

# Of Friends and Flowers

*by Fanny T*

Two years ago the war ended, which is not to say the battles ended. Neville, having chosen to aid his country by using the best skills he possesses, is working at St. Mungo's Hospital as a Healer and Herbologist, managing the hospital garden and doubling somewhat unexpectedly as potion brewer. He lives a happy and contented life among work mates who see him neither as a clumsy boy nor a freedom fighter, but a gentle and pleasant young man and a trusty friend.

However, the arrival of an old school mate is about to turn his world on its head.

## The Encounter

*Chapter 1 of 8*

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### Chapter One—The Encounter

*If friends were flowers, I'd pick you.*

Neville was in St Mungo's hospital garden pruning Heal-all, his arms red to the elbow and sticky with plant juice. He ran the back of his hand across his forehead again, wiping away sweat, and winced as he realised that he had now with all probability left a long, red smear upon the skin. It had taken him some time to realise why the other Healers always laughed when he arrived back in from the garden—the reason being that there was always either dirt on his face or leaves in his hair, and he was always completely ignorant of the fact.

It had taken him even longer to realise that they meant no harm by their giggles.

He reached for his wand and waved it vaguely behind his head, muttering an incantation. After a few seconds there was a tap on his shoulder, and Percival, the faun who adorned the garden fountain some hundred metres off, bent over him.

"Water?" he asked, in a voice which was like the sound of a heavy rock dragged across a stone hall.

"Thank you." Neville smiled and dipped the hem of his robes into Percival's cupped hands, filled with clear cool water, and then rubbed the cloth across his face. "Sorry to have you running here all the time."

"Good exercise. Keep lichen off," said Percival solemnly. "Missed a spot."

"Ah. Thank you again." Neville attended his ear, which was still somewhat smeared with Heal-all juice. "I'll call again if I need you. Hopefully I'll manage to keep myself at least marginally presentable for the last half-hour."

Percival bowed and removed himself with surprisingly little noise for a seven-foot stone statue. Neville returned to work, first shedding his outer robes with a sigh of relief. It was getting to be quite hot at midday, although they were as yet only half-way through May.

He finished the last Heal-all and laid his pruning scissors to rest in his gardening case. Next he turned his attention to the pruned-off branches and cut them down to seedling size, placing them in separate pots and watering them thoroughly. Hopefully many of them would set root—they really needed to extend their Heal-all grove.

There was a tap on his shoulder again, and he frowned, bowed over a pot of Heal-all seedlings he had set the week before. "Perce?" he said. "I'm sure I didn't call...."

"It's not Perce," said a voice behind him, "it's Luna."

There was a moment when Neville wondered if his long exposure to the sun had made him have vocal hallucinations, but then he rose quickly—stumbling on his robe and almost falling, but saving himself just in time—and spun around to face his old school mate. "Luna!" he exclaimed. "When on earth... is it really you?"

The question was somewhat justified. Luna looked like she had lost about half of her weight—well, probably not quite that much, but not having had much to spare before, the change in her was certainly a drastic one. Her once long, straggly hair had been cut down to just a few centimetres, and her protruding eyes were more marked than ever. Still, the same vague Luna half-smile was on her face, and there were large earrings of the kind he was sure no one else in the world would wear in her ears—two eyes fringed with heavy black lashes, one leaf-green and one sea-blue.

"I hope so, otherwise I've been cheated," she answered seriously. He laughed delightedly. She blinked, looking a bit surprised, and he remembered—when they were in school together, he hadn't been the type to laugh much, had he?

"How are things with you?" he asked, taking her hands into his. Such thin hands, now... "Last time I heard of you, you were on your way to... Bulgaria? That right?"

Luna snorted, as if to suggest that journeys to Bulgaria were long out-dated enterprises; rather immature and so last year. "That was a long time ago," she said disdainfully.

"Well, yes. It's been a rather long time since I saw you."

"There was a mission to Bulgaria, yes," Luna continued, conceding to tell at least a little. "It went alright. I was glad to put it behind me, though. I have been told many great things about Bulgarian beaches, but I really don't see what's so good about them if it never stops raining."

"I'm certain that it was rotten luck rather than a regular feature of their seaside." Neville smiled and then hesitated before he continued, "Look... I'm almost finished here. If you're willing to wait for just a minute, we can go in for lunch after my last plants are done, and you can tell me more about what you've been doing and how you are feeling." He squeezed her frail hands carefully, smiling at her. "OK?"

She seemed as if she was about to say "no" at first, but then she nodded.

"Great. Why don't you go sit by the fountain... the one with the faun. Ah, that's Percival," he added, then winced at his own stupidity. Yeah, that made sense.

However, Luna was one who always took oddness in her stride. She nodded again and wandered off towards the fountain, looking around her with mild interest.

He watched her for a while, then returned once again to checking which of last week's seedlings had rooted themselves and which could be pulled up. Done at last, he conscientiously wiped the last of his tools and placed them in their proper places in the case, grabbed his outer robes and rose.

"Alright, Luna," he began and then stopped as he turned to see the fountain bench empty of any girl at all, not least a half-starved, elf-like being. He looked quickly around the garden and then moved onto the main path and looked in all directions. Finally he cast a small finding spell on the garden and swore under his breath.

Luna had completely disappeared.

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Many thanks to AmyLouise for betaing.

# The Job

## Chapter 2 of 8

As Neville prepares for chaos, he realises something very disturbing.

Chapter Two...The Job

*All the flowers of all the tomorrows are in the seeds of today.*

"The Heal-all behave badly today?" asked James as Neville entered the lunch room.

"What?"

"You look like you're under quite a cloud." James laughed and nudged him. "Come on. Cheer up. I'm sure if you only talk to them, they'll come to see your point of view." Laughing again, he walked off with his lunch tray and sat down next to Derwent.

Neville's fondness for talking to his plants was another thing that had quickly spread among his fellow healers and another thing that had made him the object of much gentle teasing. Once he recognised it for what it was...curiosity and awe for his Herbology skills, hidden behind a mocking façade...he felt no discomfort at the constant small jibes, and now he gave as good as he got.

Today, he felt more annoyed than usual, but knew that the fault lay not with his friend but with his own bad temper.

He left his case and his damp outer robes in the locker room, grabbed his lunch box and went back to the kitchen to heat his food.

"Ooh," said Saida, looking over his shoulder, "that looks delicious."

Neville shrugged. "It's just risotto," he said.

"Just risotto, he says... you know, some of us wouldn't know how to boil an egg without lengthy instructions, and here you come, eating the most horribly complicated dishes day after day..."

"No, honestly!" Neville laughed, his good humour restored. "I promise it's very simple. I'll show you some day."

"Thank you, but no thank you. Really." Saida waved her hands emphatically. "I've tried Muggle cooking. My kitchen's never been the same. Even using magic I have a tendency to make my prospective dinner either explode or turn into something unpleasant... No, household chores...not my thing. I'll make do with what the canteen has to offer, thank you."

"You know that what the canteen has to offer is *not* representative of Muggle cooking, I hope."

"How could I not with you reminding me every lunch," Saida laughed. "Oh, don't blush...I think it's sweet."

"There you go. My home-cooked and rather delicious lunch is ready." Neville smiled, lifting the pot off the cooking fire and reaching for a plate. "Care to join me?"

"Thank you, no, I have patients I should be getting to, or they'll start gnawing on their beds again, the poor dears. That reminds me...would you mind brewing me some Calming Draught when you're done with lunch? A new lot of charges arrived last week, and they're not used to the rhythm here yet; there's one that keeps escaping and wandering around the floor."

"I'll see to it. I'm going down to the lab anyway," said Neville, giving her a peck on the cheek as he left.

Mention of the mental ward didn't seem to strike at him quite as hard as it used to. He had never thought he'd one day be able to actually work in St Mungo's...yet here he was now, even helping Saida out now and again. It no longer hurt quite as much.

"Longbottooom!" Richard Blackgate pounced suddenly on him, throwing an arm around his neck and ruffling his hair roughly. "What do you think you're doing, you little devil?"

"Ow... Dick! Get off! What do you think *you're* doing? Watch my lunch!"

Richard laughed, letting him go and steadying his tray at the same time. "Don't think I didn't see you cuddling my fiancée just now," he said, waving a finger in playful admonishment. "Punishment will be swift and merciless!"

"Yes, yes. Of course. Have you had lunch?"

"Yeah, but I'm planning on shamelessly helping myself to yours, anyway." Richard sat down at the nearest table and waited for Neville to seat himself opposite. "You could do with someone relieving you of that monstrous amount of food if you don't want to be getting fat."

"Excuse me?" Neville looked at him, raising his eyebrows. "Do you know how much weight I've lost since starting this godforsaken job?"

"I'm very aware," said Richard, laughing...he laughed at just about everything. "I'm being an ass. So, how are the babies coming along?"

"The Mandrakes? Oh, they're doing great. In their teens now, most of them. And I'm having great success with this new experiment of mine...I'm making them take a part-time job weeding the other plants. It does seem to make them grow up a little faster, and I've saved hours of weeding time."

"Good for you." Richard conjured up a fork for himself and grabbed a bite from Neville's plate, shoving it into his mouth before Neville had the time to protest. "Hey, this is great!" he said with his mouth full, ignoring Neville's wince. "You think you could teach me?"

"I've already offered to do as much for your fiancée but she rudely refused," sighed Neville with the air of a tormented and misunderstood genius. "It has hurt my sensitive artist feelings...because cooking is an art, I tell you! No! Say no more. It is one offer per household only. You forfeited your chance."

"Sure. So Saturday, our place, that okay for you?"

"Of course." Neville grinned. "Do you know anything about the results in Glasgow, by the way?"

"Glasgow?"

"The Dragons were going to be attacking a forest troll camp last I heard. If so, we'd best be prepping for a new swamping of the emergency rooms. No matter how it goes, there's bound to be injured, and rather a lot of them."

"Good thinking," said Richard, nodding thoughtfully, then rose. "I'll talk to the Master Healer about it now. I'm meeting her anyway. I'll send you a message about what potions she thinks we need to stock up on, yeah?"

"I can guess most of them, but it'd be good with some pointers," Neville agreed.

"Good, then I'll catch you later."

"See you, Dick."

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Alexander Imptsikovich was already in the lab when Neville arrived down, bent over a cauldron in deep concentration. Knowing how engrossed the man could become in his research...and how easily annoyed he was if he felt that anyone was sneaking up on him...Neville closed the door with a rather louder bang than necessary and called out to him, "Hi, Imp, how's the research?"

"Doing quite well," answered Imptsikovich, peevishly. "It's Imptsikovich, by the way, as you well know."

"I couldn't begin to pronounce it," said Neville easily, pulling on the now dry outer robes he had taken the precaution of bringing. "Good God, it's cold down here. How do you stand it?"

Imp didn't bother to answer this, and Neville shrugged before making his way over to his own bench. "I had a silver dagger here, do you know where it went?" he asked, flicking his wand to revive the fire under one of the largest cauldrons.

"By the earwigs," Imp answered absently, scribbling on a piece of parchment. "You needn't worry...I washed it."

"Of course, thank you. Duck." Neville summoned the dagger (Imp avoided it nimbly as it zoomed past) and pulled his herb jars towards him. First the Calming Draught...for that he needed chamomile, Mooncalf wheat, honey....

For a while after that the underground lab was very peaceful, the silence punctuated only by the soft sound of the two Healers muttering ingredients and measurements to themselves and the occasional hiss from one of Imp's many cauldrons.

Strangely, Neville had found that he had an unguessed-at aptitude for some potions, once he stopped trying to follow complicated instructions and just saw it as another day in the kitchen, making soup. When he had first arrived at St Mungo's and been told to make his first Painkilling Potion, he could still remember how he had paled and muttered something about a narrowly-scraped A in his Potions OWL. The Healer to whom he was attached as a trainee had just looked at him blankly, in a manner which told him she had no idea what he was talking about.

"They tell me you're good with Herbology," she had said, eventually.

Neville had replied modestly that he did know a little bit about plants.

"So tell me, then, what would you use for a Painkilling Potion?"

His confused stammers that he wasn't good with potions, at all, truly, hadn't he said so? had been cut off by a stern "Use your noggin, lad, it's not there for decoration!"

So Neville had said hesitantly that maybe Frogsleaf and Nicotiana Magica, and perhaps Stormsnest and Harefoot on account of their calming properties. He had suggested a half-dozen or so more ingredients and then stopped.

"And?" she had prompted, seeing that he was hesitating about whether to continue.

"And maybe menthe. Because that would neutralise the Stormsnest's bitterness and probably make the potion more pleasant to drink."

"Sounds as good as any potion to me," the Healer had said, grinning at him. "If you can grow a plant, of course you can bloody well stew it, too! Potion-making is basically fancy cooking, after all...throw in the ingredients you know will do the trick, add a couple more if you want your patient to drink it without gagging. You see, we don't care so much here for the formalities of the making. Stir this anti-clockwise and add that at this moment...that's mostly to avoid the side effects. For us in Emergency, the side effects are negligible so long as we keep the poor bastards alive."

She had exaggerated, of course. Many potions were more difficult than she suggested and required rather different ingredients than those that grew in the hospital garden. As soon as there was something non-growing to be chucked into the pot Neville still needed instructions to lean on, and if those instructions were longer than a roll of parchment he invariably messed up somewhere along the line. When it was about plants, however, he could use his own judgement to determine how much of each ingredient was needed. For the herbal potions there was no one better, and for mass producing Calming Draught or Oblivion, Neville was always the Master Healer's choice. You could count on him to do a conscientious and careful job.

"I saw an old friend of mine today," said Neville.

Imp grunted, irritably. He hated talk at work.

"She really didn't look too well."

There was a world of things left unsaid in that sentence. Neville was quite worried. Of course, she had always been strange, but....

"I'm rather worried," he said.

"You're always worried," snorted Imp. "Throw me that plait of unicorn hair."

Neville sighed. Trying to talk seriously with Imp about something that wasn't bubbling was a lost cause from the start.

"Is that anything you can't leave for a minute?" he asked, nodding towards the cauldron into which Imp was now carefully lowering one unicorn hair at a time.

"Why?" asked Imp suspiciously, looking up at him.

"We need stocking up on potions, and we're low on at least three of the most important antidotes. And you know how I am with antidotes."

Imp grunted again, this time with a tone of surprise. "Have you been using unicorn hair lately?"

"What?" Neville frowned, distracted from the trouble of antidotes. "No, I rarely use it. You know that. Why?"

Imp looked up at him and frowned, then shook his head slightly and returned to what he was doing. "No matter. I was just certain that this plait was thicker when I used it last. But maybe I was mistaken."

This was sufficiently unlike Imp to make Neville take notice. Imp never admitted error, especially not concerning potions and their ingredients, and he had an expert's eye for measures and doses.

"You, be mistaken?" Neville smiled, making light of it. "Not possible. But the ingredients cupboard is open to all, yeah? I'm sure someone just took a little bit and forgot to write it down since it was a small amount or something. We use it up in Emergency now for closing difficult wounds...you know that Muggle thing, stitches? Turns out it works for some wounds if you use unicorn hair."

Imp nodded vaguely, but he still looked worried.

"You're not satisfied," said Neville.

Imp hesitated for a second but then relented. "I'm concerned that someone might be stealing out of the ingredients cupboard. It's just tiny amounts, but things have been disappearing steadily for a while now. It has to be someone..." He stopped there and waved a hand impatiently. "Never mind. Forget what I was saying. I'm probably just paranoid anyway. What antidotes did you want?"

And that was when Neville realised that if someone was indeed removing small amounts of ingredients on an almost daily basis, he was the most obvious suspect.

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Author's Note: The quote in the beginning of this chapter is an Indian Proverb.

Thank you to AmyLouise for wonderful betaing!

## The Dragonriders

The hospital and Neville are both put to the test as Dragonriders wounded in battle swamp the Emergency.

### Chapter Three—The Dragonriders

*At dawn I asked the lotus,*

*'What is the meaning of life?'*

*Slowly she opened her hand*

*With nothing in it.*

During the night the wave hit them. When Neville arrived at four-thirty in the morning, especially called in, it was chaotic. Wounded dragonriders were everywhere, Healers were running to and fro trying to be everywhere at once, and the noise of scores of wounded men and women was almost unbearable. There were people who had fallen from their dragon's back in mid-air, breaking half the bones in their body, and people with missing limbs, and people who had gone into close combat with trolls and were so badly smashed about that even old and grizzled Healers had to turn their faces away.

Neville threw himself into the work as soon as he had changed into his Healer robes, but he hadn't tended to three patients before the Master Healer knocked on his shoulder and bid him follow.

"I haven't even—" he began, gesturing to his charge, but she interrupted him.

"Carly will take care of it. I need you elsewhere."

He nodded and left his patient's side, passing Carly on the way as she moved to take his place. "What's up?" she mouthed, but he could only shrug. He followed the Master Healer down towards the laboratory in silence, knowing that she rarely spoke without good reason and supposing that she would tell him what this was about when she was ready.

"Longbottom," she said as she flicked her wand to ignite the torches lighting the way down the final stair, "did you not get my memo yesterday?"

"Yes, I did. Why?"

"So you knew what potions I wanted a good stock of?"

"Yes. I'd already begun on some of them, the ones I could guess."

"Then how do you explain this?" she asked, tapping her wand on the piece of parchment that hung on both sides of the laboratory door. It was divided into two columns, with the left listing all the potions the hospital regularly used and the right showing how much of each potion was left. Right now one of the three most important antidotes was blazing red, signalling that there were less than three cauldronfuls in stock, and as he looked closer at the list, he saw that it amounted to no more than eight or maybe ten doses.

"How..." he began and gasped. "Oh, this is really bad! How on earth..."

"You are certain that you did indeed replenish this potion yesterday?" asked the Master Healer, examining him a little too closely for comfort. He looked at her wildly.

"I know we did! I mean... that is... I didn't do it personally. I'm no good with antidotes as you know. I took care of the herbals and the simpler potions, and Imp did the others. And he started with the antidotes, I know he did, because I'd already asked him to do those even before your memo came."

"So he was right then," mumbled the Healer, so quietly that he almost didn't catch the words. Perhaps he wasn't meant to. He, that must be Imp. As to what he'd been right about—could it be his half-formulated suspicions from the day before, perhaps? The suspicions that may easily include Neville himself....

So, was someone stealing from the lab, then? But this was no ordinary theft, no casual pilfering of ingredients or small amounts of potion. If someone had made over five cauldronfuls of important antidote disappear the night before a suspected onslaught of new charges—if so, then that was sabotage. And it could turn out to be lethal.

"Right, Longbottom," said the Master briskly, "I want you to get on with it."

"Eh?" Neville was startled out of his thoughts. "What... oh, the antidote? Me? But, I mean, me and antidotes..."

"We need that antidote, and we need it now," she interrupted him sternly. "It's the most effective against Tetanus, which is often inflicted by a troll's dirty blade. I know it's not easy for you, but I need you to do your best. We have not been able to get hold of Imptsikovich. I'm counting on you."

There was something else behind her words. *Do this, and prove your worth... and loyalty.* So was he being put to the test, now? If he managed to supply the potion needed, would they consider him a less likely suspect for the thefts? As if he wasn't nervous enough already...

"Yes, ma'am," he said and hastened into the lab.

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"What a nightmare," sighed Neville, pushing his finished lunch tray from him and leaning back in his chair.

"Yes," agreed Derwent, "I'm not too fond of canteen food either."

"That's not what I—" Neville stopped, seeing that his friend was grinning at him. "Oh, funny."

"You had it rough, then?" Derwent asked. "I imagine it can't have been nice to be here when they arrived. I only got here at eight, so I had it easy. By comparison."

"I wasn't here for the first shock of it, either," Neville admitted. "Got here at four-thirty and hardly tended to any patients, actually."

"What're you whining about, then?" Derwent asked, but with a smile.

"Try setting four cauldrons of Metronia at the same time," said Neville darkly. "And knowing that if you got anything wrong, people would probably be dying like flies from Tetanus."

"Ooh, I see." Derwent winced—he knew about Neville's aversion to antidotes in particular. "You did well, though, didn't you? Maybe you work best under pressure."

"Not bloody likely." Neville spoke forcefully, remembering years of terror with a hawk-nosed, greasy-haired professor. If that wasn't called being "under pressure", he didn't know what was.

Derwent grinned at him, then started patting his pockets.

"You're not allowed to smoke in here," said Neville.

"Oh, shush, mum," Derwent replied. He pulled his wand from the (somewhat tasteless, in Neville's opinion, but then who was he to tell his friends how to dress?) holster around his waist and conjured a bubble around his head and upper torso, pulled a cigarette from the packet in his breast pocket and lit it. "And don't tell me I look ridiculous, either. I know I do. So, is it back to the lab now for you? Or are you joining us?"

"Going home, actually." Neville grinned. "Catch some sleep. I have an early morning in the garden tomorrow, and enough people have come in that another Healer isn't desperately needed. And now that they've finally managed to round up Imp, I'm no longer needed as emergency potion brewer either. I hope I'll never be again. Freakishly scary, I tell you. If that was how it was like on a daily basis during the war, I'm gladder than ever I was at Hogwarts being carved up by lunatics. Is that really pleasant?"

The bubble around Derwent's head was starting to fill up with smoke now, obscuring his features.

"It's cool. Got to get my smoke somehow."

"You could step outside. Not into the garden though, mind you. Then I'd have to come after you with the pruning scissors."

"See, it's much better that I remain here." Derwent grinned again and leaned back in his chair, blew a smoke ring and swore as it hit the wall of his bubble, disintegrated and got into his eyes.

"Looks right cosy, that."

"Shut up."

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Quote in this chapter by Debra Woolard Bender. Sorry it's been a while since the last chapter—real life overwhelmed me.

As always, AmyLouise is a fantastic beta!

## The Growth

*Chapter 4 of 8*

Neville and Luna meet in the garden and discuss school and war and family.

### Chapter Four...The Growth

*If seeds in the black earth can turn into such beautiful roses, what might not the heart of man become in its long journey towards the stars?*

When he arrived in the garden the following morning at six thirty, Luna was sitting by the fountain, talking to Percival. She looked mildly surprised to see him. She rose from her place after giving Percival's still stone hand a sad little pat and walked towards him, hugging her upper body. It was cold this early in the morning, and she was wearing thin white cotton robes and no shoes. Her earrings today were daisies, adding to the illusion of summer created by her manner of dress.

"I don't really like going inside," she said, and it was as if the past day and a half hadn't happened. It took him a while to realise she was simply answering his suggestion for lunch from when they'd last met. "The air is so heavy. And it smells. Like hospital."

"It is a hospital," Neville pointed out.

"I don't like it." She put her head to one side and looked at him, almost childish in her studied cuteness. "Can't we just stay here?"

He smiled then. "Works perfectly for me. As long as you can talk while I pick my herbs."

"You've grown up a bit, haven't you," Luna said, by way of replying.

"A little," smiled Neville. He sat down by his line of pots, opening his gardening case and locating his silver scissors. She crouched down opposite him, fidgeting with her robes, as he started to cut the herbs he needed to harvest.

"In school," she said, "you were always so angry and serious. Focused."

Neville laughed, looking at her with disbelief. "You mean slow and clumsy and awkward."

"Hm? No," said Luna, "angry and serious and focused. Didn't you hear me right?"

"But, no..." Neville shook his head, bemused. "No. That's not me. Is it?"

"We're talking *was*. And I think so, don't you?" She leaned her head to one side again. "You turned up at every DA meeting, and you never had time for jokes...you just practised, practised."

*I was shy*, thought Neville.

"You went to the Department of Mysteries and fought grown men and women, murderers and torturers. You were the only one who turned up to fight the Death Eaters on the night Dumbledore died."

*Not the only one*, thought Neville.

"You fought like no one else during that long year that followed after. You spat in the face of Alecto and rallied the others to stand up and hit back." She paused, stopped picking at her robes for a moment and smiled. "I've always admired you."

*How interesting*, thought Neville, and then he said it. "How interesting. You've seen another me than I have."

"Oh." Luna looked chastised. "Sorry."

"No! On the contrary. You've seen me as better than I've ever seen myself. I always thought of myself as a disaster waiting to happen."

"That's a bit silly, isn't it?" asked Luna, and because it was her, he didn't say, *Not really. Not when that's all you've ever been told you are. When you've heard others describe you as a lost cause, what will you become?*

And if you've been called crazy, what will you become then?

"But now," Luna was going on, looking thoughtful. "You seem more peaceful now. I saw you talk with those people, the Healers." He noticed, out of the corner of his eye, that she suddenly made a face, but when he looked up, she was gazing over his shoulder vacantly. "You talked so easily, lightly... you laughed a lot. You used not to. Not happily."

"I learned."

"I envy you. It must be nice." She giggled suddenly, a strange little giggle that he couldn't remember ever having heard from her before. "You seem to have good friends. I don't have many friends any more. It's hard to keep in touch these days."

"I'm still here," he said and realised how pathetic it sounded. So banal and clichéd.

Still, it was true. If she talked, he'd be happy to listen.

"How is your grandmother?" she asked him...unusual for her, to ask such a trivial, everyday question. She worked the hem of her robes as she spoke, hands moving restlessly, knotting and unknotting in a nervous pattern.

"Still mean," he said, and he laughed. She looked at him, half-startled again. Maybe it wasn't just that she was unused to laughter from him; maybe it was laughter itself she hadn't heard for a long time. "She's getting older. She has a Home Healer who checks in on her once a day, now. Doesn't *really* need it, of course, but I suspect she enjoys having someone to yell at and ridicule. Now that I've left, I mean."

The words could have been bitter, but they were said with a smile. Neville cared a lot for his grandmother. He had learned to accept everything she threw at him without a word...and then when he had seen her at the battlefield of Hogwarts, seen her fierce pride as she looked at him, he had known the fondness and the worry behind her harsh words. But because she was one who fought, she didn't know how to relate to him until he did, too.

"And your dad?" he asked, remembering his manners. Luna frowned.

"I don't know, really... I haven't talked to him in a long while." She contemplated this for a second or two, then said quite naturally, "There are lots of rats there, you know."

Neville looked up from his pots, unsure of how to respond to that. "Where?" he asked eventually.

"In Bulgaria," said Luna, "obviously. I haven't gone anywhere else in the last year, have I?"

"Oh." Neville reran the last couple of sentences in his mind, examined them for anything that could throw light on Luna's statement, and found nothing. "I'm sorry, but I didn't understand... What's with the rats?"

She looked at him for some time, then said very slowly and clearly, "There are lots of rats ~~because~~," she emphasised this by widening her eyes alarmingly, "there are no owls. That's why I couldn't send many letters." She gazed at him, concerned. "Did you follow?"

"Yes." He smiled. "Thank you."

"He never liked this. Me going off. Getting hurt."

"You got hurt?"

"It's a war. Or at least, the aftermath of it, which is still war in a sense. Of course I got hurt."

She said it so casually, only wrinkling her nose a little to signal that she thought his question was an unusually stupid one. Then she pulled her right sleeve up above the elbow to reveal a long scar on her forearm.

"They go for the wand arm, always," she explained. "There's a spell...breaks the arm badly. My bones were all splinters. They did pretty well with piecing me back together, though. Might not be exactly the same as before, but good enough. I can still wave a wand."

"But, Luna," Neville laid his scissors to one side and reached out. "Let me see."

"I doubt you can make it much better," she said matter-of-factly, but extended her arm for him to examine. He touched it carefully, seeing the tell-tale twists of the muscles where the bone had been replaced a little differently than it had been before.

"It's far too advanced for me," he said, admitting defeat, but still kept hold of her hand. "And I believe they did the best they could. Was it in Bulgaria?"

"Mm. *And it rained.*"

There was no trace of bitterness in her voice. She seemed perfectly resigned to continuing her life with a damaged arm. No, not resigned, that wasn't the word, either... accepting, that was it. Accepting whatever life had in store.

He let go of her hand and didn't say, *Luna, I'm so sorry or You poor, poor thing or How do you just manage to live on, never despairing, never giving up?* Instead, he returned to his harvest and said simply, "If it bothers you at any time, just say the word. I brew a smashing Painkilling Potion."

"So you do potions now?" She pulled her sleeve back down and returned to her never-ceasing plucking at her robes.

"Of necessity."

"I was rather good at Potions. Of course, I was very fond of Professor Snape, that might have had something to do with it. But you were awful."

The usual Luna frankness. Neville smiled. "Yes, I was rather bad at Potions. Of course, I was *veryfrightened* of Professor Snape, which might have had something to do with it. It's a lot easier to concentrate on what's in the cauldron now when I'm not afraid I'll find him creeping up behind me. I thought he was the scariest person to ever have walked the earth. Except, perhaps, for my grandmother. I'd have liked to see what would happen if they ever got together. Or no, I'd rather just hear about it afterwards; I wouldn't really want to be there."

"But you're doing potions now?" asked Luna, with a single-mindedness that made him smile again.

"A few. The herbals. The simple ones. The ones I've done so many times I've finally learnt them. Won't ever be a Potions master though."

Luna nodded, slowly, as if she was thinking over his words. "You borrow ingredients," she said, "and practise at home, perfecting the potions you know you'll have to do often..."

Neville laughed, shaking his head. "Not that ambitious, I'm afraid. I rarely do potions at home. I do try to practise, like making my own Sparkling Solution...for the windows...instead of buying it, but mostly I'm too lazy. And I don't take ingredients from here, either...the ingredients cupboard is carefully regulated, and you have to sign for everything you take for your work, writing down the amount you take and for what. Potions ingredients in particular are often expensive and rare, and it's extremely important for Mungo's to always know exactly how much is in stock." He realised he'd given her a lecture and smiled sheepishly, adding, in an effort to sound less serious, "Plus, they smell."

The somewhat long explanation was prompted partly by his vague discomfort about Imp's recent revelation. Hopefully, it would all turn out to have been some kind of mistake, but he couldn't forget the way the Master Healer had looked at him.

Luna was looking at him with her head leaning to one side, still nodding thoughtfully. Then, quite suddenly, she stood up. "I think I should leave now," she said uncertainly. "I believe it's about time."

Neville hesitated, then laid his scissors aside again and rose, brushing his hands off against his robes and turning them black with dirt. "How about," he said, "we eat lunch together tomorrow? Not inside," he hastened to add as she opened her mouth to protest, "but here, in the garden. I can bring some lunch for you, too. I don't think you've ever tried my cooking. That is, if you're free tomorrow and in the neighbourhood."

He was certain she would be, however. Because he thought he knew the reason behind her large eyes, her white robes, and disjointed sentences. He thought he knew, and he hoped he was wrong.

Luna pursed her lips and thought for some time, then looked back at him and smiled.

"Those are very nice robes for you," she said, inclining her head towards his green outer robes. "You look like a flower. I think lunch would be nice." She turned and started to walk away, and he watched her go.

He hesitated, then said, "Luna? You know that Perce doesn't talk unless you say the incantation, right? You know that?"

She stopped and looked back at him, puzzled. "Oh... how strange. I had a very pleasant discussion with him before..." Her brow creased for a second, but then she shrugged and walked around a Venomous Tentacula and out of sight.

---

She wasn't there the next day, and he ate his lunch alone.

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Quote in this chapter by G.K. Chesterton.

This site has been rather unfairly ignored by me for some time now. Will try to get better with updates from now on, now that the rest of my life is a little calmer!

As always, thank to AmyLouise for betaing.

# The Lunch

*Chapter 5 of 8*

Neville reflects on faith and discusses friendship.

Chapter Five...The Lunch

*Little flower, but if I could understand, what you are, root and all in all, I should know what God and man is.*

"Neville!"

He turned and smiled at Saida as she caught up with him. She was panting, struggling with a heavy laundry wagon heaped with white linen and robes, bed sheets and curtains.

"Laundry day, is it?" he asked and grabbed hold of the side of the wagon, helping her steer.

"One day early," she said, nodding. "The patient I told you about? The one who runs off all the time? Soils the robes somewhat dreadful, I've changed her so many times already this week..."

"That bad, is she?"

"Can hardly communicate properly any more... mind like a corkscrew, poor thing."

She was wearing two necklaces today, one a fine gold chain with a jade pendant attached and one a crucifix that hung on a band of black and silver pearls. Neville gazed at it, fascinated by this display of a religion that had at best made him feel awkward and slightly embarrassed, at worst obligated, and never peaceful.

"I didn't know you were Christian," he said.

Saida's reaction was interesting. She looked first uncomprehending, then startled and flustered as she remembered the crucifix around her neck. She immediately clasped one hand around it, almost as if to hide it, and the laundry trolley swerved as she let go.

"Ah! Oh, I'm such a klutz." She returned both hands to handling the wagon and let the crucifix go, cheeks flushing a little. "No, I'm not a believer. But, um... it was my great-aunt's, and she liked me to wear it... yeah."



Neville nodded. He thought he knew how she felt, because he faced the same dilemma. Not willing to call himself Christian but not quite willing to denounce it completely, either. Not having enough faith (he thought) but at the same time not having enough lack of faith to call himself atheist. He'd heard the word agnostic and thought it sounded too much like something out of a Muggle medical journal. He'd heard of Taoism and thought it sounded like something that should be practised in some eastern country wearing tie-dyed robes. He'd heard of wishy-washy and thought that fitted him rather well.

Because when dragonriders fell from the sky, Death Eaters tortured innocent men and women into insanity, and Luna talked with statues, her fingers twitching, how could you believe in a benevolent God? Yet when there was such a thing as the beauty of the *Gloriosa Suberba*, with its wondrous crowns of red and yellow petals and its delicately curled green leaves, how could you not?

"My stop." Saida broke in on his thoughts, bringing the wagon to a halt in front of the statue of a bathing Bacchus that guarded the laundry room. "Thanks for the help." She raised her hand to tap Bacchus's, then turned back. "You know, now that I caught you, I was wondering... you couldn't get me a bit of powdered dragon claw, if you're heading down to the lab later? Just an ounce or two."

Neville frowned in thought. "I'm on patients after lunch as well, but I might be down if I need something for myself. If you give me the receipt, I'll try to find the time to nip down."

"The receipt, yeah." Saida smiled. "That's just the damndest thing haven't my ID-number on me at the moment, and I can't ever seem to remember it, blasted thing. You couldn't bend the rules a little? Please?"

"You have to sign for it, Saida," smiled Neville, "you know that. Sorry, rules are rules...and they're *really* strict at the moment."

He didn't say anything about the thefts, or where the suspicion was falling, or the fear that he could lose his job and freedom...they wouldn't send him to Azkaban for suspicion of theft, he was being ridiculous...if he was caught leaving with as much as a ball of dust he hadn't signed for.

Saida looked slightly disgruntled for a second but then shrugged. "Oh well. Guess I'll just have to drag myself down there and sign for it later on. You know, that Imp can be a real uptight snark about these things."

"I'm sure it's necessary on some level." Neville grinned, somewhat forced. He knew damn well that it was absolutely necessary.

It wasn't until later he started wondering what she would use dragon claw for, up in the mental ward. Maybe he wouldn't want to know. The medications they gave the charges were sometimes not pleasant, neither for the patients to take nor for others to see. Neville was still young when they had removed shock treatment, where the Healers would attempt to startle the mental patients back into sanity either by pain or visions of horror, but he was old enough to remember his mother crying, clutching pleadingly at the Healers' robes.

His grandmother had hated the shock treatments and had been instrumental in bringing about their removal.

He was forever grateful to her for that, but he'd never found the words to tell her.

---

Luna was sitting by the fountain when he took his lunch out, and as she saw him, she smiled. There was a small bead in one of her ears and a grotesque, twisted figure hanging from the other, so large he was sure it would rend her earlobe in two. But either it wasn't as heavy as it looked or there was some magic attached to it, because she showed no sign of discomfort. The figure was vaguely humanoid, made of a silvery metal and tarnished with time.

"It's a gargoyle," said Luna, and he jumped as he realised she'd noticed him staring. "I wore it today because I thought Percival might like to see it. He says he likes it."

Neville looked up at the stone faun. It was silent, and there was no sign of any evoking charm having been cast on it recently.

"Does he, now. Well, each to his own taste," he said, smiling at her. "Brought you lunch." He was glad he'd taken the precaution of bringing food for two today.

"You're not wearing your green robes today," she said. "And I told you yesterday they were so nice. Don't you agree?"

"Here, lunch." He handed her a plate and a plastic fork, not revealing how frightening he found her words. Yesterday? Had she really lost an entire day, then? "The green ones are my sturdier outer robes, the ones I put on for gardening and potion-making. But today I'm not doing either. Just tending to patients. So today, the nice robes are in the wash. God knows they needed it, too." He grinned. "How's the food?"

"Good," nodded Luna, picking at the food on her plate. "I'm not often hungry though, these days. Sorry. It's good."

"Eat as much...or as little...as you like. It's cool."

"Isn't it hot, rather?" asked Luna, looking at him with large eyes. "I think so, in any case. You'd think it was July." She paused and appeared to think. "It isn't July, is it?"

"No," said Neville, and now he sighed. "It isn't."

"There's a girl," said Luna, "looks Indian. I saw you with her earlier."

"So you were inside St Mungo's today then?" asked Neville, and that was a stupid question. He knew...well, thought he knew, but hoped he was wrong...that she was inside St Mungo's every day.

"No," said Luna, shiftily. "I saw you through a window."

There were no windows in any of the corridors or rooms he and Saida had passed through.

"Of course," said Neville. "What about her? The girl? Her name is Saida, by the way."

"Are you good friends?" asked Luna. She was looking over his shoulder into the heart of the garden, and she was bending the prongs of the fork backwards and breaking them, one after the other. He wondered if she knew what she was doing.

"We're good friends, yes."

"You'd do anything for her." It was a statement, not a question, but Neville laughed.

"Don't know about that," he said. "That's what she has her fiancé for. To do all the *anything* for her. But we're friends, through him. The fiancé, I mean. I met him during my trainee period, and he was very kind to me. Very mean, sometimes, too...Merlin, he could be so sarcastic. Made me come out of my shell a little." He stopped, realised he had been babbling. "Ah, I'm sorry! I just keep talking. Was there anything you wanted to ask? About Saida?"

She looked at him for some time, searchingly, then looked away.

"No," she said. "Nothing important."

Thanks to AmyLouise for betaing!

## Chapter Six—The Attack

*Chapter 6 of 8*

Neville is shocked to realise that something has been happening to Luna.

Chapter Six...The Attack

*Flowers leave some of their fragrance in the hand that bestows them.*

When Neville arrived back on Tuesday after two days off, he could sense that something had happened. He could see discreet wizards and witches clad in the sombre blue robes of security, marginally more of them than usual, and Saida's colleagues from the mental wards were holding a quietly-spoken conference in the lunch room. They stopped talking when he went a little too close and glared pointedly at him until he moved away.

"What's up?" he asked Derwent as they met in the changing rooms. Derwent shrugged, looking harried.

"Don't know. Some trouble in the mental wards, I guess. I've had a hellish time here the last two days...haven't really had time to listen to the goss. I'm off to an operation now, catch you later..."

"Sure. No, wait! Are we still on for Friday?"

"Course. I'm not *that* stressed out." Derwent smiled at him, then rushed off.

Neville was off to the garden first thing, to check on his plants and see if anything needed immediate attention. The blood apples did...they were just ripe and needed to be pickled promptly. He plucked a basketful and headed for the lab.

"Hey, Imp," he called as he pushed open the door. "How is everything?"

"Imptsikovich. And fine," muttered Imp. He was shredding Mandrake leaves, using Neville's silver dagger again.

"Good knife, that, huh?" said Neville innocently, depositing his basket by the nearest cauldron and looking around for another knife to use.

"Your fault for leaving it around for anyone to take," grunted Imp, correctly sensing the hidden barb. "You'd think you'd be more careful, what with the mental patients running amok and attacking people, and whatever else has happened."

"What?" Neville stared at his older colleague. "There's been an attack? When?"

"You didn't know?" Imp looked at him, confused. "I thought you'd have heard immediately, being pals with Saida and all."

"I've been off," Neville reminded him. "What happened?"

"Well, as I wasn't there I wouldn't really know," shrugged Imp. "But the alarm went off suddenly last night, and then Saida came down dragging a Body Bound patient. Apparently she'd reacted badly when it was time for her medication and lashed out. Saida acted very professionally, getting her under control almost immediately...so I was told."

Neville sighed, noting the careful addition of "*apparently*" and "*so I was told*". He knew that Imp disliked Saida, and indeed, all women, very much, but this reluctance to admit that even she might act with an ounce of professionalism was rather childish, wasn't it?

The thought of problems in the mental ward followed him for the rest of the day, making his stomach clench with worry.

---

He didn't see Luna that day. He hadn't expected to.

She didn't come the next day either, or the day after, or the day after that. He took to eating his lunch in the garden, guessing that if she did come again she would probably look for him there. But a week and another of his free days had come and gone before he saw her again.

He was working in a fine drizzle of rain, that still managed to get him completely soaked. The Venomous Tentacula needed a dental and was being horribly uncooperative about it, and he was tired and cross and sweaty. He had discovered a bad tooth that needed to be pulled, but the Tentacula was writhing this way and that and refusing to open its petals wide enough for him to get at it. He was turning to reach for something to block its jaws with when he saw her.

Luna was sitting two paces off on an overturned flowerpot, watching him silently. Her legs were crossed at the ankles and leaned to one side, and her hands were folded delicately in her lap. She was wet right through, her white robes clinging to her bony frame, and her cropped hair was plastered down with the rain. With her composed but vacant expression and large eyes she could have posed for a statue of some delicate water creature...a Mediterranean mermaid, or a benevolent kelpie.

If it hadn't been for the black eye and the swollen lip.

"Do you want help with that?" she asked, and without waiting for an answer, she rose from her seat and walked swiftly across to stand behind the Tentacula's head. She inserted her fingers expertly between the petals and pulled, having the flower gaping within a second.

"There's a trick to it," she said calmly and nodded towards the tongs Neville had laid out, ready for use. "You should probably pull the tooth quickly though before it has time to realise what happened."

"Ah, yeah," said Neville stupidly, grabbing the tongs and fastening them around the tooth, then quickly yanking the rotting tooth out. The Venomous Tentacula reared its head violently, throwing Luna off; then it pursed its petals, paused for a second as if it was inhaling, and sprayed Neville with thick, black, evil-smelling pollen.

"I think it's upset with me," said Neville once he had wiped his face enough to banish the fear that he might swallow the soot-like stuff if he opened his mouth. He grinned at the Tentacula, which was now standing quite still in its pot and sulking, then looked at Luna. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Luna answered placidly, pulling herself to her feet again.

"That's a good trick," said Neville. "Wish Professor Sprout had taught *me* that."

"I didn't learn it from Professor Sprout," said Luna vaguely. "My mum does it." The fingers of her right hand crept to her left sleeve and twisted it while she gazed somewhere past his shoulder. "She does a great recipe with Tentacula pollen and Gurdyroots and hawthorn berries. The gnomes love it."

"I'll keep that in mind," mumbled Neville, painstakingly brushing his robes clean in an effort to keep his face hidden. "Does she mention anything about how to get the pollen out of your clothes?"

"What?" Luna looked at him briefly, frowning. "Of course she doesn't. She's dead."

"Oh. Yes." Neville sighed and sat down next to his gardening case. He picked up one of the glass vials sitting snugly in the lid, dropped the bad tooth into it and inserted a cork. "What happened to you since I saw you last?"

Luna was watching the glass vial. "You're keeping it?" she asked, crouching down opposite him.

"I'll do some tests. I'm researching dental diseases among the Tentaculas." He put the vial back in its place and shut the case. "What happened to your face?"

"I walked into a door," said Luna uncertainly.

"With fists?"

"No, with my face."

"I meant the door, Luna," said Neville tightly. "Did the door have fists? Because it looks very much as if you've been punched ."

"It was a hard door," said Luna, stubbornly.

"If someone is hurting you, you have to tell me. Because I don't care what is deemed as acceptable violence for restraint...there are some things you don't do. I wouldn't accept it from anyone."

"It was a door."

"Fine." He opened the case and rummaged angrily for a toothbrush and paste. Then he looked up, remembering. "Do you have the DA coin, still?" he asked.

"No." Luna shook her head slowly. "No. I lost it."

"I have a spare. Here." He took out the two coins he kept in his gardening case and handed her one, smiling as she looked at it, somewhat confused. "I know it's a bit weird to have kept them still...and two of them, no less...but I've always found them very practical. So if you run into another door," he looked hard at her, "be sure to let me know?"

"Mm," said Luna, stowing the heavy coin in a pocket.

The coin had made him remember something, and he asked carefully, "Luna? What about Dean?"

She looked up at him sharply and opened her mouth, then seemed to hesitate, to falter, and looked down again. He realised that he'd touched on a hard subject...she looked flustered and startled, uncertain of how to respond.

"I don't know," she said quietly. "I don't... He said he'd come and visit me."

"Here?"

"Yes... no," she said. "Not here, of course."

"Of course."

"That would be silly."

"Yes."

"He said he'd visit me in my new... at my... in my new apartment."

"Oh."

"But he hasn't."

Neville looked at her, small and pale and with frayed sleeves on her white robes, and was filled with rage once again. To abandon someone who needed you, no matter what had happened...he couldn't forgive it.

With an effort, he smiled. "Well, I'm sure he's just been busy. You'll see...he'll come and visit when you least expect it. Do you want to help me out with brushing its teeth?" He nodded towards the Venomous Tentacula, which looked as if it was still inclined towards giving him a hard time. "You seemed to have a knack for handling it." He grinned at her, wanting to make her forget about Dean's betrayal by focusing on something positive. But she didn't accept his offer; and if anything, it looked as if he'd only made her sadder.

She stood up, letting go of the sleeve she been picking at, and stood looking down at him.

"I want you to know I hate this," she said. "I hate it, I hate it, I hate it."

Then she turned, and was gone.

---

The quote in this chapter is a Chinese proverb.

Continued thanks to AmyLouise for betaing!

# The Lies

## Chapter 7 of 8

Things proceed alarmingly on all fronts now, until Neville is forced to make a choice.

Chapter Seven...The Lies

*Belladonna: In Italian, a beautiful woman; in English, a deadly poison.*

Neville was exhausted both mentally and physically when he arrived back in. His robes were dripping steadily, so he hung them up outside his locker and cast a drying charm on them.

"Days like this, I'm really glad it's you and not me who's good at plants," said Richard, laughing, having just arrived in the locker room and taken in the robes now steaming quietly and Neville's energetic towelling of his hair.

"Saves me watering them, though," mumbled Neville, looking around for his boots. "How's your day been? Did you manage to find out what he was suffering from, that guy with the... the..."

"Boils, for lack of better word? Dragonpox."

"Yeah? How'd he get that, then?"

"Girlfriend's a dragonrider. We've sent owls to the sanctuary; they should be checking all their employees by now. Don't want it spreading, do we? What do you think of this?"

Neville looked at the necklace Richard was holding up. It was a thin wire with a large daisy attached.

"Not your usual style," he said.

"Ha, kiddie." Richard laughed again and stowed the necklace back into its case. "For Saida, of course. She just got herself a pair of daisy earrings...adorable...and I thought I'd..."

"Oh, bugger." Neville dropped the towel. "Birthday!"

"Don't tell me you forgot?" Richard laughed harder than ever. "And you always remember everything!"

"Tomorrow, right?" Neville was pulling on his casual robes, trying to check his watch at the same time and entangling himself in the sleeves. "Eight?"

"Steady, mate. Shops are closed now anyway, aren't they?"

"Not food stores...I need eggs and caster sugar..."

"Cake, is it?" Richard grinned. "She likes chocolate."

"Oh... great... thanks. Bugger." In his haste he had snapped one of the laces on his boots. "I really need new boots... see you."

He left the uniform robes drying, stuffed the gardening case and still-wet towel into his locker and grabbed his bag, hastening out the door.

Five minutes later he was back again. Swearing under his breath, he pulled out his gardening case again and rummaged around until he found a heavy gold coin, stuck it in his pocket and dashed out, ignoring Richard's "Hard up for money, mate?" as he slammed the door shut behind him.

---

"Neville!" Saida's eyes were shining. "You horrible boy. You realise how inferior you make me feel here?"

"I'll take that as a thank you." Neville smiled and bent to kiss her cheek. "Happy Birthday."

"Thank you! Oh, it looks really delicious." She placed the cake on a table and went off to find something to cut it with, telling the people she passed on the way that it was time for coffee and sweets.

Neville melted into the background as guests started milling into the room, many expressing their admiration over the cake. He fingered the DA coin in his pocket, thinking about Luna. How was she doing? How was she feeling? Was she perhaps sleeping now...and if she was, was it a natural healing slumber or just a potion-induced oblivion?

He wondered if she remembered how to work the coin.

"Heard about the thefts?" said a voice to his right, and he jumped. He turned his head to see a woman he didn't recognise talking with Carly. She had her back to him, and was talking in a low tone apparently meant for Carly's ears only. However, her voice carried well, and Neville caught her words perfectly.

"Thefts?"

"From the lab, apparently. Don't know if there's any truth in it, but I saw a memo from Imp to the master."

"Will you stop reading her mail! She'll find out one day, you know."

"It's a secretarial privilege to read the masters' mail. No, more than a privilege...I'd say a duty. Anyway, he said that he was concerned about the stock of potions diminishing to a critical point, and he was now certain that he was indeed right in suspecting...", she began, then someone jogged her elbow, and she turned to glare at them. As she did so she looked towards Neville, and for a second she seemed to falter.

"Yeah? Who?" asked Carly impatiently, and the other woman started and turned back towards her.

"Someone... someone on the Healer staff," she finished weakly. Carly snorted derisively.

"Go, Imp. Anyone could have guessed that much."

Neville missed the rest of their conversation, as Saida came up behind him and flourished a cake plate beneath his nose.

"And it tastes just as good as it looks," she said. "You're an angel, have I told you before? Are you having some?"

"Ate my fill while I made it." Neville grinned. "It was supposed to be twice as large."

He laughed with her and stood chatting for a while, but he soon made his excuses and went on his way homewards.

Thinking back on the week that had passed, he remembered how he'd hardly ever been alone in the ingredients cupboard, Imp having recalled that he needed something as well every time Neville had business there, and how the master Healer had been down no less than three times to check on their progress. Was he merely paranoid? Or did they really, truly suspect him now?

---

The following three days were unpleasant and frightening. He read suspicion in Imp's every glance, distaste in every word. The non-committal grunts that were his preferred method of communication and had before seemed so harmless and amusing were now obviously a screen and a way for Imp to hide his real feelings. And the older man's habit of conjuring plastic gloves for himself while handling ingredients perhaps was not only due to a touch of bacteriophobia...perhaps that was because he did not want to leave his own fingerprints on jars that would later be examined for Neville's?

Neville was thinking wildly and irrationally, he knew, but he also knew that every time he walked towards the ingredients cupboard Imp craned his head to look.

He didn't see Luna during those days, either. He would have liked so much to talk with her, though, because he was certain that if anyone would be able to understand the feeling of going slowly mad, it would be her.

Things were finally brought to a head one day when he had just finished work. He was in the locker room getting changed when James walked in.

"Imp sent word from the lab," he said, raising his eyebrows speculatively. "Said the master Healer is down there with him now and would like a word if you could come down immediately. What've you done now, then?"

Neville laughed, unconvincingly. "Beats me," he said and put his working robes back on with a sinking feeling in his stomach. So was this it? A hard stare, suspicious words, and a suggestion of a holiday? Or a straight question, yes or no, thief or innocent...

The walk down towards the lab was longer than it had ever been.

He was almost at the final stair when he felt his pocket grow hot and stuck his hand in to find a coin, heated from the Protean Charm.

---

He hesitated, but only for a second.

---

The tableau that met his eyes when he opened the door to the mental ward was quite frightening. Saida was standing over Luna and screaming at her, holding on to the short stubble that was her hair, and Luna was clawing at her hands, wailing. Both stopped short when Neville entered, and the silence dropped like a lead weight.

"Neville!" said Saida finally, awkwardly. "Oh, I'm glad you showed up...was just about to call for security...quite demented, as you can see...jumped me when she was due for medication...lost case, clearly..."

Luna remained silent during Saida's garbled explanation, looking at the floor, but as the other woman's words petered out she looked up at her old school mate.

"You knew where to come, then."

"I knew from the start," said Neville, because he had.

"Neville!" Saida exclaimed. He looked at her, sadly.

"Let her go. Please. I don't care what she's done. Please just leave her for a moment."

"She was threatening to kill me...her medication..."

"Neville," said Luna, and her voice seemed strangely calm and clear, and steadier than it had for a long time, "I'm really sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for..." he began, but she interrupted.

"No; I really am so sorry." She stood up suddenly, wincing as Saida's fingers, still locked in her hair, pulled her head back for a moment. "Because I'm going to have to ask you to testify that this woman is wearing my earrings."

"What?" Neville stared, feeling as if he had just completely lost his bearings. "Luna, I... what?"

"Look." Without much effort Luna shook Saida off and pulled a wand out of her pocket. Saida gasped.

"How did you..."

"*Impedimenta*."

Saida froze, her hand halfway to her own wand. "Neville!" she screeched. "Call security! She's not allowed to have a wand...I don't know how..."

"Look," said Luna again, and pulled Saida's hair away from her ears. "I would like you to say if you recognise these."

There were two daisies in Saida's ears. Neville frowned, completely confused.

"I don't..."

"Neville! Call security! Now!"

"Please do," said Luna calmly. "And then tell me if you remember these better?" She stuck her hand into Saida's pocket and brought out another pair of earrings...two mismatched, heavily lashed eyes. Neville stared.

"Saida?" he said at last, looking at her.

Saida spat then, and her mouth twisted angrily. "You little bitch," she hissed, just as the sound of quickly running footsteps was heard outside, and the door was flung open once again by a security witch, closely followed by her fellows.

"I'm arresting you," said Luna, kneeling down in front of the frozen Saida to gaze into her face, "on suspicion of theft, sabotage and assault."

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Quote in this chapter by Ambrose Bierce.

AmyLouise keeps catching those faulty commas for me, thanks for that!

# The Truth

Chapter 8 of 8

All comes out into the open.

Chapter Eight...The Truth

*Happiness is holding flowers in both hands.*

"Apart from the sabotage done to the stock of potions and ingredients," said Luna, stirring sugar into her coffee with a complacent air, "she also stole jewellery and valuable personal effects from her patients. There is little control of the mental ward, and she was free to act more or less as she saw fit...and of course in her particular ward, all the patients are so far gone as to have little say in the matter. Many probably won't ever know that they were robbed. But when she took my first pair of earrings, I made the mistake of protesting. She hit me quite savagely. Mm, you can't imagine how I've longed for this cup." She drank deep, closing her eyes. "We don't get coffee, us crazy people. It isn't good for our nerves."

"I still can't believe it," Neville, who had hardly been listening, said quietly. Luna regarded him sadly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've said it before and I can't say it enough."

"It was your job." How long had Saida been stealing and pilfering before suspicion started to grow? How long had she been asking him to bring her something from the lab, saying she'd be down to sign for it later?

"An ugly job. Having to spy on a friend...lock up *his* friend...pretend, lie, play a mean game..."

"So that was why you made contact with me?" asked Neville. He was looking away from her, and although his tone was light, she winced as if he'd shouted.

"Yes," she said quietly. "You were such good friends with her, and in such a position, that when they learned that I knew you from before, my employers couldn't resist the opportunity. Maybe you'd tell me things without thinking, seeing as I was crazy anyway."

She sighed and looked down into her coffee cup, her face flushed with shame.

"I told you I hated it," she said.

"Yes." How was Dick taking it? Had he known? Or had it come as a shock to him, as well?

"Infiltrating the mental ward...pretending to be insane...nothing, in comparison." She laughed suddenly. "I suppose I did go a little mad, at that. Especially after Bulgaria and everything that happened there. It wasn't very nice."

"You were made an Auror, then?" asked Neville, making an effort to speak with nothing but a friendly interest.

"Not really." Luna hesitated, bit her lip. "I never passed the tests, never registered. But I was sent on missions, mostly like this one. All the government-run establishments are full of old Death Eaters as well as those who followed them only for power or money. I've been doing similar work at the Ministry and the Daily Prophet. I went to Bulgaria posing as the daughter of a Death Eater and tried to infiltrate their faction there; that's where the arm happened, of course. I was found out."

"An undercover agent," said Neville.

"Yes."

"That's a living?"

"Yes. Not a very good one. Ugly, hateful. I won't continue. Seeing you worry..." She bit her lip again and turned away. "I know a little of shame, now."

Neville said nothing, merely drank his tea. Then he sighed, set the tea cup down and rubbed his hands across his face.

"I'm sorry I'm acting like an idiot," he said. "But I liked her, and the feeling of having been an dimwitted, blind fool makes me irritable... and I did worry. Quite a lot. Sorry, I'm accusing you."

"No," said Luna, "you're right. But she didn't only fool you."

"Hm." He drank some more tea, thoughtful. "Did they suspect me? For real?"

"Mm."

"What made them change their minds? Not prosecuting now, are they?" And yet Imp had not said sorry or said with a laugh: "You'll never guess what we were thinking, for a while..." He had been silent, as uncommunicative as before the whole crazy business started...the same, but not the same. Because now Neville knew the silence might always be hiding something else.

"What made them? I did," said Luna, not exactly smugly but with a definite sense of satisfaction. "I've not only been talking to you, here...and I didn't want to talk to you like I was supposed to, trying to wheedle out information and interrogating you without you knowing; I hated it, so I tried to find other ways...I've also been following both you and Saida. Harry's cloak, you know."

"Eh?" said Neville, nonplussed, then understood what she was talking about. "Oh, the Invisibility Cloak? You've been using it..." That explained the forages into the garden, how she had been able to see him again and again, even after the security was tightened. "He doesn't need it himself, then?"

Neville recalled that he'd been hearing very little from Harry for the last half year or so. He'd been burying himself in his work, of course, but still...

"Harry thinks the war is over," said Luna with some asperity. "He's settling into a cottage with Ginny. They're talking of getting married."

"What? No!"

"Yes."

"But she's not even twenty yet!"

"You can have time to see quite a lot of life before turning twenty," said Luna, and although neither she nor Neville looked at her scarred right arm, they both thought of it. "But I agree. I think it's silly."

Luna was the only person who could really use the word silly, thought Neville.

"To get back to you," she continued, "I've testified that you are completely innocent in the matter."

"Mm? Oh, yeah." He thought. "That day, when I came... the master Healer had summoned me. Were they going to accuse me then?"

"No. We needed you to witness. And they did not believe you were involved, not then. I'd told them you weren't."

So it had been paranoia after all, that certainty that he was being watched and guarded. Strange, how powerful the mind was.

Wasn't it?

Luna was watching him closely, and she said now,

"So Dean said you'd called on him."

"Yes."

"You were quite livid, he said."

Neville flushed at the memory. He had been standing in Dean's living room, shouting at him in a way he couldn't remember ever having shouted before. With hindsight, Dean's silent acceptance of his abuse, with no attempt to explain or justify himself, should probably have told him something.

"I said I've always admired you," said Luna smiling, "and I really meant that. It wasn't merely the crazy talking. Thank you."

Neville muttered something rather unintelligible.

"He told me to invite you over as soon as possible. But only if you didn't shout."

They laughed then, for the first time, and although it was nervous at first, they kept laughing until he was drying tears out of his eyes and she was clutching her side.

"So what will you do now?" he asked, once he had recovered. The laughter had been a relief, a return to normal. Luna shrugged.

"Resign. Live on the money I've saved until something comes along that's worth my time. I might turn to Thestral research..."

"Oh? There's research being done on them?"

"Oh, yes, but not nearly on the scale it should be. There is a whole range of uses for Thestral hair that hasn't been explored enough, and I'd be interested in...oh. I'm sorry, I'm boring you." She paused and looked at him (while he tried to look as if Thestral research was, on the contrary, a fascinating subject), leaning her head to one side in the manner he suspected she had practised for her role, but which had by now probably become a habit. "And you?"

Indeed. What would he do now. He had taken the job at St Mungo's because he felt that it was a job in which he could do some good in this traumatised, post-war England and at the same time develop his Herbology skills. He had done that, certainly. But now, with the knowledge that from now on every look from Imp would startle and disconcert him, and every summons from the master Healer would be answered with anxiety, he was starting to wonder if it was time to move on. He had even given it some thought earlier, but had thought it would seem too much like running at that time.

Luna smiled at him. "Did you know Professor Sprout once wrote a thesis on Venomous Tentacula gum disease?" she asked. Neville laughed again...suddenly laughing was easy.

"No, can't say I did. Why?"

"Just thought you might like to know."

"Huh."

"Mm, Hogwarts... the kids there..." She laughed briefly and shook her head. "They're a bit messed up, you know. Many of them saw the war, and they don't know how to handle it. The Slytherins have it bad right now, of course, and many of them retaliate very harshly when they're attacked or mocked. And all of them...the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs and Slytherins...they're all confused. Some who were there, fighting that war, they think they have to be brave to handle it, and so they turn into hard, angry little creatures, and they hurt others without meaning to. Porcupines." She smiled, then continued, very obviously not looking at him, "It might be that what they need is someone who can show that you can be brave and focused, and maybe angry too, but at the same time kind and laughing."

Neville smiled inwardly as he finished his tea. "Luna," he then said, "the ones you call kids... the oldest are only two years younger than you."

Luna shook her head. "Oh, but they are kids...you'll know it when you see them."

"I suppose I will," said Neville, imagining new students trooping down the lawn towards the greenhouses, curious about what the huge purple-red plant in Number One was or tense with anticipation over the first day in Number Three. They'd be confused and maybe a little bit frightened, and they'd need someone who could explain and encourage without mocking...

"Would," he said. "Would, if I were to seek employment at Hogwarts. Not saying I will."

Luna smiled.

"Luna! I never said anything about applying at Hogwarts! You can't trick me into it like this!"

Luna laughed at him, at his fluster, and stood up.

"I have to go," she said. "report...my employers don't like to be kept waiting. Also, since I'll be telling them that I'm quitting, I'd like them to be in a good mood." She leaned over towards him for a second, and kissed his cheek quickly. "I'll see you at Hogwarts, then."

"Hold on, didn't I just tell you..." Neville began, half annoyed and half amused, but then he stopped, confused. "At Hogwarts? Then you..."

"Oh, didn't I say?" Luna picked up her bag and stood looking down at him. "It'll be a bit of a wrench leaving Dean, of course...a relationship conducted by owls can only

survive for so long...but on the other hand he can paint anywhere, and there *is* a position opening up in Gladrags. He'll be applying for it. Well... he doesn't know yet, of course. Anyway, I've already put out enquiries for a cottage in Hogsmeade. You should probably start soon, too...housing is ever so hard to find these days. Hogsmeade is marginally better than London, true, but even so..."

"Luna, Luna." Neville raised his hands, laughing. "You're not making sense again."

"No?" She raised her eyebrows. "I thought it was obvious. Really, if I'm to do Thestral research, I should want to be where the largest herd in England is, right?"

She laughed again and walked away, and he watched her leave, thinking about Hogwarts. Where he'd been a clumsy, awkward boy, and where he'd grown into someone who was daring, who stood his ground and took up the struggle when he had to. If he went back, now, which one would he be? Here at St Mungo's he'd at least been an adult, whatever else had happened. If he went back, apprenticed to Professor Sprout, would the other teachers treat him as an equal, or would he never grow past the status of an accident-prone student?

He thought he knew the answer, and he also thought he knew what would happen if he stayed at St Mungo's. He could feel it already...he was tired of all his fellow Healers, feeling annoyed or disgusted even with the best of them. If he stayed, he would end up hating them all. And there were people here he didn't want to hate.

Luna stopped by Percival's fountain and raised her wand, and as the faun took her small hands in his large stone ones, the sun came out and bathed them all in bright light, and Neville knew that it was time to break up and start anew. He'd leave a note for Derwent, and he'd send a memo to the Master Healer, then he'd take his gardening case with him and leave.

Maybe he was acting a little crazy, but there was no shame in running if you knew where you were going.

"Hey, Luna!" he shouted, rising from his seat and Vanishing their two cups. "Wait for me."

*The End*

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Ah, and so we come to The End of the Story. Thanks once more to AmyLouise for being a great beta for this, and thank you to all who have reviewed!

The quote in this chapter is a Japanese proverb.