her fingers together and peering over her spectacles. 'Harry, promise me you won't try to find him? If Severus does not want to be found, we should respect his wishes. It's the least we can do for him, to let him live out a quiet, undisturbed life. I have no doubt that his portrait will appear when his life comes to a natural end. But until that time...'

'You're hoping that no one else notices his missing portrait and realises he's alive?' Harry finished dully.

Minerva's lips twitched uncomfortably. 'Please, Harry? Will you promise me?'

Harry looked back at his former headmistress and reluctantly nodded his agreement, and Minerva's relief was almost palpable. He thanked her for being honest with him, and after they talked some more about his life after Hogwarts, he asked her if she minded if he took a walk around the grounds before leaving. Minerva assented, telling him the gates were charmed to open for him whenever he decided to leave.

As he strolled around the Quidditch Pitch and took in the brisk Scottish air, Harry tried to process exactly what he'd discovered. Things were not always clear cut, especially when it came to Severus Snape. Shielding his eyes against the sunshine and peering up at the stands, he was reminded of the time during his very first Quidditch match against Slytherin when it looked as though Snape had been jinxing Harry's broom, but in fact had actually been saving his life by uttering a counter-curse to Quirrell's spell...

He'd thought of the duplicity of his former Potions master often after the war, and how easily Snape had fooled people into believing his actions were bad. There was no denying he had been a cruel, vindictive and unapproachable man, but how much of that was really him and how much of that was caused by the pressures he's had to bear in order to serve two masters and keep him, Harry, safe? Harry thought Snape must have been punished enough in his life by experiencing unrequited love for Harry's mother and the mistakes he'd made by ruining his friendship with her and then going on to join Voldemort. Yet without his efforts for the Order of the Phoenix, the outcome of the war could have been very different indeed...

Harry wandered onwards with his thoughts, around the back of the castle. In the distance, the imposing dark treetops of the Forbidden Forest towered over Hagrid's little gamekeeper's hut. Smoke curled out of the stone chimney in a familiar, comforting way. Again, Harry's mind was instantly taken back to a memory, this time from his sixth year, when he'd chased Snape across the grounds towards the Forbidden Forest after the death of Dumbledore. He'd desperately fired spell after spell at the former Death Eater, who had deflected them with as much ease as swatting a fly. Harry, angry and hurting, screamed at Snape to fight back, calling him a coward and attempting to strike him with Sectumsempra, Snape's own spell... He'd never seen Snape so incandescent with rage, and he had never forgotten the words Snape roared at him before he made his escape.

*'You dare use my own spells against me, Potter? It was I who invented them ... I, the Half-Blood Prince!'*

Half-Blood Prince. It was a strange title indeed that Snape had given himself and potentially dangerous as a member of Slytherin House. Snape was, in one way, disassociating himself from his Muggle roots by aligning himself with his mother's maiden name, yet at the same time highlighting the fact he was a half-blood and therefore half-Muggle. Harry supposed he'd never know the true reasoning behind the nickname; it was just another enigma and secret that Snape had hidden behind.

Harry had reached the Black Lake now, and he sat on a tree stump, considering its murky depths as the sunlight played across the still surface. Snape had no portrait at Hogwarts, just as he'd suspected, and even Minerva McGonagall herself believed Snape to be alive. Could Snape really be the man that had saved his son, and was the Half-Blood Prince having an affair with his wife?

*Half-Blood Prince.*

Suddenly, with a prickle of inspiration, Harry had an idea. Urgently, he pulled his wand from his pocket and began to trace it through the air, spelling out the letters of Snape's self-styled nickname. The words manifested in slashes of amber flame, just like the spell the young Tom Riddle had performed in front of him many years ago in the Chamber of Secrets.

HALF BLOOD PRINCE

Harry felt as if he'd been doused with water as the final piece of the puzzle clicked into place. He waved his wand once and his stomach plummeted as the letters rearranged themselves in front of his astonished eyes.

ALFRIC O NOBEL PHD

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Author's note: I want to thank everyone who has read and reviewed and for your patience with this WIP. I am afraid I need to ask you for yet more patience; I am moving and changing jobs over the space of the next two months, so it may be some time before I can update again. But fear not, I have not abandoned this story and as soon as real life calms down a bit I will be back to complete this story.

## Chapter 21 - Showdown At Godric's Hollow

*Chapter 21 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 21 Showdown At Godric's Hollow

Motes of dust swirled lazily in the shard of sunlight that pierced through the living-room window of the Potter household. Harry looked through them without really seeing; his gaze was caught in a thousand-yard stare as he processed the events of the day. The tick, tick, tick of the clock on the mantelpiece was the only sound that he could hear. At one time, Harry had associated this soothing repetition with peace and tranquility, reflecting a time for solitude and relaxation. But today it imitated a bomb that was ready to go off. Harry couldn't stop a bitter smile pulling at the corner of his mouth; he felt that the bomb analogy was an accurate description of his current predicament as he waited for his wife to return to their marital home.

Once Harry's incantation in the grounds of Hogwarts had revealed his son's saviour's true identity, he'd felt equally angry and betrayed. The final piece of the puzzle had slotted into place, and he was now under no doubt that Ginny was being unfaithful. The journey home to Godric's Hollow had been a blur as he struggled to contain the rage within him, whilst he mulled over all the possible scenarios of their illicit coupling, each scene more lurid and impossible than the last. The bile that rose in his stomach at the sickening images was as bitter and acrid as his feelings towards Ginny.

Yes, it was strange, but all of Harry's ire was aimed directly at his wife. He knew that Snape was just as guilty as Ginny was in carrying out the affair, but oddly he was not angry with him. Maybe he felt too much in Snape's debt, in the way he'd all but sacrificed himself to bring Voldemort down and then seemingly selflessly stepped in to save his son. Or maybe it was because he believed Snape to be as lonely now as he was in his previous life and could therefore easily understand his attraction to the young, beautiful Ginny. Either way, Harry thought that Snape wasn't really to blame in all this and that Ginny herself was entirely responsible.

However, throughout his pain and anger, Harry felt he had a trump card up his sleeve; he was convinced Ginny was unaware that the man she was having an affair with was really Snape. For one thing, Snape had left the wizarding world behind and didn't want to be involved in that world any more. He was happy with people thinking him dead. He wouldn't even answer Minerva's letters, for Merlin's sake, and besides Dumbledore, she had to be the one person who knew him really well. Snape had been so careful to protect his identity during Al's illness that Harry couldn't imagine for one minute that he would let his mask slip. Snape was stubborn and the master of keeping secrets after all. And, Harry knew, he was also a master of Potions. It would be very easy for him to rustle up a perfect batch of Polyjuice Potion, or to change his appearance in some other way with a skillfully concocted brew. Added to that, Ginny was not the type to harbour latent crushes on her former professor, unlike the surprisingly soppy Hermione. Hermione had admitted some time ago that once the truth about Snape had come to light, she'd held a little flame for him for a while. Ginny had snorted with laughter at the very thought of her friend having a crush on a dead man whilst Ron had sulked at this admission for a whole month. Harry was not surprised by Hermione's revelations, however. Snape had been an intelligent wizard who was very proficient and skilled in magic, with a dark, brooding edge and a surprisingly romantic core, very much like Viktor Krum. In other words, exactly Hermione's type. Ginny had made a witty comment about Hermione wanting Snape to enter her Chamber of Secrets and Hermione had blushed furiously, mumbling that it was a long time ago and that Ron was the only wizard for her.

So what would Ginny do if she found out that she was actually having trysts with the Bat of the Dungeons, as she used to call him? Well, that was exactly what Harry was going to find out.

In the hours after returning from Hogwarts, Harry had calmed down considerably. The kids were still at Molly's and that had given him the time to think things through rationally. He'd processed the facts and waited calmly on the sofa, the monotonous ticking of the clock hypnotising him. Nyx, the family Kneazle, was now curled up beside him and occasionally he would scratch her behind the ears, an action that soothed them both. The sound of the front door slamming pulled him abruptly out of his reverie, and he listened to the sound of his wife dropping her handbag on to the dresser in the hallway and kicking off her shoes with a sigh, before finally, eventually, entering the lounge.

'Hi,' Ginny said breathlessly, barely looking in Harry's direction as she absently picked up a stray teddy from an armchair and tossed it into the toy box in the corner of the room.

Harry's knuckles whitened as he seized his grip on the armrest of the sofa. 'We need to talk,' he said softly, almost monotonously.

It was obvious that Ginny was still unaware that something was wrong, as she was now plumping the cushions on the armchair before sitting, the whole while still not looking at Harry. A prickle of anger and indignation surged through Harry at this. How dare she pretend that everything was alright? How dare she have the gall to lie to his face, and not be in the least bit concerned that their marriage was very nearly over?

'We need to talk,' he repeated through gritted teeth, struggling hard to keep his voice neutral.

Ginny raised an eyebrow as she perched on the edge of the armchair, her hands knotted on her knees.

'Something wrong?' she asked quietly. Harry looked pale and tense; she knew that whatever was coming couldn't be good.

Harry breathed heavily through his nose. Yes, something was wrong. This whole scenario was wrong. It was more than that; it was insane! He forced himself to meet her gaze.

'I know you've been having an affair, Ginny,' he said, in a calm tone that surprised even himself.

Ginny felt her stomach plummet towards her feet. Of all the things she imagined Harry would say to her, this wasn't even on the list. She'd been careful and discreet. How the hell did he know?

Ginny's look of shock and, Harry noticed with a twisted form of triumph, guilt, was enough to steel him for the second allegation.

'Well? Aren't you going to deny it?' he asked, his knuckles clenching the armrest of the sofa once more.

Ginny didn't know what to say. Instead, she shook her head imperceptibly and looked down at the tangle of fingers in her lap. She thought she was in control of the situation. She thought Harry would never find out. This wasn't the way this was supposed to turn out...

Harry watched her carefully, letting the moments drag by uncomfortably before interrogating her once more. 'So, what's he like then? This Alfric O. Nobel?' he asked in a forced jovial voice.

Ginny's head shot up as if she'd been electrocuted. 'How do you know?' she asked, rather more shrilly than she'd

anticipated. 'Have you been spying on us?'

Harry merely snorted. 'In case you've forgotten, I'm an Auror. I don't need to spy on people to put two and two together. Now tell me, what is he like? The man who saved our son? I want to know every detail.' His smile was broad but yet ugly, stretching his face so he looked like a caricature of himself.

Ginny looked bewildered at Harry, not knowing if he was joking or not. She felt on the back foot; anger she could deal with. But geniality at a time like this?

'Come on, Ginny. You haven't been this tongue-tied around me since my second year at Hogwarts. Tell me. Is he tall? Handsome? Biceps like coconuts?'

'What difference does it make?' Ginny asked carefully, not knowing where this was going.

Harry turned in his seat so fast, he startled Nyx, who promptly jumped off the sofa and skittered out of the lounge, her huge, fluffy tail held upright.

'It makes ALL the difference,' he answered, and his green eyes were glinting in a way that made Ginny feel very uncomfortable indeed. 'Now I will ask you once more: What. Is. He. Like.'

Ginny had never felt afraid of Harry before, until now. She swallowed, her throat suddenly feeling like it was blocked with cotton wool. 'He's tall... with fair hair...' she began unsurely.

Harry was now wearing a quizzical smile. 'Yes? And?'

'H-he's got blue eyes. Broad build. And has a tanned complexion.' She noted that Harry's smile had now turned into something resembling triumph. 'Oh, what does it matter? Why do you even care?' she finished wretchedly.

'Well, I must say, he sounds rather dashing, this Alfric,' Harry said after a moment, his smile still utterly maddening. 'Let me guess: it was lust at first sight, ever since that cosy evening at the Quidditch together.'

If Ginny's eyebrows rose any higher, they'd disappear into her hairline. She managed to let out a little gasp of shock and indignation. He even knew about that night? And how long had he known?



'Oh yes, I can see it now,' Harry continued. 'Tall, blond and handsome; the man who saved our son. How could you not be attracted to him? He's a hero, after all.'

Ginny closed her eyes. 'Harry, don't,' she pleaded softly.

'I bet he's a real beefcake, isn't he? All rippling muscles and designer stubble...'

'Stop it!' Ginny implored, a little louder now.

'Yes, quite the hunk,' went on, ignoring his wife's appeals. 'But I'm afraid your lover boy isn't all that he seems.' Harry fixed her with his steely green eyes.

Ginny stared back at Harry, and her stomach flipped over. Oh, Merlin. So this is what all this is about. He knew something. Her mouth felt, if possible, drier than ever as she waited for Harry to go on.

'Your lover has been lying to you, Ginny. He's not the man you think he is.'

'What are you talking about?' Ginny asked in exasperation. Couldn't he just cut to the chase?

'There's no easy way to say this, so let's start at the beginning. Rather good at potions, old Alfric, wouldn't you say?' Harry said mysteriously.

'I hardly see what that has to do with anything...'

'*The Prophet* called him a genius the likes of which have not been seen in a generation, did they not?' Harry asked, cutting Ginny off abruptly. 'Can you think of anyone else this might apply to?'

Ginny merely screwed up her face in disbelief. 'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'Can't you think of anyone who was gifted at Potions? An old teacher, maybe?' he prompted lightly.

Ginny's mind wandered back to her final year at Hogwarts, when she was taught by the eccentric yet undoubtedly brilliant Horace Slughorn. The old man was surely nearly a hundred by now! Harry surely couldn't be implying the one-time Head of Slytherin was her suitor... Unless he actually meant...

'Snape?!' Ginny asked incredulously.

'DING DING!' Harry cried victoriously. 'Give the woman a prize. Yes, Snape. You, my dear, have been having your end away with Severus Snape, Bat of the Dungeons himself.'

Ginny shook her head slowly and looked at Harry like he was a Blast-Ended Skrewt. 'Harry, I really think you've lost it this time...' she murmured, feeling her husband was on the edge of insanity. Snape was dead! Wasn't he?

'Think about it,' Harry went on. 'How else would this Alfric person know about the rare allergy Al had? It was because my mum had it too, and Snape knew that.'

'No...' Ginny said firmly, shaking her head.

'I knew you wouldn't believe me,' Harry said matter-of-factly, pulling his wand from the belt of his jeans. 'So this is why I'll have to spell it out for you instead.'

And so, using the same incantation as he'd performed at Hogwarts, Harry spelled out Alfric's name in shimmering, fiery letters. One swoop of the wand was all it took for the letters to rearrange themselves into the old Potion master's self-styled nickname.

The horror on Ginny's face was indescribable, and a small, vindictive part of Harry felt vindicated.

'You're lying,' she gasped, staring at the letters like they were something diabolical. 'This can't be true... How... ' she spluttered, unable to comprehend.

'Polyjuice Potion, Ginny,' Harry answered grimly, removing the letters with a firm swish of his wand. 'The oldest trick in the book.'

'No!' Ginny cried, standing up. She had a wild look about her, just like she'd had at St.Mungo's. 'I don't believe you!'

Her mind was in turmoil; part of what Harry was telling her made sense, but the other part seemed utterly, utterly mad.

Harry sat back on the sofa, gazing at his wife coolly. 'Well, don't just take my word for it. Why don't you ask him yourself?'

Ginny stared back at Harry for a few moments before turning on her heel and fleeing the house, her heart in her mouth. Was what Harry really telling the truth? Had she been hoodwinked by her former professor? The feeling of nausea which spread through Ginny's body had nothing to do with the jolt of Apparition that took her from her garden in Godric's Hollow and straight on to the doorstep of the man she knew to be Alfric O. Nobel, PHD.

## Chapter 22 - Facing The Truth

*Chapter 22 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in *Deathly Hallows*.

### Chapter 22 Facing The Truth

Ginny stood, shaking, on the doorstep of Alfric's tiny Cornish cottage, the wind whipping her hair around her face and into her eyes. Holding on to the door frame for support, Harry's words kept revolving in her mind like a twisted kind of mantra.

*Polyjuice Potion, Ginny. The oldest trick in the book.*

As much as Ginny didn't want to believe what her husband had told her, she had a sickening feeling that he was telling the truth. In a perverse way, it all made sense. The use of Polyjuice Potion would explain why Alfric had to be so rigid and precise when arranging a time to see each other. Ginny assumed it was her job and family commitments which dictated those terms, but thinking about it, she'd never turned up out of the blue to simply surprise her lover because they'd always set a date and time. Similarly, they'd only ever corresponded through letters rather than simply using the Floo. Ginny hadn't thought this odd; rather, it felt romantic and exciting. But with Harry's allegations still ringing in her ears, she realised the use of owl post for communication would indeed shield Alfric's use of Polyjuice Potion.

Ginny gritted her teeth as she stood on the threshold. There was only one way to see if Harry was lying or not. Casting a non-verbal Silencing Charm, she furtively grabbed hold of the doorknob and twisted. The cold, worn brass felt smooth in her hand and, to her immense surprise, the handle turned without resistance, and she found herself standing in the sparse hallway. Silently, she closed the door behind her, her heart pounding with adrenaline as she crept towards the lounge.

The door was ajar. She stood, listening intently for any sign of occupancy over the frantic tattoo of her racing pulse. After a few moments she heard the rustle of paper: the unmistakable sound of the page of a book being turned. She closed her eyes momentarily, taking a deep breath with which to steady herself, before launching forwards and bursting into the room.

The shock in Severus Snape's eyes was a sight she'd never forget.

'You bastard!' she raged, lunging towards him and whipping her wand from her robes in one fluid action. She was startled to find that he looked not much different from how she remembered him at school: his black hair still framed his pale face, and his eyes, hypnotic and bottomless onyx. Time had passed, but aside from the deepening of the furrow his brow, her former professor looked essentially the same. He was even dressed head to toe in black. Anxiety twisted in her gut as the realisation dawned that all her stolen moments of passion and all the intense feelings she had shared had been with the stern ex-Potions master before her, instead of the ruggedly handsome man whom she'd known as Alfric.

It had been a while since he'd had to employ his Occlumency, but it appeared it was a skill Snape still possessed as his mental barriers swiftly fortified his mind like the portcullis of a fortress. Years of shielding his emotions and disciplining his mind meant he could still draw Occlumency around him like a veil. But his self-control surprised him under the circumstances because seeing Ginny before him stirred up many emotions: guilt, shame, but also a swooping in his stomach that spoke of hope and love.

How Ginny had found out his true identity was neither here nor there. The truth was out and that was all that mattered now. He inwardly cursed himself for not warding the doors against her as he snapped the book shut and placed it carefully on the rickety table beside him, remaining seated in his tatty armchair as he prepared to admit the truth to her at last.

'I don't blame you for being angry, Ginny,' he said slowly in his familiar, rich baritone, his black eyes meeting her chestnut gaze.

'How dare you!' she yelled, her wand hand shaking with rage. 'How dare you trick me?'

Severus looked warily from Ginny's wand back to her pale face. Her wand was visibly trembling, and she was furious. If he weren't careful, he'd end up with no testicles. Talking about feelings was not one of his strong points and throughout his life he avoided it if at all possible. But he had to try to make her understand how he'd got in to this mess in the first place.

'It was never my intention to deceive you,' he began quietly.

'Never your intention?' she spat, mockingly. 'Polyjuice Potion is the biggest deception there is!'

Snape put his hand up, by way of offering a truce. 'I don't blame you for being angry,' he repeated, 'but at least give me a chance to explain.'

Ginny's eyes flashed, and Snape swore he could hear her hair crackle as she hissed, 'Give me one reason why I shouldn't castrate you right now.'

Snape breathed deeply through his nose, weighing up his words carefully. He had to show her his actions weren't premeditated. She deserved the truth; he could only hope she would believe him.

'I've been away from the wizarding world for a decade. I wanted nothing more to do with it. During the time of the Dark Lord's return, I was trapped between playing his right-hand man and working for Dumbledore. Once the war was over, I chose to leave it forever so I could be free.' He paused and looked at Ginny, hoping she could hear the sincerity of his words. 'I've never been a free man, Ginny.'

'And?' she answered impatiently. 'What does this have to do with anything?'

He sighed before continuing, 'In order to break away completely, I needed a new identity. That's where Alfric O. Nobel came in. Under that name I could have a bank account, a subscription to the *Daily Prophet* and complete my own potion work without fuss. Because if anyone knew I was alive, they would try to find me. Rita Skeeter would write some hideous exposé on the tragedy of my life,' he sneered, 'and yet others would demand that I pay for Dumbledore's death in Azkaban. I couldn't risk that, not after being pulled from the jaws of death. I'd rather be dead than have to live incarcerated again.'

Ginny eyed him suspiciously, her wand arm faltering as Snape went on.

'This is where I have been living for the last ten years: here in this tiny cottage, essentially as a hermit, clawing back the years the Dark Lord had taken from me. Reading the *Daily Prophet* was my only link to the world I'd left behind. So when I found out your son was critically ill, knowing I could save him put me in a dilemma. I didn't want to be involved, yet I couldn't sit back and do nothing and send the boy to his death. So I sent word to St. Mungo's using my pseudonym and hoped that would be the end of it.

'But it wasn't. You found me, Ginny. You went out of your way to thank me, to find the person who saved your son. And when you invited me to that Quidditch match I will admit I was weak by saying yes. I hadn't been amongst wizards and witches for a decade, and during that time I hadn't heard the roar of the crowd in my ears or enjoyed a good game of Quidditch. Your invitation was my first chance to rejoin the wizarding world fleetingly, without being detected. And that is why I used Polyjuice Potion.'

Ginny watched the man in front of her carefully. She'd never seen him look so sincere, but this was a man who had fooled the most powerful Dark wizard the world had ever known, not to mention playing the part of a villain so compellingly that he had been a figure of loathing to all Hogwarts students. He could still be lying yet. 'That still doesn't explain why you tricked me!'

'I hadn't planned for you to be attracted to me.' He paused before continuing, and his next words obviously cost him great effort. 'I hadn't planned on being attracted to you.' He stopped, his black eyes shining. 'I didn't know I wouldn't be able to resist you.'

Now it was Ginny's turn to be shocked, and her wand arm fell limply by her side.

'Don't try and make out you have feelings for me!' she snapped.

'I'm not pretending,' he murmured, rising from his armchair and taking a step towards her. His heart seemed to thud so loudly, it threatened to drown out what he was about to say. His palms felt clammy as he prepared to tell Ginny the truth about his feelings. 'I let myself get in too deep. And then I didn't know how to stop. Because I knew if I told you the truth, then... this would happen.' He turned his face from her bitterly. 'So here I am. The ugly truth. Hex me, if it makes you feel better. But nothing you can do to me will make me feel more wretched than I do right now.'

Ginny faltered as she watched her former professor pinch the bridge of his nose with his long fingers. He looked tired, and a part of Ginny felt confused and even sorry for him; if he had indeed developed feelings for her, then he faced a real predicament now. Severus Snape, his face usually a stoic, inscrutable mask, now looked truly

ashamed. But the other part of her felt betrayed by his deception, and that part wasn't done with Severus Snape just yet.

'How can I believe a single thing you say?' she asked grimly, stowing her wand back inside her robes. Turning away from him, she added, 'You'll never know how much you've hurt me.'

'I never meant to hurt you,' he answered hoarsely, reaching a hand out to her.

'Save your breath,' Ginny muttered viciously, walking towards the door.

In that moment, Severus felt his throat constricting, and he couldn't have called out to apologise to Ginny even if his very existence depended on it. Another red-head had rebutted his explanations a whole generation ago; another red-head had walked out of his life in anger and had left him broken and desolate with those very words. And now it was happening again. The room seemed to get smaller and all the air sucked out of it by the time she reached the door.

'I'll keep your secret, Severus Snape,' Ginny said, and her voice was as cold as the cells in Nurmengard. 'That much I owe you for saving my son. But don't ever try contacting me again.'

'Ginny,' Severus croaked, but it was too late; with a few short steps, Ginny had exited the lounge and Disapparated in the hall.

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## Chapter 23 – Fallout From The Fall Out

*Chapter 23 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 23 Fallout From The Fall Out

The weeks following Ginny's confrontation were some of the worst Severus had experienced since the time of Voldemort. He found himself plunged into a pit of despair, the likes of which were on a par with losing Lily's friendship.

Lily. Yes, he could not deny that Lily Potter bore a great deal of resemblance to Ginny Potter, and it was in more than just name alone. They were both red-heads, both brave Gryffindors, and had both married insufferable, specy little four-eyed twits. They were passionate and compassionate; by turns as fiery as the sun and colder than the surface of the moon. They were beautiful and feminine, but had keen intelligence and a playful sense of humour. And they even both had an affinity for cats. Given all this, it was no surprise that he'd fallen head-over-heels, but Ginny was not merely a Lily substitute.

Ginny had known poverty and hardship, whereas Lily had been brought up in middle-class comfort. And this turned out to be a key distinction between the two. There had always been a part of Severus that had felt he was never quite good enough for Lily, no matter how kind she had been to him. Maybe it was that nagging doubt that had driven her away from him in the first place: the knowledge that, no matter what Severus went on to achieve, in her eyes he'd only ever be the weird, scruffy Snape boy from Spinner's End on whom she'd taken pity.

But it wasn't like that with Ginny. It felt as if they were on an even footing from the start they had both escaped a life of second-hand clothes and hand-me-downs and had forged their own way in the world. She was also a mother, and of all the qualities Severus thought he was looking for in a woman, the word "maternal" would surely come right underneath "Hufflepuff" on his undesirable list. However, he didn't view her as a mother, nor as the wife of Harry Potter, nor even as Senior Quidditch Correspondent and minor celebrity. To him, she was simply Ginny: glorious, sexy, wonderful Ginny.

But, as with the first red-head that had grabbed hold of his heart, it seemed inevitable that Severus would end up ruining it, like he'd done before. How was he supposed to know that Ginny would desire his Polyjuiced form and he'd be unable to resist her? How was he to know that their coupling would be explosive and addictive? And how could he have guessed that he would start to develop feelings and the whole situation would spiral out of control?

It was right that Ginny should be angry. He'd lied to her, and he'd violated her. But when she'd walked away from him it felt like history repeating itself; the memory of Lily's abandonment came flooding back and made Ginny's rebuttal a double rejection. She'd even used the same words as Lily had, all those years ago.

Severus knew it was foolish to have fallen for Ginny. It had been an utter sham. She'd thought she had been having an affair with a macho, masculine hunk. No wonder she was angry when she found out it was actually him, Severus Snape: bitter, sallow, ugly, and with a nose so crooked, it could open bottles of Butterbeer. Who could love him? Certainly, no one else ever had. So why should she?

All of these thoughts plagued Severus over the weeks following the argument with Ginny. He was consumed with guilt and remorse, brooding for hours whilst sipping thimbles of Firewhiskey. Soon, he was drinking straight from the bottle. Although usually he rarely felt lonesome, these days he felt empty and isolated. His appetite decreased, and he found he had no interest in his daily routine. His copies of the *Daily Prophet* were left unread on the windowsill where the owl had delivered them, and he'd even stopped going for his morning walk. His potion lab remained closed; he didn't even have the energy to open the curtains in the living room. What use was the new light of spring when everything inside him was dark?

Ginny, too, felt thoroughly miserable and alone. Her interactions with Harry had reached a new low. Harry's smug expression when she'd returned from confronting Snape was almost more than she could bear, and her broken demeanour had reaffirmed to him that he had been right about Alfric's identity. From that point on, they had suddenly turned in to one of those wretched couples that only communicated through their children, whilst trying to keep up a flimsy appearance that all was well in front of them. And when the children weren't around, the atmosphere in the house was colder than Siberia. Ginny accepted the silent treatment as her punishment; after all, she was the one that was in the wrong. She was the one who had cheated. She'd hurt Harry, she knew that, and Harry had every right to be angry. But his passive-aggressive behaviour was much more upsetting to Ginny than if he faced up to her and had a blazing row. Ginny did not know if it was possible for her and Harry to heal their relationship after everything that had happened. Furthermore, she didn't know if she actually wanted to. But for now, for the sake of the children, they stayed under the same roof.

On top of this, she found that her enthusiasm for her job had all but slipped away; indeed, just getting up in the morning seemed to require superhuman strength, and her Quidditch reports became shorter and less engaging as her attention was mired by her own misery. Life had become something to endure, and sinking into an empty bed every night was no solace either.

Ginny had gone over and over the events that had led her to this point a hundred times or more. It was true that she had initiated things in the first place, and so she had to take some responsibility for her actions. But what puzzled her was the mourning that she seemed to be going through for the end of the affair. Why was she so cut-up about it? Was it the lies and betrayal that hurt the most, or was she actually missing "Alfric"? She had to concede that their physical encounters had been more intense than anything she had previously experienced. Their bodies seemed to work in synchronicity, and it had been obvious that the passion was not merely one-sided. She could understand Snape being physically attracted to her not that she was vain or thought herself particularly good-looking but men were men and most would not turn down sex with an eager partner. What she was struggling to come to terms with was the fact that Snape had actually developed genuine feelings for her.

He certainly seemed full of remorse when she had confronted him, and that was a side of Severus Snape she had never seen before. Of course, just like everyone else at the Battle of Hogwarts, she had discovered that his motivation for protecting Harry and bringing down Voldemort had been his enduring love for Harry's mother. And whereas this knowledge obviously changed most people's perceptions of the sullen ex-headmaster, it was still difficult to imagine him ever being tender and gentle. Yet he had been, with her. They had enjoyed intense sexual pleasure, but they had also known real intimacy together. That kind of intimacy was not something that could be faked, surely? The way he'd held her after their moments of passion seemed so real, as if every caress held meaning. They'd got on so well, as if they intuitively understood each other. Their banter was peppered with playful teasing. It seemed incredible that Severus Snape could be capable of interacting with a lover in such a way.

Ginny reflected on the professor as she'd known him, during his year as headmaster of Hogwarts. With hindsight, she could see what a perilous tightrope he'd had to walk, and whereas he allowed the Carrows to be in charge of all punishments, he never laid a finger on any of the pupils himself. He never needed to; his words were often far more powerful than the use of his wand, and he could strike terror in to pupils with just a glare. She often wondered how much more difficult she and the surviving members of Dumbledore's Army had made his task of helping Harry, with their foolish and unsuccessful attempt at stealing the Sword of Gryffindor. Once the truth about Snape's allegiance had been finally revealed, it seemed ironic to Ginny that the ex-Head of Slytherin was actually as brave as any Gryffindor.

There was no doubting he must have had nerves of steel in order to hoodwink Voldemort for so long, and that he'd possessed a high level of loyalty, to both Lily and Dumbledore. These were all established Gryffindor traits. And whereas Slytherin had become a synonym for evil and unpleasantness, their core attributes were actually less nefarious when taken at face value. Cunning, resourcefulness and ambition were at the heart of that House, all of which Snape clearly owned in spades, because without the marriage of Gryffindor and Slytherin qualities, Ginny was amazed to realise, he probably would have failed at being a double-agent from the very start.

Yet for all that, in his time as a teacher, he'd been cruel and vindictive, mean and inapproachable. He'd favoured his own House over all others, and had found any excuse to goad and be unpleasant to almost everyone else. But how much of that was actually him, and how much of that had been a carefully-constructed mask in order to make his life as a spy easier? Given the hand he'd been dealt in life, it was easy to see why he had become bitter. He was an enigma; indeed, it felt like no-one, aside from Albus Dumbledore, actually knew the real Severus Snape at all.

But Ginny had seen a different side of him during her affair. She'd seen a man who had a biting sense of humour that could match her own; a man who was a generous lover, with a sharp intellect, and who was gentle and tender. And, surprisingly for her, a huge Quidditch fan. He'd even confessed he supported the Holyhead Harpies, Ginny's old team.

She had to concede that she had fallen for the personality of "Alfric" as much as his physical form. After a shaky start, they had got on well; there was no two ways about it, they had just clicked. Spending time with him was easy and never felt forced. But where did that leave her now? Did that mean that she, Ginny Potter, was actually in love with and pining for Severus Snape? And if she was, what in the name of Merlin was she going to do about it?

## Chapter 24 – Cards On The Table

*Chapter 24 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

### Chapter 24 Cards On The Table

Spring arrived in a flurry of yellow daffodils and sporadic showers, but in Ginny's heart it was perpetual winter. Not even the noticeably lighter mornings and evenings helped to cheer her mood. Life seemed cold and grey, even as the bright blossoms bloomed in her garden at Godric's Hollow.

One windy Wednesday afternoon in March, Ginny came home from work to find a curled-up scroll of crisp, yellow parchment standing proudly on the dining room table. On closer inspection, she saw with a swoop of dread that it was wax-sealed with the unmistakable black crest of Devi & Deed, the wizarding lawyers.

Unfurling the parchment with shaking hands, her eyes scanned the Decree Nisi, trying to take in the contents. One paragraph, however, stood out above all others.

*The Wizengamot hereby acknowledges that on the fourteenth of March two thousand and nine, Harry James Potter filed a claim of divorce against his wife of eight years, Ginevra Molly Potter, on the grounds of repeated adultery.*

The words made Ginny's head spin. So this was it; Harry was really ending their marriage. In her heart, she knew they could not carry on avoiding each other and having forced conversations through their children forever, but to see the divorce papers in front of her made the whole situation feel very surreal.

Was she sad? Ginny could not answer this. She'd spent so many weeks feeling miserable that it was difficult to know how she felt about the ending of her marriage. So much had changed in her relationship with Harry that it almost seemed like divorce was inevitable somehow, even without her infidelity forcing the issue.

Ginny didn't know a great deal about wizard law, but what she did know terrified her. In order for adultery to be proved to the Wizengamot, the other party involved in the act must confess to the affair alongside herself in court. And that would be an absolute disaster for Snape, who had so carefully constructed a life for himself outside of the public eye, and it would probably destroy his fragile reputation for good. Even now, there were those who did not see that Dumbledore's death was necessary in Voldemort's downfall and who believed it was good riddance that Snape had "perished" during the Battle of Hogwarts. Despite Harry's best efforts to defend him, some people still only viewed Snape as a Death Eater, which was enhanced by his infamy during his time as Headmaster, as well as by those who knew him by reputation, and

by people whose lives had been devastated by the acts of Death Eaters. The revelation that Snape had survived the battle and had been "hiding" would be more than enough proof of his guilt to them. Add adultery into the mix and Ginny could see that he would in all probability be sent to prison quicker than you could say Azkaban.

But Ginny could not let that happen. It was her fault that she'd unwittingly coaxed Snape out of hiding, and she felt she was completely to blame for the infidelity. She'd given him her word that she would not betray his secret. She had to stop Harry from naming Snape somehow. It seemed unfair to Ginny that Snape had given so much of his life already, and might have yet so much more to lose if Harry went through with the divorce. She wanted to protect him and spare him the embarrassment and the possible ramifications from their liaisons.

Harry returned home just over an hour later, and Ginny's blood ran cold as she heard him whistling cheerfully in the hall as he kicked off his boots. She waited for him at the kitchen table, looking pale and tired with the parchment spread before her.

Harry sauntered in, looking his wife squarely in the eye.

'Ah. So I see you've had some post today,' he said, in a tone which suggested he was enjoying Ginny's discomfort very much.

'Harry... Please...'

He raised his eyebrows questioningly at his wife to continue. Would she beg him for forgiveness? Would she demand a second chance? Or would she crumble, admitting she was foolish to ever have looked at another man? Harry had his responses to each of these reactions carefully thought out and was looking forward to using them.

Ginny drew a breath before starting. 'I agree that we can't go on like this. And I agree that we should get a divorce.'

Harry's eyebrows shot up even higher. This, he was not expecting.

'But please, don't go through with the adultery claim. Not for me, but for Severus.'

Harry looked at his wife incredulously. 'What an earth are you talking about?'

'If your claim goes through, both Severus and I will be hauled in front of the Wizengamot. It's no more than I deserve, but Severus has done nothing to warrant that. He's spent his whole life since the war avoiding the wizarding world; he doesn't deserve his anonymity to be broken like this.'

Harry's green eyes flashed at this. 'Maybe he should have thought of that before he had sex with you.'

Ginny winced at the guttural way Harry pronounced the word *sex*, as if it were filthy and contaminated. 'In case you have forgotten, Severus saved our son!' she shot back. 'And he also gave you the clues you needed to defeat Voldemort! Now tell me, is this how you'll repay him? By risking getting him put into Azkaban, just because you are angry with me?'

Harry faltered. She was right, of course. It wasn't really Snape he was angry with, it was her. In truth, he hadn't considered the ramifications the divorce proceedings would have on Snape. All Harry wanted was vindication; Ginny had betrayed him, and he wanted justice for that betrayal. He wanted everyone to know she was guilty. But Harry hadn't realised the repercussions of naming Snape; his former teacher would indeed find himself in an even worse situation if he were thrust into the spotlight out of the blue. Quite why Ginny was concerned about that, however, was another matter.

'What do you care about what happens to Snape, anyway?' he scoffed. 'Don't tell me you're in love with him?'

Ginny's chestnut eyes were heavy with emotion as she gazed back at her husband. Harry noticed she seemed unable to speak, and eventually Ginny simply nodded.

Harry felt like he'd been hit by a Bludger. Ginny, in love with Snape? Had the world just gone completely crazy? He let out a disbelieving bark of incredulous laughter.

'I know it's insane,' Ginny cut in, before Harry had a chance to say anything. One hand ran through her hair in agitation. 'I don't know how it happened. But that's not what this is about, Harry. I don't care if you take out a double-page spread in the *Daily Prophet*, telling the whole world that I cheated on you. But Severus does not deserve his life to be destroyed by this.' She looked pleadingly up at her husband, who turned away with a sigh.

Harry rested his hands on the sink, staring out of the window into the garden. How did his life come to this? Even before he had been born, his life had been inextricably linked with Severus Snape's. And the man had saved his life, and then that of his son's. Maybe fate demanded a payment for all that Snape had done for him. And just maybe, that payment was in the form of his wife.

'There is a way round this,' he eventually muttered.

Ginny held her breath in anticipation of what was to follow.

'I'm still divorcing you on the grounds of adultery. But I will name Alfric O. Nobel instead.'

Ginny sagged in her chair. This was not ideal; Snape would still have to go to court with her, albeit in his Polyjuiced form. And surely, he'd despise her forever more for the indiscretion and embarrassment. But it would conceal his identity and his anonymity, and that was the main thing. It was too much to expect that Harry would change his mind regarding the grounds for their divorce and name it as "irreconcilable differences," and certainly she did not deserve any lenience. At least she had succeeded in convincing Harry that Snape shouldn't be the fall-guy for Harry's anger.

Ginny let out a shaky breath. 'Thank you,' she whispered hoarsely.

Harry's eyes flashed again. 'You don't have to thank me. I'm not doing this for you, I'm doing it for Snape,' he spat.

Ginny nodded, glancing down at her hands sorrowfully.

'You'll be hearing from the Wizengamot shortly to confirm the hearing.' He paused, a nasty smile forming on his lips. 'You might want to let Snape know. It takes a while to brew Polyjuice Potion, if I remember correctly.'

And with that, Harry left the kitchen, leaving Ginny reeling at the thought of having to tell Severus about the mess they were now in.

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Author's note: Life has been very busy, I appreciate all of your patience and support. The story WILL be finished at some point!

# Chapter 25 – Feelings and Firewhiskey

Chapter 25 of 29

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

## Chapter 25 Feelings and Firewhiskey

A storm was raging down in Cornwall, making the waves crash with violence against the harbour walls in the village. Fishing boats tethered to the mooring bobbed perilously together on the iron-grey sea as if huddling up for shelter, the wind whipping the rigging so that it clanked eerily on the masts. The rain was almost horizontal with the sheer force of the ferocious gale. It was certainly not the kind of night to be outside, and as Severus Snape listened to the howling of the wind through the chimney top, he felt grateful he was sitting in his favourite armchair, cosy and warm, next to the fire in his little cottage.

He'd finally stopped moping over Ginny and had moved on instead to what he was best at: brooding by night. He knew sitting around in a darkened room drinking his way through copious amounts of Ogden's was not something he could sustain, even though it was very tempting. After a week of such morose indulgence, he'd forced himself back into his old routine. Routine gave him a purpose and there was some sort of comfort to be taken from that, at least. He kept his mind busy and would only allow his thoughts to lament on Ginny in the dead of night. Dampening his ardour with a few pumps of his wrist at the thought of her left him feeling even more frustrated and empty, however.

He missed her. He missed her scent, he missed her laugh. He missed her kisses and the way she made love. He missed her wry comments. He missed all of her. And he was still adjusting to the idea of never seeing her again. So when frantic and incessant knocking at the front door pulled him out of his thoughts, the last person he expected to see on his doorstep as he threw open the door in annoyance was Ginny herself.

She looked so small and helpless, the storm blowing her cloak from her face and lashing strands of red hair about her. Her chestnut eyes were filled with sorrow. It took all of Snape's strength not to sweep her in his arms. Instead, he silently stood aside and let her pass, his heart racing. He didn't know what had brought her back to his cottage, but whatever it was, judging by her doleful expression, it couldn't be good.

He followed Ginny into the lounge, his throat suddenly feeling very dry. It was curious how seeing Ginny again had been his greatest wish over the last few weeks and yet, now she was here, he didn't have a clue what to say to her. He offered her a drink, and she gratefully accepted a tumbler of Firewhiskey, perching on one side of the battered leather sofa. He sat opposite her in his armchair, feeling decidedly awkward, and waited for her to speak.

'I've made such a mess,' she said eventually, clutching the tumbler so tightly her knuckles whitened. 'I'm so sorry.'

Snape's brow furrowed as he watched her carefully. 'Has something happened?' he asked, trying to keep his voice even.

Ginny closed her eyes and sighed. 'Harry has filed for divorce.'

There were a few beats of silence as Snape processed this. 'I see,' he said. 'On what grounds?'

Ginny's gaze met Snape's, and she looked more wretched than ever. 'Repeated adultery,' she replied, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Snape felt like his stomach had been plunged in icy water. 'What? Did you tell him what had happened?' he asked, more sharply than he'd intended.

Ginny shook her head in defeat. 'I don't know how, but he worked it out himself. He even worked out it was you.'

Snape's mind reeled as he struggled to take this in. He'd always maintained that Potter had never showed signs of exceptional logic or perceptiveness in his entire academic career, and he'd assumed Potter had been given the title of Head Auror purely on the grounds of defeating Voldemort. But Snape had to admit, however Potter had found out, he must have been very shrewd. But this was irrelevant. The fact was, Potter knew, and he wanted to divorce Ginny. And clearly, Ginny was upset about this.

'Do you know how a divorce case works at the Wizengamot?' Ginny asked tentatively, clutching her tumbler of Firewhiskey even tighter.

Snape looked back at her blankly, shaking his head. Wizard law was not his area of expertise, and divorce was not something he'd ever come into contact with, even though when growing up he'd wished many times his own parents would end their marriage. He assumed divorce in the wizarding world would simply be a case of both parties signing some papers in the presence of the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, after which they would be free of their marital duties. Something in the way Ginny was fearfully looking at him told him there may be slightly more to it than that.

Ginny took a deep breath before continuing. 'Wizard law states that, in cases of adultery, both parties that committed the act need to confess in front of the Wizengamot before divorce is granted.'

Ginny watched Snape's expression turn from neutral to confusion to comprehension and then to anger, all in a matter of moments.

'And you want me to confess, in order to free you from the shackles of your marriage to the Four-Eyed Git Who Lived, do you?' Snape sneered. Now he saw with clarity just what this visit was really about. Of course, he was to blame for hoodwinking Ginny in the first place, but little did he know that it would lead to his exposure to the wizarding world, the world he'd tried so hard to leave behind. His Jobberknolls had certainly come home to roost, this time. Thousands of them, wailing a deafening death-cry.

Snape screwed up his eyes as he imagined the terrifying scenarios unfolding from the revelation that he was alive: the *Daily Prophet* having a field day, his face splashed all over the headlines. The rumour mill about his Death Eater activities gradually gaining pace alongside his reputation as an adulterer. An exposé by Rita Skeeter, leaving no grisly stone unturned. A campaign of justice for Dumbledore. The Wizengamot, sentencing him to rot in Azkaban for war crimes. And all of this could and probably would follow as a result of an admission of adultery.

It seemed ridiculous that the law demanded proof in the form of confession of both parties for divorce to happen. If this law was used as a way of preventing the break-up of

marriages, it certainly worked, as divorce was fairly uncommon amongst wizarding society. Admission of adultery publicly put shame on both parties and would be of great personal embarrassment. And yet, simultaneously, it was far less shameful than having one's private memories of illicit intimate encounters displayed in front of a court as evidence, Snape supposed.

'I begged him not to name you, Severus,' Ginny replied desperately. 'You saved our son. I told him... I told him you shouldn't have your life ruined because he was angry with me.' Her eyes were shining with emotion, begging him to believe her. 'Eventually, he agreed with me. But he said he'd name Alfric O. Nobel as the other party instead. I tried to protect you,' she finished weakly.

Tried to protect him? Snape wasn't expecting that. He saw Ginny flush, as if she'd confessed a secret she hadn't wanted to share. As he watched her playing with her hands uncomfortably in her lap, he pondered having to go to court as Alfric. In many respects, it would be easier; after all, it was Alfric who was known for his brilliant potioning work and who had saved Ginny's son, not Snape. And Alfric was not tarred with the stigma of being a Death Eater or a murderer. It seemed unlikely that the indiscretion would directly affect his professional work. At worst, it would be embarrassing. He was not sure if the same could be said for Ginny, however.

Ginny had a great deal to lose by going through the divorce. There was the risk of losing contact with her children, as well as being lowered in the opinions of her family and friends. But, even more crucially, Ginny had a job that was very much in the public eye. Could her divorce jeopardise that? Even though she worked for the *Prophet*, they hadn't been shy about publishing stories when her son became ill. Would her own employer turn on her and kick her when she was down?

Suddenly, Snape realised how magnanimous it was of Ginny to think of protecting him when she also had so much at stake by going through this divorce, and felt a little ashamed that he'd assumed her visit was purely self-serving.

'Do you want to get divorced?' Snape asked softly, looking at the forlorn woman in front of him.

Ginny replied without hesitation. 'Yes, I do. I can't stay married to a man I don't love anymore.'*Especially not when I think I'm in love with you* she finished in her head.

'Even though you risk losing your friends, your job and your family?' he asked carefully, genuinely surprised that Ginny could think about giving up so much just on the basis of their affair.

Ginny bit her lip and stared into the fire. It was several moments before she replied.

'I'm not happy, Severus,' she started at last, her voice wavering slightly. 'I haven't been happy for a long time. I don't feel like I'm me anymore. I feel like I've been squeezed into a box that doesn't quite fit. I never actually wanted to be a mother. It just happened. And then I had to give up Quidditch, which was the only thing I was ever really good at and loved doing. Harry got his promotion and we saw less and less of each other. We both changed; our priorities changed. And I lost sight of who I was. Who I am. But being with Alfric being with you made me feel alive again. It made me feel like the old me. And then I saw clearly that I didn't want to have this life, just existing with someone who I no longer loved. I wanted to be the old Ginny. The Ginny who loved life, the Ginny who followed her dreams. The Ginny who was happy.'

*The Ginny who is in love with you.*

Ginny couldn't stop the hot tears from falling. This was the truth, which she'd never spoken aloud before. It was selfish, it was reckless, but it was the truth. Ginny hated crying, and the old Ginny rarely did. But the new Ginny was broken and emotionally exhausted, and couldn't have stopped herself even if she tried. She covered her eyes. The thought of Snape looking at her with disdain made her anguish even worse.

But Snape wasn't looking at her with disdain. There was empathy shining in his black eyes. He knew what it was like to be in a situation which spiralled out of control and then ruined your life. But along with empathy, there was also a confused knot in his stomach. Ginny had said he'd made her feel alive. Did she really mean it? And could she still feel that way?

With the stealth of a cat, Snape left his armchair to sit gracefully next to Ginny on the sofa. Although he wanted to hold her, to comfort her, he felt afraid. He was never very good when it came to expressing emotion. Instead, he carefully laid a hand on her shoulder, terrified she would shake him off. But she didn't.

'Ginny.'

Hearing him say her name in his rich, low baritone coupled with the touch of his hand at her shoulder made her body tremble, and the last of her resolve crumbled. She turned and buried her face in Snape's chest, weeping openly and clutching to him as if she were drowning.

Snape wrapped his arms around her, one hand entwined in her still-damp red hair as he held her close. He wished he could absorb all of her pain inside himself, and make her happy again. Seeing her so distraught was gut-wrenching.

'If you really want a divorce, I'll come to the court with you,' he said quietly, stroking her hair idly with a thumb and watching the flames flicker in the fireplace. As the flames leapt and danced, they seemed to imitate the erratic beat of his heart which was caused just by being close to Ginny. She had awoken a burning inside him: smouldering feelings of love and desire that he never thought he'd experience again. Holding her like this spread warmth through him, stronger than any fire. In that moment, he realised he'd walk across hot coals if she asked him to.

'I'd do anything for you,' he murmured into her fiery red hair, surprising himself by speaking his thoughts aloud. He froze momentarily, every part of him terrified that Ginny would push him away in disgust for his foolish admission.

But Ginny merely held him tighter, her sobs subsiding with every passing second in his embrace.

## Chapter 26 – Questions and Answers

*Chapter 26 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

Being in Severus' arms was a balm to Ginny's soul, and gradually her sobs became less and less until they stopped altogether. As she let herself be soothed by the rhythmic stroking of her hair and the strong pounding of his heartbeat, she began to calm down and try and arrange her thoughts into some kind of order.

It was an amazing relief that Severus had agreed to come to the Wizengamot with her, and that was one obstacle overcome at least. Had he decided to refuse for whatever reason, she and Harry would have had to stay married. The thought of living in a loveless marriage for the rest of her life chilled her to the bone. She could see it now: silent meals at the dinner table which would be punctuated by the scraping of cutlery against plates, fending off awkward questions from the kids, having to put on a show for friends and family that all was well at Christmas and other gatherings... Day by day, the colour would drain from her life; her soul would gradually be sucked from her like a slow-motion Dementor's Kiss.

But the reality of getting divorced was just beginning to dawn on her. There were plenty more challenges ahead from this point on and tons of unanswered questions. Such as, how was she going to break the news about the divorce to Ron and Hermione, her family, and the kids? And how would they react? Would they shun her? She didn't want it to turn into a situation where people chose sides, especially the children, even though it was her that was in the wrong. Would they turn against her?

Then there was work. The *Daily Prophet* never usually turned down an opportunity for a story. But the last thing she needed right now was for her personal life to be plastered all over the very paper she worked for. And what of her professional reputation? Could her divorce harm that somehow?

And of course, there were the practical issues. Where was she going to live? Would the kids stay with her, or would they stay with Harry? Would the court decide?

But the biggest question of all was: did Severus feel the same way as she did? She'd heard him say that he'd do anything for her... Was that true? She needed to know.

Ginny shifted her weight so she was looking up at Severus. He'd had his eyes closed at first, looking more tranquil and relaxed than she'd ever seen him in the past, when he was her teacher. The deep crease that appeared so often when he frowned had gone. His nose, always a thing of ridicule when at school, actually seemed to fit his face better when he wasn't habitually scowling. And she saw that his mouth, when not pursed in anger or pulled back into an ugly sneer, was actually quite kissable. His black hair was not greasy; on the contrary, it had the sheen of a raven's wing. Underneath the many layers of bitterness that Severus usually hid behind was a man who, if not classically handsome, was certainly striking.

Seeing him without teaching robes also gave him another dimension. His infamous bat-like appearance did nothing to flatter his tall, lean physique, whereas the white high-collared shirt and black trousers he was wearing now were beautifully tailored and fitted him well. Ginny would bet her last Knut that these were Madam Malkin's finest and that no expense had been spared on them.

As she studied Severus' relaxed countenance, Ginny thought that it should have felt strange, being so close to her former teacher. But if anything, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. Because she'd seen the man behind the mask, and it was that man that she loved.

As Severus felt Ginny pull away from him, he opened his black eyes and looked down at her.

'Did you mean it when you said you'd do anything for me?' Ginny asked, her voice slightly hoarse from crying.

Severus gazed at the forlorn witch in his arms. Even with the tears still damp on her cheeks and her hair ruffled, she was beautiful. And just holding her made his spirit feel at peace. If this was what love felt like, then he was head-over-heels. He was usually terrible when it came to discussing emotions, but he knew it was now or never.

'Ginny,' he muttered, his rich baritone like a caress. 'No witch has ever touched me the way you have. Not even Lily.'

His stomach flipped at this revelation. He'd never had anything physical with Lily, apart from some clammy hand-holding and one awkward kiss as teenagers. And his sexual encounters as a grown man had been few and far between; one-night affairs which were perfunctory, almost clinical, without feelings or attachments. But with Ginny, his undeniable carnal attraction had blossomed into something much, much more.

His soul was now laid bare. If Ginny walked away from him for a second time, he didn't think he'd be able to survive it.

Ginny's chestnut eyes searched the onyx, her heart swelling so much that it might burst. 'Oh, Severus. All this time I've been away from you, it made me realise... It wasn't Alfric's looks that I'd fallen for at all.' She reached up a hand and gently placed it over Severus' heart. 'It was the man that's in here.'

Severus almost felt dizzy with Ginny's confession. It had been so much easier under the guise of Polyjuice Potion to let his guard down, and so he'd been able to show a side of himself to her that no-one but Lily had ever seen before. He'd sheltered his softer side, the side with feelings and humour and passion, from the world for so long that there was a time when he thought that side no longer existed. But Ginny had awoken something in him; he realised that before she came along, he was half a person. That Ginny had feelings for the "real" him was a complete surprise, however. Never had he thought anyone could feel that way about him, not since the day Lily abandoned him. But more than that, Severus had never believed he was worthy of such love.

He desperately wanted to pull Ginny to him and kiss her until there was no breath left in him. Instead, he cupped her face and wiped away a tear-track with the pad of his thumb. This was far more complicated than either of them could have imagined.

'What are we going to do, Ginny?' he murmured. 'Are you sure you can be with a man like me? I've never wanted to be a father. What about your children? And what will your family say?'

Ginny bit her lip and looked down. She hadn't got that far yet. 'I don't know what will happen,' she admitted. 'All I know is: I want to be with you.'

Suddenly, Severus felt very protective of Ginny. Of course she was confused; there was so much that was out of her control at the moment, the last thing she needed was him putting any kind of pressure on her. He immediately regretted making her feel bad. She needed time to process this; they both did. If they were going to stand a chance of being together, it was abundantly clear that each of them would have to make certain sacrifices. It was going to be a long, hard road for each of them and he was pretty sure there would be a great deal of soul-searching involved.

'I want to be with you, too.' He pulled her close again, wrapping his arms around her once more. 'It'll work out, Ginny. We'll just take it one step at a time.'

## Chapter 27 - The Wizengamot

### Chapter 27 of 29

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in



## Chapter 27: The Wizengamot

Harry had been to the Wizengamot many times in his life. From his hearing whilst he was at Hogwarts, through Dumbledore's memories of the Crouch trial, and more recently, countless occasions as an Auror presenting evidence against the accused; it was fair to say he knew the place like the back of his wand. As a result of the routine of his job, the intimidation of entering the sombre-looking, stone walled courtrooms had long gone. Today, however, he was not visiting the Wizengamot for work. He was here for his divorce, this time sitting on the other side of the balcony.

Divorce hearings were never conducted by the full Wizengamot, and Harry was grateful for that. He had no doubt that the topic of the end of his marriage would be the hottest piece of gossip on everyone's lips outside the court, but at least inside there was a modicum of discretion. He watched as the Chief Warlock, Court Scribe, and a few members of the Wizard Council took their places on the raised platform, each of them wearing the traditional plum-coloured robes with an elaborate silver "W" embroidered on the left-hand side. His stomach clenched with nausea as he sat stiffly in his best suit and waited for the proceedings to begin.

The Chief Warlock opened by stating the purpose of the hearing and introducing himself and the members of the Council, but he might as well have been talking in Gobbledegook for all the attention Harry was paying. For Harry's eyes were locked on the heavy wooden door, waiting for Ginny and Snape to be called through to the courtroom.

'Mr Potter?'

Harry blinked and glanced up, suddenly realising the Warlock had asked him something. The Warlock was looking down at him, smiling kindly.

'Mr Potter, I just need you to confirm for me the grounds for the divorce proceedings today. Our records say repeated adultery, is that correct?'

Harry cleared his throat, which had suddenly gone very dry, and was overwhelmed by a surreal feeling. He was on first-name terms with the Chief Warlock and they would regularly chat in the lift about this and that. To be sat in front of him now, as a criminal, felt like a nightmare. He could see the pity in the old man's eyes, and he supposed the hearing was equally as awkward for the Warlock as it was for him.

But the look of pity was something that Harry had got used to over the last month as he'd broken the news of his divorce. Telling Ron and Hermione was just awful. He and Ginny had told them together, to show that they were both in agreement about the decision. Ironically, it seemed like they were more upset about the news than himself and Ginny were. Telling the rest of the Weasleys was harrowing too, and Molly had shed many tears. Molly and Arthur had said Harry was still a part of their family, no matter what, and Harry had then shed tears of his own.

Strangely, telling the boys had not been as upsetting as he'd imagined it would be. James said he'd wanted to stay with his dad, of course, whereas Al quietly took it in, proving that he had wisdom beyond his years by saying he needed time to think about it.

'Yes, Your Honour,' Harry replied, his voice echoing around the curved brickwork.

There was no tutting or sharp intakes of breath at the admission, much to Harry's relief. The incessant scratching from the Scribe's quill was the only sound that filled the otherwise-silent courtroom.

The Warlock continued, 'And I understand you have declined the presence of your solicitor at this hearing?'

'That's right, Your Honour.' Harry knew that a solicitor was a mere formality when it came to the hearing, as nearly all of the questioning was done by the Chief Warlock or the Council members. A solicitor had been needed to provide the summons and officially notify the Wizengamot of the divorce proceedings, but as far as Harry was concerned they were about as much use as a chocolate teapot when it came to the hearing itself, and he wasn't about to waste his hard-earned Galleons lining wealthy solicitor's pockets. Just the summons itself could have bought him a new broom.

The Warlock bowed slightly. 'Very well. In accordance with the Decree of Magical Matrimony, Clause B, the law states that in cases of adultery, both parties involved in the act of unfaithfulness must present themselves to the Wizengamot before a decision on the annulment is reached. Mr Potter, could you please name for me the parties involved in the adultery?'

Harry's stomach swooped with dread as he replied, 'Ginevra Molly Potter, my wife of nine years, and Alfric O. Nobel, PHD.'

The Warlock called for the named persons to enter the courtroom, and there was a thud and screech as the old wooden doors opened. Every pair of eyes watched them enter, but none with more scrutiny than Harry himself.

He noticed Ginny first. She was wearing a smart but plain set of navy robes. Her hair was pinned up and she looked pale and tense. Beside her was a tall, muscular blond man, dressed in muted dark colours. The man was scowling, and he had his hands behind his back. Harry was amazed to see Alfric in the flesh. He could not have been more opposite to Snape. Whereas Snape was lean and pale from years of hiding away in the dungeons, Alfric was heavily-set and had the kind of athletic tan which spoke of hardy and frequent outdoor activity. And Alfric was almost Scandinavian in his fairness, which was a direct contrast to Snape's black hair and eyes. With a twist of jealousy rising in his chest, Harry could see why Ginny had cheated with such an alpha male.

'Ginevra Molly Potter, née Weasley?' the Warlock asked, and Ginny muttered her assent.

'You are summoned here today by Harry James Potter to dissolve your marriage, on the grounds of repeated adultery. How do you plead?'

'Guilty, Your Honour,' Ginny answered quietly.

'And do you testify that the man standing next to you is the partner in your unfaithfulness?'

'Yes, Your Honour.'

The Warlock turned his gaze to the blond wizard. 'Alfric O. Nobel, PHD?'

'Yes, Your Honour.'

Harry was not expecting the accent that came out of Alfric's mouth. It sounded like a peculiar mixture of Received Pronunciation with flattened "r" sounds. It wasn't quite nasal enough to be Australian, nor inflected enough to be South African. He struggled to place the accent to anywhere in the United Kingdom.

'You have been named as the partner in adultery with Ginevra Molly Potter, née Weasley. How do you plead?'

'Guilty, Your Honour,' the figure known as Alfric replied, staring stoically ahead.

The Warlock looked at Alfric thoughtfully, and he seemed to be weighing something up in his mind. Eventually, he spoke again.

'You're a gifted potioneer, Mr. Nobel,' he began, scanning a length of parchment before him. 'Says here you've revolutionised Wolfsbane, not to mention curing the youngest of the Potter's sons during the Augurey Flu outbreak.'

Alfric nodded stiffly, clearly uncomfortable at this acknowledgement.

'And it was after curing said son that the two of you became... close?'

A muscle in Alfric's jaw twitched, and again he nodded.

'I see.' There was a few beats of silence, and then the Warlock continued, 'You did not attend Hogwarts, did you, Mr Nobel?'

Harry unconsciously held his breath at this shock line of questioning. He watched as Ginny bit her lip and gazed at the floor. Lying in front of the Wizengamot had serious implications and could even result in a spell in Azkaban if the falsehoods were discovered. Harry was not a religious man, but he found himself praying to whatever deity he could think of for Snape's lie not to be uncovered.

'I did not, Your Honour,' Alfric concurred. 'I grew up in Massachusetts in the United States of America, and I was home-schooled.'

The Warlock raised his eyebrows. 'Massachusetts? Which part?'

'Salem, Your Honour,' Alfric replied coolly.

America? Harry looked on, puzzled. Alfric's accent certainly did not sound American to him. Harry watched as Ginny swallowed nervously, her eyes still rooted to the floor, whilst Alfric gazed ahead, his expression neutral. His voice did not waver and his lies sounded utterly convincing. But then, Harry mused, Snape was a highly skilled Occlumens and must have been an extraordinary liar to have hoodwinked Voldemort for so long. If anyone could get away with lying to the Wizengamot, it was surely him. Harry could not help but feel a grudging admiration for his former teacher in spite of himself.

After a few moments, which to Harry seemed like hours, the Warlock spoke once more.

'Ah, yes. They always have been mistrustful of the government and government-approved schooling in that particular area. Not that I blame them, after that awful witch trial business.' The Warlock looked almost respectfully down at Alfric now. 'I can't help but notice a touch of the Boston Brahmin about your accent, Mr. Nobel.'

Alfric merely inclined his head in a respectful but non-denial kind of way.

The Warlock nodded sagely before turning his attentions back to Ginny.

'It is usually the children who suffer from the break-up of a traditional family unit. I understand you have three children under the age of seven, Mrs Potter?'

Ginny meekly acknowledged the Warlock's question.

'A very young age to have such a large family. I can see how that may have increased strain on the marriage.' He stroked his chin thoughtfully before continuing.

'Would you say, Mrs Potter, that your marriage began to break down before or after your affair with Mr Nobel?'

Ginny's hands were poker-straight by her sides, her fists clenched. Harry was sure she was digging her nails into her palms.

'Our marriage had been in decline for a long time before my son got ill,' she replied, her voice wobbling slightly as she tried to keep control. 'I never set out to hurt my husband, and I never set out to have an affair. I take no pride in being unfaithful. But our marriage was over before I'd met Mr Nobel. The affair was the catalyst for us to get divorced.'

The Warlock turned his eyes to Harry. 'Is that true, Mr Potter? Are you able to pinpoint just when your marriage broke down?'

Harry took a deep breath. Ginny was right; they had been floundering for ages before Al had got sick. And if he had to choose a moment when their marriage had irrevocably fallen apart, he'd have to choose their sleepless night in St. Mungo's, waiting for news on Al's illness.

'Our son's illness was the peak of the breakdown,' Harry admitted. 'But even then I'd hoped we'd be able to get through it. Once I'd found out my wife was having an affair, I knew it was all over. And I couldn't have forgiven her, even if I'd wanted to.'

Ginny glanced down at the floor at this, and it looked like she was about to cry. Alfric remained staring resolutely ahead, and the Warlock's eyes were once again filled with pity.

'Divorce is always a sad business, for both parties involved, and none is more sad than the breakdown of a magical marriage, particularly of two individuals who are highly-regarded in society.' The Warlock looked from Ginny to Harry. 'Our laws are there because the ending of a marriage is not taken lightly. But it is not for me to prolong the agony and draw out the pain in this proceeding. It is clear to me that the marriage has broken down beyond all reasonable reparation and that each party wishes a divorce to be granted.'

'And so, by the admittance herewith to the breach of the rules of the sanctity of marriage as outlined in Clause B of the Decree of Magical Matrimony, otherwise known as adultery, the Wizengamot hereby rules that the marriage of Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Potter née Weasley is henceforth annulled. Custody of the children is to be decided by the parents outside of this courtroom.'

The bang of the Warlock's gavel rang in Harry's ears as a feeling of relief mixed with sorrow welled up inside him. He'd got the justice he'd been searching for, but there was no happy ending to this tale. He chanced a look at Alfric, who was slowly making his way out of the dock, but the fair wizard did not look in his direction. Ginny, meanwhile, looked relieved yet exhausted. And as the old wooden doors screeched open once more, Harry contemplated what the future would hold, now he would be leaving the court finally as a single man.

## Chapter 28 – Life Goes On

### *Chapter 28 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

## Chapter 28: Life Goes On

The weeks and months following the divorce were a surreal period for Ginny and Harry. The *Prophet* had published a short, sensitively-written article, breaking the news of the famous couple's split without citing the reasons involved and featured a brief quote from Ginny asking for privacy at this troubling time. Most people offered their sincere condolences whenever they saw either of them, and it felt like there had been a bereavement, except it was a marriage that had died, not a person.

Deciding on what to do with the house and what was best for the children was one of the hardest parts of the whole process. Ginny decided to move out of Godric's Hollow nearly straight away, taking Lily, Al and Nyx the Kneazle with her, initially staying at The Burrow for a while in order to get her head together. James stayed behind with Harry at Godric's Hollow. Although it tore at Harry to have Al and Lily taken from him, he knew it was Al's decision to stay with Ginny and that a baby should be with its mother. Harry wasn't too bothered by Nyx's departure, however. He'd never been a feline fan and James had always wanted a Crup.

Between them, Harry and Ginny agreed that they should stay civil for the sake of the children and that they would meet up once a week, so that the children could spend time with their siblings as well as their other parent. Both of them knew this would be awkward to start with, but it was the only way they could see of being fair to the children.

In practice, it actually worked quite well. As the months went on, the dedicated "family" time helped both parties to build up a kind of friendship with each other. Strangely, without the albatross of their failing marriage around their shoulders, Harry and Ginny found that these weekly afternoons were actually enjoyable and that they could relate to each other on a platonic level much better than they ever did as a couple. It was a chance to play with the kids, go out and have fun and feel like a family. Ironically, this meant that the children were getting far more quality time from their busy parents than they ever did whilst they were still together.

Harry eventually gave in to James and bought him a little Crup. James was absolutely delighted, and decided to name him Conan, much to Harry's amusement. Although the first few encounters involved lots of hissing and barking, Conan and Nyx actually became playmates as time wore on and tolerated each other well, in a reflection of their owner's rediscovered friendship.

Harry found that single life was not as depressing as he'd envisaged it might be. Work was still busy, so that provided one distraction. But he'd grown up alone and so it didn't take long for him to adjust to his own company again. He found he was popping over to Ron and Hermione's more than he did before, the benefit of which meant he could take James round to play with Rose whilst he caught up with his oldest friends. Ron and Hermione had been fantastic throughout, even though Harry knew it was difficult for them to stay impartial given their closeness to Ginny. Sunday night was Quidditch night, and Harry and Ron would take Rose and James to see the Chudley Canons, getting a chance to have a glass or two of elf-made mead in the process. Once he was back in the stalls, Harry couldn't believe he'd been away from seeing regular Quidditch games for so long. Aside from watching the odd international match here and there, it was as if he'd surrendered his enjoyment of Quidditch for the sake of Ginny's career and the kids. Attending games on a weekly basis helped to reignite his love of the sport, even if the Canons were as hopeless as ever.

It was amazing the amount of people from his past Harry and Ron bumped in to at the Quidditch over the coming months. First, there was Lee Jordan, who hugged Harry so hard he felt like his ribs had cracked. Lee invited the pair of them to his birthday party at the end of June, and told them most of the old Gryffindor crowd would be in attendance. Then there was Justin Finch-Fletchley, the semi-aristocratic Hufflepuff, who had insisted on buying drinks for the duration of the game, much to Ron's delight. And last, but not least, there was Cho Chang.

Harry was surprised by the butterflies that had flooded his stomach at the sight of the Wimbourne Wasps' Seeker. Yes, Cho was his first crush, and yes, she was still as beautiful as ever, with her shiny, poker-straight black hair and soft, blossom-blush skin. But to have had such a physical reaction to her, after all this time, and so relatively soon after his divorce, sent his head into a spin. They had chatted and laughed, without it ever feeling clumsy or forced, and before she went, she touched his arm and told him she was sorry things didn't work out with Ginny, giving him a sad smile and leaving him with dozens of questions, not to mention even more butterflies.

Meanwhile, for Ginny, life was also taking a surprising turn. It was abundantly clear that she could not simply jump from one relationship straight into another. Severus had said he had never wanted to be a father and even though her children were an inescapable part of who she was, Ginny was not about to foist them on to someone who wasn't ready for the responsibility. It wouldn't be fair on anyone, most of all her children. In addition, Ginny's realisation at the hospital that she'd never actually spent much time on her own really started to dawn on her. Staying at The Burrow was a bit of a cop-out in some respects, but Arthur was still working at the Ministry and Molly was always busy doing something, whether it was chores, baking or looking after her various grandchildren, that it didn't feel like Ginny was being crowded at all. In fact, Ginny had more time to think and get used to her own space by being in The Burrow as she had child care on tap 24/7.

This meant that her relationship with Severus had time to grow at a slower pace. Indeed, it actually felt like they were "dating" as they would only see each other a couple of times a week. Severus would often invite Ginny over to his little cottage for the evening and cook dinner before they'd cuddle up in front of the fire, or else they would take a walk along the harbour, strolling and discussing the news items of the day. Ever since Ginny had revealed her true feelings for Severus, they had decided to be completely honest with each other. Ginny had told Severus all about her fears about rushing in too soon, having never been single since she was a teenager, and about her concerns regarding the children. Severus admitted he was still getting his head around having children in his life and that he was not used to his personal space being taken up, but agreed there was no rush. He never pressurised Ginny for anything physical and for the first few weeks, Ginny was grateful. Not only did Ginny have to adjust to a new life, she had to adjust to a new lover too. Not that she found Severus to be unattractive; they still had the same spark and chemistry as they'd had when he'd been disguised as Alfric, but it still took some getting used to.

Months later, Ginny and Severus came to an unconventional agreement regarding living arrangements. Severus put an Undetectable Extension charm on his cottage, essentially creating a whole separate cottage which was divided from Snape's by a single locked doorway. He'd also cast a Muffliato charm over both cottages so complete privacy was ensured. Ginny moved in with Al, Lily and the Kneazle, finding it to be comfortable and relaxing. Al loved the fact he was so near to the sea, and they'd often to down to the beach at the weekend to collect shells and explore rock pools. There was a cat-flap installed between the two cottages, so Nyx could come and go between each area as she pleased. Severus had always had a soft spot for felines and many times Nyx would sit on his knees, purring contentedly, whilst he read the latest issue of Potioneer Magazine.

Through this unorthodox way of living, Ginny was given the independence she'd never had, whilst Severus kept his solitude and personal space. Whenever one partner wanted to see the other, they'd have to knock on the door like a visitor would and be welcomed into the other person's living area. It may not have worked for everyone, but it worked for them.

One of Severus' main fears was being thrust into the role of a father, as he'd admitted he'd never wanted children. The separate living quarters helped in this respect, but as time went on, he found himself getting more and more used to their presence. Lily was a happy baby who was growing up faster every day. And Albus was a serious, thoughtful and well-behaved child who had a keen thirst for knowledge. It surprised no-one more than Severus to find that they formed a deep bond. Maybe it was Lily Evan's green eyes that the boy carried, along with her blood, or maybe it was the fact he'd saved the child's life. Either way, there was a mutual respect between them that grew as time went on. Severus was never going to be a doting kind of surrogate father, but he found himself able to give advice and to teach his "step-son" in a practical way which made up for any lack of displays of affection.

Then there was the matter of Severus' identity. He was still not willing to let the world know who he really was, even though they were now together as a couple, and Ginny was forced to accept that she would have to keep their relationship a secret for the time being. It actually felt a little bit illicit and naughty, and it was another facet of their otherwise unusual and recusant relationship. However, Ginny hoped that as Severus gained confidence and was exposed to more of the Wizarding world through her, that he would one day be able to stop hiding away and be able to embrace his true identity, in the same way that she had.

It was amazing, Severus mused one night as the kids were in bed and Ginny had crept through to his quarters to snuggle by the fire, just how his life had come to this. He felt so indescribably happy that the sensation often made him suspicious of what else was round the corner. After all of the terrible things he'd been through in his life, from his abusive upbringing and bullying at school, to losing Lily and the horror of his Death Eater days, and then to Lily's death and his incarceration by honouring her memory which almost resulted in losing his own life, Severus never thought he'd be able to experience happiness in the purest sense of the word. And yet, here he was, with a beautiful woman and an unconventional family, feeling like he'd earned his reward from all his years of torment and anguish.

Life isn't fair, Severus had once told Harry. He still believed this to be true, but he also knew something else. That, no matter what happens, life will always find a way. Life goes on.

# Epilogue

## *Chapter 29 of 29*

Life does not always turn out the way we want it to. Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape, thought by everyone to be dead, is living out his days in solitude on the edge of the wizarding world. Ginny Potter, meanwhile, is juggling a high-profile career, three small children, a Kneazle and a workaholic husband. A family crisis within the Potter household unwittingly brings Snape out of hiding and his and Ginny's lives are changed forever, with both of them ultimately offered a second chance for happiness. This story is mostly canon compliant but discounts the epilogue in Deathly Hallows.

## Epilogue

### *Five Years Later*

The morning of the first of September was simply glorious: as golden and crisp as the leaves on the trees. Autumn had come early, so the air had a nip to it, fogging breath like the steam from the Hogwarts Express. And that was exactly where Harry and his family were making their way towards today: Platform 9 ¾ at King's Cross Station in London, in order to see James off on his way to the School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for the very first time.

James, although usually cocky and playful, was uncharacteristically subdued as he followed his father wheeling the trunk through the curious commuters towards the barrier between platform nine and ten. He carried the cage housing his beautiful new barn owl, Selene, as if it were made of porcelain. Lily, meanwhile, stared wide-eyed at the all the people hurrying this way and that, her attention flicking from smartly-dressed office workers to the more flamboyant witches and wizards, who seemed to casually disappear whenever she focused on them for too long. She held on tightly to the hand of her step-mother, who was pushing a pram with her free hand.

'Are you ready, Cho?' Harry asked his wife cheerfully, stopping just short of the barrier.

Cho nodded and returned the smile before looking down into the pram at their sleeping baby daughter. She had a tuft of black hair that stuck up, just like her father's, and she had also inherited her mother's striking, exotic dark eyes. 'I think Dora's ready, too.' She turned to Lily and James. 'Ready, you two?'

Lily nodded eagerly but James merely stared at the floor, looking pale and awkward as he clutched the cage tightly.

Cho put a comforting arm around James. 'It's natural to be nervous, love,' she said gently, giving him a squeeze.

'It's not that... I... I was hoping Mum would be here, too.'

Cho shot a concerned look at Harry, who made his way over to his son.

'She will be. She promised, remember? And Al. They're probably waiting for us on the other side. Now, we'd better get going.' Harry went back to the truck and manoeuvred it into position. 'Just like we practised, okay? After three! One... Two... Three!'

And on Harry's count, he and James disappeared through the barrier and on to Platform 9 ¾, shortly followed by his wife and daughters.

'There, that wasn't so bad, was it?' Harry asked his son, who nodded excitedly before craning his neck, looking all around the platform, evidently searching for his mum and Al. But he couldn't see them, and once more his face fell.

'Dad?' he asked after a moment, shifting from one foot to the next.

'Hmm?'

James looked very serious and worried, and Harry thought his son was still concerned about Ginny not turning up.

'Dad... What if I get Sorted into Slytherin?'

Harry almost laughed at the absurdity of the question, but as if on cue, Ginny and Al were suddenly standing right behind James. Harry chanced a glance at them, before fixing his green eyes on his son and placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

'James Sirius,' Harry began, just loud enough so that Ginny and Al could hear every word. 'Your brother was named after two headmasters of Hogwarts. One of those was a Slytherin, and he was probably the bravest man I've ever known.'

Harry looked up at Ginny, who gave him a grateful smile full of love at this magnanimous speech. Not only was he reassuring his son, he was also reassuring her; he was showing her that he accepted her new husband, after all that had happened in the lead-up to their own failed marriage. If someone had told her five years ago that she would be married to Severus Snape and Harry would be married to Cho Chang, she would have laughed in their face and thought them as wide of the mark as one of Sybil Trelawney's prophecies. They'd all come so far since then. The journey hadn't been easy, but right now she wouldn't change a thing. She loved Severus in a way she'd never thought possible, and through that love, he opened up to her more and more every day, amazing her with the man he truly was.

As soon as James followed Harry's gaze, his face lit up on seeing his mother and they rushed towards each other with open arms. Ginny beamed as she held her son tightly, and she was shortly pounced on by Lily, who also wanted a piece of the hugging action. Cho and Harry looked on and laughed as Al managed to burrow his way under Ginny's legs and get in the middle of the group hug.

Harry's gaze shifted from Ginny and the children to Cho. She still took his breath away, just like she had when he first had a crush on her at Hogwarts. Each kiss felt like the first, and his stomach flipped every time she walked into the room. It was crazy to think that, after all the hurt and anger that raged within him during his break-up with Ginny, that he could now feel so elated and content. It was a twisted path that had led him to this point; there had been heartache and tears, and times when he'd thought he'd never love again. But they say the first love cuts the deepest and in his case it was true. Cho was his soul mate.

And, as Harry looked on, he realised it didn't matter what awfulness had happened in the past. Right now, everyone was happy. All was well.

THE END

A/N: I'd like to take this chance to explain my reasons for writing this story and what I was trying to achieve. I'm usually an SS/OC shipper or at the very least, enjoy seeing Snape with minor characters that might as well be OC because we know so little about them. Sometimes, it does feel that the SS/HG ship dominates the HP fanfic landscape. As much as I can appreciate there are great fics in this genre, it is often frustrating for me to see this ship posted over and over. So I wrote this story to redress the balance, and an alternative ship of which I've seen very little posted. I also set myself the very difficult task of trying to stay canon where possible (and if I have slipped off the path, it was all for the sake of the story!)

I have had some interesting feedback on this story and not all of it positive! Even though the main theme of this story is adultery, my intention was never to glamorise unfaithfulness; rather, I'd hoped to show the circumstances that might cause one partner to run into another's arms. And for the sake of canon, it needed to be this way, as I wanted Ginny to be an adult.

I'd like to thank my beta, Agnus Castus, for her support and tireless feedback. This story would not exist in the same form without her, and I am indebted to her for making my writing the best it can be.

Also, I'd like to thank each and every one of you that have stuck by this story, read and reviewed. It's every single one of you that's kept me writing, even though this hasn't been a particularly easy story to write at times and has taken a long time to complete. So thank you!

I keep saying that I will attempt to write my own original fic one day, but I keep getting too many plot ideas around fanfic! So no doubt you'll see me posting on here again. And if you fancy reading some SS/OC, I am currently writing with **morgaine\_dulac** under the guise **sevs\_starsisters** – we're halfway through the sequel to our magnum opus, *Star Sisters*, and the sequel is called *Shooting Stars*, both of which are also posted on this fine website. \*Cough\* Shameless plug! \*Cough\*

Thanks again,

star\_girl