

To Dance by the Light of the Moon

by scaranda

She hadn't even knocked on his door that first day. She'd just kicked it open, and if he hadn't seen the odd shoes peeping below the rest of what stood in his doorway, he would have assumed himself to have been addressed by a large blue and gold box.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 12

She hadn't even knocked on his door that first day. She'd just kicked it open, and if he hadn't seen the odd shoes peeping below the rest of what stood in his doorway, he would have assumed himself to have been addressed by a large blue and gold box.

She hadn't even knocked on his door that first day. She'd just kicked it open, and if he hadn't seen the odd shoes peeping below the rest of what stood in his doorway, he would have assumed himself to have been addressed by a large blue and gold box.

'What do I do first?' the box asked, as she closed the door with her bottom, laid the box on the floor, where it took up most of the available space, and at last peered over the top to reveal herself to be exactly whom he had suspected.

'Do?' he asked, snapping his mouth shut for the first time since the door had opened. 'What do you mean? In fact, Miss Lovegood, what are you doing here?'

'I work here now,' she replied, walking round the box, and fishing a copy of the day before's "Daily Prophet" from a Ravenclaw-blue robe; one that seemed suspiciously as though she had recycled it from old Quidditch uniforms, a notion not dispelled by the fact that she had a Snitch around her neck, dangling from what looked rather like greenhouse twine. 'Your advertisement for an assistant,' she said breathlessly, holding it under his nose. 'I'll take the post.'

'It is customary, Miss Lovegood, to submit an application for a post of employment,' he said. 'From then, prospective employers consider the applications before them, and then invite the most suitable candidate to discuss terms. Upon mutual agreement of such terms, employment then commences.' He was about to nod to the door with a "Good day to you, Miss Lovegood" remark, when she interrupted him.

'Oh, I'll accept the terms,' she said somewhat magnanimously. 'I'm sure Professor McGonagall will feed me and provide a room for me to sleep in, and I don't need much more.'

'Miss Lovegood,' he began again. 'It is / who am to be satisfied with the candidate.'

'Oh,' she repeated. She had moved back behind the box, and was peering over it again, in a way that made him realise she was standing on her tiptoes, the tiptoes of the odd shoes. 'Who else has applied?'

He felt the trap spring shut; in fact, he almost heard it reverberate in his mind. It had been the third of three advertisements, and apart from one illiterate hopeful from a country whose name Snape didn't even recognise, he had no other applicants. He knew he shouldn't have put his name in the paper; that had been a mistake, and had

Minerva not said the very same to him after the lack of response to his first two advertisements, he would have changed the third one.

'That is not the point, Miss Lovegood,' he said, in the uncomfortable knowledge that she was not beginning to feel as foolish as he was.

'What is the point then, Severus?' she asked, and he almost gasped at her use of his given name, and then realised that was foolish too; she was, after all, twenty-four, maybe twenty-five.

'What experience do you have, for instance?' he asked.

She blinked, and began to walk around the room; touching books, as though they were small children, whose heads she was patting; and peering into cauldrons, sniffing her approval; and examining the cobwebs that hung in the corners, softening the sharper angles of the room, as if in some sort of counterpoint to the even sharper and more angular Severus Snape, whose black eyes followed her progress in something akin to fascination.

'Well,' she said eventually, 'you taught me. And I did get a very good Potions mark... in all my exams... so that must mean that your teachings made an impression on me.'

He felt quite at a loss. 'I meant, since Hogwarts, Miss Lovegood,' he said at last, as she picked up a stirring stick and began to stir the potion, the very one he had been about to stir himself before she had interrupted him.

'It was about to stick to the bottom,' she said, nodding to the cauldron. 'Oh, don't worry, Severus. You have no one else's wrong ideas to erase from me. I haven't even given a single thought to Potions since I left school.'

'That's hardly much of a recommendation,' he replied, feeling on slightly safer ground.

'Oh,' she said yet again, sitting down at his table, as though she had been invited to do so. 'I wouldn't have thought that other people's ideas would have appealed to you. I... I'm a little disappointed in that.'

Snape stared at her, unsure if she had complimented him, or if she had hung a carrot in front of his face, in the way one would hang one in front of the donkey he was beginning to feel like. 'They don't,' he snapped. 'I mean ... What is in that ruddy box?' he asked, trying to cram the words back down his throat, and wondering why he had said them anyway, and if the box had indeed shuffled slightly to the left.

'Does that mean I've got the job?'

He couldn't make up his mind if it were the way her wand was hovering an inch or so above her head, with her hair wound around it in an elaborate plait; or the earrings, that had quite clearly been grown with the intention of being eaten, as opposed to worn, in that they were clusters of tiny tomatoes; or the fact that she was wearing two odd shoes, and that he truly believed she would be surprised to find that she had an identical pair in her wardrobe, albeit with left and right foot reversed, and would wonder why she had ever bought two pairs the same; but whatever it was, he found himself standing.

'What *is* in that box?' he repeated, instead of the scathing, "Certainly not", that he had intended to say.

'Oh, they won't get in the way,' she said airily, sitting back much more comfortably than he felt, and crossing her legs in a way that made Severus notice that not only were her shoes odd, but that they both appeared to be right footed, and he mentally re-jigged his earlier notion of the equal and opposite pair she had in whatever wardrobe held her belongings.

'Miss Lovegood,' he began, sitting back down, horribly aware that he was beginning to wander down a path he had not intended. 'Are your feet sore?'

'Well, yes,' she replied. 'Now you mention it, the left one feels a bit odd. I think it's because I've put a right shoe on it.'

'And where, if I might enquire, is the right shoe... the left shoe... the correct shoe?' he went on, tying himself up in a way he didn't at all care for. He shouldn't have seen fit to comment further; in hindsight, he recognised that.

'In the box,' she replied.

Yes, the box, he reminded himself. 'And what else in the box, Miss Lovegood?' he asked, glancing across the room to where he thought it had moved again slightly when he hadn't been looking.

'Niffles,' she replied. 'I suspect that's why I couldn't find anything to wear but an old Quidditch uniform and two odd shoes, and had to hold my hair up by magic.'

'Miss Lovegood,' he said, now terribly conscious that he was being manoeuvred into a corner, and quite failing to notice that he was enjoying himself enormously, 'Niffles are attracted to shiny objects,' he said, looking pointedly down to where she was jiggling one red-shod foot above a blue-shod one, neither of which were at all shiny.

'Oh, I know that, Severus,' she said, repeating his given name again, as though they were old friends, and plucking a tomato from the bunch at her left ear, and popping it into her mouth. 'But I always put a sparkly brooch on my left shoes, so I know what foot to put them on,' she said, once she had swallowed the tiny tomato.

'Perhaps that is why you find yourself with two right... wrong shoes?' he offered.

She pouted. 'I did try changing the brooches to the right shoes, but...' She trailed off as Severus held his hand up.

'Please, Miss Lovegood, no more,' he said, rather more faintly than he would have liked.

'Can I have the job?' she asked.

'Only if you can satisfy me that you have disposed of the Niffles in an appropriate fashion,' he said, not at all sure who had won, but somehow suspecting it was himself.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 12

Luna dazzles everyone with her irrefutable logic and cunning candour.

'Lovegood? Luna Lovegood?' Minerva repeated, as though perhaps another Miss Lovegood had slipped unnoticed through Hogwarts in recent years.

'Do you have a problem with that, Minerva?' Severus snapped.

'No, no, not at all,' she replied, drawing her green velvets about her, and clutching a handful of them at her breast in what he had always suspected was a defensive manner. 'I would just have expected someone more...'. She trailed off, as though searching for a suitable description.

'Boring?' he offered, as he noticed with displeasure that Dumbledore's likeness had cracked an eye open, where it hung on the wall behind the present incumbent, as though he had only lent her the seat, and was just waiting until she stood up to claim it back.

'I meant, I would have expected someone more experienced,' Minerva replied, letting go of her robes.

'So I can un-teach them all of the rubbish they have learned from others, before starting with a clean slate?' he asked, refusing to admit to himself that he was using Luna's reasoning on her behalf.

'There were no other applicants, were there, Severus?' she asked, smiling in some sort of petty triumph.

'Minerva, I even had an applicant from as far away as Wasiland,' he said witheringly, and not entirely untruthfully, hoping that not only had she forgotten that she knew he'd had no response to the first two advertisements, but that Wasiland did in fact exist, something he had been slightly remiss in checking.

'And what then, may I ask, was it about Miss Lovegood's application that placed her above the others?' the headmistress asked, the hand that had recently clutched her robes, now clutching a teacup instead.

'She doesn't annoy me as much as most people do,' Severus replied, glaring behind her to where Dumbledore had closed his eyes and was pretending to be asleep. 'Can we get down to her terms and conditions now, Minerva? I would like to get back to my rooms before her damned Niffles have run amok.'

'Niffles?' Minerva echoed, perhaps subconsciously clasping her rather busy hand around the filigree-bordered Cairngorm stone brooch she wore on her robes. 'You didn't mention Niffles, Severus.'

He hadn't meant to mention them either; it had just slipped out, and he only hoped the damned Niffles hadn't. 'They are under control,' he assured her, much more confidently than he felt.

'Well, I shan't keep you then, Severus,' she said quickly, rising from behind her desk in a cloud of lavender-scented velvet. 'Ask your new apprentice to come to see me when she has settled in. She may have the suite of rooms that were once mine. Now get rid of those Niffles, Severus,' she said with a shudder, making her way to the door, as though to all but shove him down the steps.

'Thanks, Minerva,' Luna said brightly from where she had pushed the door open without knocking, as seemed to be her habit, almost sending the headmistress's slight frame through the opposite wall, portrait of Dumbledore and all.

'Miss Lovegood, how did you get past the gargoyle?' McGonagall looked startled, as well she might have, as she steadied herself against her desk; though whether at the familiar address, or the fact that Luna had somehow managed to gain right of entry to the headmistress's inner sanctum, Severus wasn't quite sure.

'Oh, you can call me Luna,' she replied. 'I'm staff now; Severus has hired me.'

'The gargoyle?' McGonagall repeated, as Severus sat back again, rather enjoying himself, for the second time in as many hours, noticing with no small degree of satisfaction that even the all-knowing old pest in the portrait didn't seem to know Luna's... Miss Lovegood's, he corrected himself... secret access.

'Oh, the gargoyle,' Luna replied, as though just remembering the question. 'Well, he's made of sandstone... like the rest of the castle. Quite lovely, sandstone is,' she went on. 'Did you know that most of the sandstone in the castle came from one quarry on the Isle of Arran? It's the iron ore that makes it red.'

'Yes, Miss Lovegood, indeed I did know that,' McGonagall replied, a bit more tartly than Snape thought she should have. 'I come from Ayrshire.'

'Of course you do, Minerva,' Luna replied placatingly. 'I had quite forgotten that.'

'Can we get back to the point, Miss Lovegood?'

'Luna.'

'Very well... Luna,' Minerva went on, and Severus was almost tempted to ask her to remove the hard tone from her voice when addressing his apprentice. 'How did you get past the gargoyle?'

'Stone communicates, Minerva,' Luna replied. 'If you listen very carefully.'

'I am perfectly well aware that this castle is sentient, Miss Love... Luna,' Minerva replied. 'I was not, however, aware that the gargoyle communicated with the inhabitants of the castle.'

'Oh, it doesn't,' Luna agreed heartily. 'It's not permitted to. I believe it was Helga Hufflepuff who set that restriction.'

Minerva sighed. 'Yes, Luna, it was. Now, if the gargoyle did not communicate with you, and I have not informed it as yet that you are a member of staff, perhaps you would now see fit to let me know how you got past it.'

'Perhaps the other stones?' Luna offered. 'The gargoyle can speak to the other stones. Perhaps they told it that I am a member of staff. If I recall, the walls in Severus's office are stone.'

Minerva cast a quick glance to Snape, and he wondered just for a moment if she were seeking an ally. 'That's true, Minerva,' he said lazily, secretly quite anxious now to leave the room. 'Have you secured those Niffles, Miss Lovegood?' he asked. That ought to hurry McGonagall along, he thought, as he gave Luna a long look, to indicate to her that she should not attempt to question the "Miss Lovegood" part of his address.

'Maybe Severus left the stairway open?' Dumbledore offered his unwelcome two Knuts worth from behind Minerva.

'I most certainly did not,' Snape retorted, sensing that now was as good a time as any to make an exit. 'And mind your own business, you interfering old busybody.'

'I think that will be all, Severus,' Minerva said, giving him and Luna thin smiles of dismissal, and drawing Dumbledore a flinty look, as though to suggest that she would turn his portrait to the wall, so he, too, could talk to the stones, if he didn't stop meddling in what were now her affairs.

Severus was halfway down the steps from Minerva's office, having been ushered without further ceremony from the headmistress's presence, with his apprentice skipping a couple of steps in front of him. He was just admiring the way her cloud of hair bounced with each step, now that she had removed her wand from above her head to thread it precariously through a buttonhole instead, when an uncomfortable thought struck him, and he called to her.

'Miss Lovegood?' He waited for her to turn at the bottom step. 'How did you get past the gargoyle?'

'You left the stairway open, Severus,' she replied, smiling back at him. 'I didn't think you would want to be scolded for such a breach of security though.'

'Do you make a habit of telling lies to your superiors?' he asked.

'I think that if you cast your mind back, Severus, you'll realise that I didn't lie,' she replied. 'I was quite careful about that.'

'You didn't tell the truth,' he murmured, refusing to acknowledge his own fabrication.

'Well, not all of it,' she admitted. 'It was a good story though, wasn't it?'

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 12

The speculation begins.

'Curricula vitae, Miss Lovegood, are documents normally used to promote oneself in the eyes of prospective employers,' he said. 'They should not be considered as media for thrusting one's adolescent fantasies under their noses.'

'Oh,' she said, and he noticed that was a habit of hers, one that preceded a spark of annoyingly irrefutable logic. 'I thought it was Latin for "course of life".'

'It is,' he replied, snapping up the lure. 'It is supposed, however, to be an indication of one's aspirations as far as one's career is concerned.'

'Does it matter, Severus?' she asked. 'I mean, I'm already working for you; so it's superfluous now, isn't it?'

'Miss Lovegood, I have been asked by the headmistress to supply this document as part of your personal employment file,' he said, omitting to point out that not only had she done no work that day, but neither had he. 'I have no intentions of having the rest of the staff sniggering over the fact that I have taken on an apprentice whose ambitions are...' He glared down at the blue handwriting. '...To prove to the world that the Crumple-Horned Snorkack exists, and to dance by the light of the moon.'

He thrust the offending document at her, only to find that he had exchanged it for a glass of clear dark brown tea that she had been holding out to him; it looked ominously to his taste.

'Drink that, while I change it to something more boring,' she said, pulling a pencil from behind her ear, without disturbing the few remaining tomatoes. 'It's just the way you like it.'

Severus looked down at the tea, not at all sure when she had made it, nor even how it came to be in his hand. 'Not here, Miss Lovegood,' he said smoothly, trying to take control over a situation that seemed to be running very fast in the opposite direction to him. 'You may take the document to your new rooms, and rewrite it there, either before or after you do whatever unpacking you have to do.'

'Shall I just drop it in to Minerva on my way to dinner?' Luna asked.

'Certainly not,' he replied. 'Not until I have seen it.' He watched her stick her wand behind her ear, where the pencil had recently been, and turn to leave. 'Miss Lovegood,' he called as she opened the door. 'Take the box with you,' he said, nodding to where the blue and gold box seemed to take up more space than it had done earlier, a fact proven by the way that it would no longer fit through the doorway. He watched her take the wand from behind her ear again, and shrink the box, until it fitted neatly under her arm, and wondered vaguely if it had just been its previous size so that she had had something to hide behind.

He watched the door close, pondering amongst other things if he had made a terrible mistake, and if he could manoeuvre things so that she sat beside him at dinner, on the opposite side to Minerva, in the place Hagrid normally occupied. Severus Snape was rather pleased with himself.

'Luna Lovegood?' Aurora Sinistra repeated to Minerva, in much the same way as Minerva had repeated the same back to Severus.

'My initial sentiment too, Aurora,' Minerva replied to her recently appointed deputy head.

'There'll be tears before bedtime, Minerva.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' McGonagall disagreed. 'Miss Lovegood, *call me Luna*,' she said, with a sniff and a twitch of her pinched lips, 'is a good deal smarter than many give her credit for. She was an outstanding student, a paragon of the understated brilliance that runs through the Ravenclaws.'

'She's dotty,' Pomona Sprout remarked, removing her pipe from between her lips, and exhaling a cloud of greenish, spruce-scented smoke. She pulled some long stands of vegetation from a pouch at what might have been her waist, but as she was so rotund, it was a bit hard to tell, and stuffed the leaves into the pipe bowl, tamping them down with the end of a brownish thumb the size of the bowl of a soup spoon. 'And Severus must have gone dotty, too, to take her on.'

'Dotty, she may be,' Minerva replied, 'but stupid, she is not. As to Severus, you have to admit, ladies, that is he is a little odd himself, to put it kindly... which leads me to my other concern, a slight concern, but a concern for all that.'

'You don't think he's having an affair with the girl, and brought her here under the guise of an apprenticeship, so he could live with her?' Pomona asked, quite clearly relishing the thought, and hoping that was indeed the case. Hogwarts had been a bit flat, not to mention flattened, for a few years, since the demise of the Dark Lord. A nice bit of juicy scandal would liven things up a bit.

'It is not Severus's romantic aspirations that trouble me, it is the girl's,' Minerva said, leaning forward as if to emphasise her point, instead of, as the case was, to inhale the purplish lavender-scented smoke that had begun to billow from Pomona's pipe, in the way that the colours and scents changed with whatever her sentiments were.

'And which one of us hasn't had romantic aspirations in Severus's direction,' Septima Vector asked, from where she had been sitting back in the female staffroom, listening with no small degree of tolerant amusement.

'I haven't,' Sybill Trelawney replied, waving her hand in front of her eyes, as though examining some greater truth beyond the understanding of her colleagues, whilst in fact trying to dry the nail varnish she had just applied. 'Although I sense I shall, one day. Perhaps my greater sight abandoned on me this matter,' she said, peering at the fingernails before her, as if they were tiny specks on some faraway horizon. 'Maybe I should have applied for the post instead.'

'On reflection,' Aurora said dryly, 'perhaps Miss Lovegood, *call me Luna*, will be the best all round. I confess to have been rather dreading a Hermione Granger, or some such, turning up.' She looked around the rest of the witches, a pleasing mixture of the odd, the eccentric, and the downright batty. 'I, for one, think the girl will fit in very nicely.'

'We agree,' Poppy Pomfrey added her opinion, from where she sat close to Irma Pince, 'don't we, Irma dear?'

'So?' Minerva asked, looking around her staff, the women whose opinions she valued as highly as own, those from whom she sought advice before presenting the male staff members with faits accomplis, couched in ways that would lead them to believe they had had some say in matters. 'We are agreed then?' She watched the rest of the ladies nod, not at all displeased with the decision she had already taken, as the door opened, without a knock, to admit a young witch in quite the oddest assortment of clothes any of them had seen for a while.

'Please, everyone,' Luna said brightly, 'call me Luna.' She looked down at herself. 'Oh, don't worry, I shan't be wearing this all the time; it's just what I unpacked first.'

'Lovegood?' Binns said, in a way that made the rest of the occupants of the male staffroom look up, partly because he never really saw fit to comment on anything that had succeeded his death, unless it concerned him directly, and partly because his voice had an interested inflection no one had ever heard in it before. 'Can't say I know the name too well,' he went on. 'The only female Lovegoods I can recall from recent years are a pretty girl, who married a Lovegood, and then blew herself up; and a very strange blonde from a few years back, who had an uncanny knack of looking through the wall just before I passed into a room.'

'She could see through the stone?' Flitwick asked.

'I'm not sure that that was it,' Binns replied vaguely, as he drifted to a corner and touched the stone of the wall. 'I used to hear the stones murmur as I passed sometimes, and I noticed that it was when she was in a room, watching me come through, that it happened. I took to going through the wall at different places, but it made no difference, she still knew where I was coming from.' He sighed. 'I rather miss that odd little communication.'

'She spoke with the stones?' Dean Thomas asked, smiling fondly. 'That sounds like Luna.'

'I was more hoping that she was speaking with me.' Binns sighed again. 'Not many students do.'

'Sweet girl, I always thought,' Flitwick said hurriedly, before Binns became his usual morbid self. 'I was rather proud of her. But Luna Lovegood, and our dour uncommunicative Severus...' He trailed off as the staffroom door opened, and Remus Lupin slouched in, with a cigarette dangling out of the corner of his mouth.

'Hear the news, Remus?' Hagrid asked from the corner, where he was slurping from what looked like a bucket of tea. 'Luna's only gone and taken the post of Snape's assistant.'

'Has she?' Lupin replied, omitting to point out that it had been he who had alerted Luna to the fact that a position had become available at Hogwarts. 'That ought to brighten things up a bit.'

'Shall we run a sweepstake on how long it lasts?' Binns asked, surprising them all again.

'I'll have two Galleons on less than a month,' Flitwick said, starting the ball rolling.

'A fortnight,' Dean Thomas said, anxious to be part of things, being, as he was, very much the new boy. 'One Galleon,' he added bravely.

Lupin smiled as the rest of the men added their wagers and speculations to the list Binns had begun to write on the wall. 'I think you're all in for a surprise,' he said, as the door opened again, and Binns Vanished the list from the wall, and Severus Snape stepped into the staffroom, giving Dean a hard look for sitting in the seat he preferred, and Lupin a glare for smoking in the staffroom when he was unsuccessfully trying to give up.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 12

Luna's first dinner at the High Table.

Severus watched Luna cross the Hall and head for the staff table. She appeared to have found two matching shoes, which whilst both pink and matching one another, clashed violently with the dress she wore. It was an odd streaky shade of mustard, as though it had been yellow, and had been washed along with blue, and the colour had washed out of the blue... the Ravenclaw Quidditch robes, he suspected, reigning in his inane thoughts as Luna bent to the headmistress.

'Would you move along a place please, Minerva, so I can sit next to Severus?' she asked, as Snape felt his jaw drop in time to the headmistress's. 'It's my first night, and I'm a bit nervous, and I'd like to sit beside someone I know.'

'Miss Lovegood,' Snape said, when McGonagall seemed bereft of a reply to the request that she move from the head teacher's ornately carved seat, the very one that had been handed through generations of illustrious incumbents, and a few whose portraits hung in the rogues' gallery, instead of her office. 'If I am not mistaken, which I am not,' Severus said, glancing down the staff table in both directions, to where almost all of the teaching staff had already arrived for dinner, and were all watching back, 'you are acquainted with, or have indeed been taught by, every professor here.'

'Of course I have, Severus,' she replied. 'But I don't know them all intimately.'

Severus felt himself swallow, as Minerva's eyebrow rose into her hat, and the insufferable Hagrid's shaggy eyebrows danced as though with a life of their very own, and an intelligence far above the brain behind them.

'In'ermittly?' the giant bellowed. 'I didn' rightly knows yer two were in'ermit,' he went on, beaming in pleasure, as Snape felt something like a wave of nausea sweep over

him.

'Oh, not that kind of intimate, Hagrid,' Luna corrected him. 'I just meant that I know Severus personally...'

Snape stood before it got any worse, took Luna's arm, and bent to Hagrid. 'Get up, you great oaf, and give Miss Lovegood a seat,' he hissed. 'Miss Lovegood, please sit, and please also consider your remarks more carefully in future, and try to avoid any double-entendres.' He drew himself up, disinterested that everyone on the right side of the table had to move along one place, until Sybill Trelawney found herself standing at the end of the far right-hand side, and had to walk the full length of the table, muttering to herself, to where a single unoccupied seat remained at the far left.

The Hall had filled with students too, and the soup had appeared as the last couple of stragglers took their seats. Severus was quite hungry, he realised, not awfully sure why he had missed lunch. He went to lift his soup spoon, as the aroma of the hearty lentil broth reached him; he would have done so too, had there been any spoons on the table. He had a very bad feeling about that.

'Miss Lovegood,' he said from the corner of his mouth, trying to ignore the fact that Minerva had already summoned the head kitchen elf, 'are all of your Niffles accounted for?'

'I think so,' she replied, looking at him in some sort of appeal that Severus didn't want to consider meant that she wasn't at all sure.

The elf had instantly appeared in front of the High Table, and she was standing wailing her eyes out, bawling in an ear-shattering shriek. 'We has no spoons, Headmistress McGonagall Lady Minerva. They is all gone.'

'Well, make some more,' McGonagall replied, and Severus was at least relieved that she hadn't seemed to have made the connection he had.

He was just about to begin his fast-cooling soup with the new spoons that had appeared on the table, when the fat oaf spoke up again from two seats away.

'Niffles,' Hagrid said darkly to Flitwick, who sat at his far side, like some ludicrous contrast. 'They likes spoons. Uses them as mirrors, they does.'

Snape laid his newly procured spoon down, glancing quickly at Minerva, but she seemed not to have noticed, engaged as she was in conversation with Aurora, probably on the merits or otherwise of him having hired Miss Lovegood, he thought a bit sourly. Severus had quite gone off the idea of soup now; it was cold anyway. He turned to the girl... young woman... at his side, as he felt her stiffen slightly and bite her lip as Hagrid's mutterings grew more intense.

'Illegitimus nil carborundum, Miss Lovegood,' he murmured, giving her a thin smile. 'If you are going to work for me, you may as well live by the maxim I live by. I suspect it will serve you well.'

'Should I excuse myself, and go and check the Niffles?' she whispered anxiously, and for the first since she had barged through his door, she seemed unsure of herself, and he was rather sorry about that. She glanced around at where the giant and Flitwick were discussing the various possibilities of the mystery of the missing spoons, having moved away from Niffles, to some obscure Vanishing Charms that Snape was quite sure Flitwick was making up as he went along.

'No,' he said, his lips twisting in disdain of all but very few of the teaching staff, wondering at the same time if Luna had understood his little Latin motto, and suspecting not. 'Let it pass,' he said. 'The fool seems to have moved on.'

'Alma mater vult decipi,' she replied, her blue eyes wide and ingenuous. 'Ergo, decipiatur.'

'Quite, Miss Lovegood.' Severus smiled to himself as Luna's lips twitched in mirth. He noticed they were a pretty pink colour, and pushed away the unkind thought that at least something matched her shoes. He felt her lay her hand on his arm in a gesture he knew was one of shared, yet innocent confidences, the sort of gesture everyone present would misread, he thought, as he drew his arm away slightly regretfully. That would do very well for now, he reflected, pushing his other thoughts to the secret compartments of his mind, to be summoned in private, as was fitting. He didn't notice Remus Lupin watching both him and Luna, from where he sat a few seats to the far side of Minerva.

Severus paused at the door to Minerva's old rooms, quite unsure if he should knock or not. Not that he had any intention of simply barging in on her, the way she had exploded into his rooms, but he wasn't sure if he should go in at all. He wondered if she would view the intrusion as inappropriate, something he would not care for, or if she would understand that he was concerned for her welfare on her first night, and even more concerned about the Niffles. He should have dealt with them himself, he knew that, and he wasn't sure why he hadn't.

He took a deep breath, and knocked sharply, looking around belatedly to check no one was watching, and failing to notice that Remus Lupin had just slipped behind a statue.

'Come in, Severus,' she said.

He opened the door before he wondered how she had known it was him, failing to catch the gasp that fell from his lips. He had been in Minerva's private rooms on many past occasions, when they had contained a pleasingly eclectic mixture of not too feminine knickknacks, which looked as though they had been placed where they rested with the precision of a Knockturn Alley drug dealer; and the floors had been covered in tartan carpeting; and the walls had been hung with claymores and battleaxes, and a wizard portrait of a red-bearded warrior in a drab green kilt, with a sword, which whilst planted between his feet, ran with blood, presumably from the severed troll head lying at his side. All of that was gone now, of course, to Minerva's new rooms, and what had replaced it, in the few short hours that Luna had been there, was no less diverse, and considerably more eccentric.

'The Niffles?' he asked, remembering why he was there, and pretending not to be trying to take in the fact that although she had arrived at Hogwarts with but one large blue and gold box, there were now several, each one with a long furry snout poking through an air hole.

'They're all here, Severus,' she replied.

'Yes,' he acknowledged. 'And so, I see, are the spoons.' He nodded to the huge pile of spoons that had replaced the tartan carpet.

'What shall I do about them?' she asked, biting her lip in a way he rather liked, one that suggested to him that she was looking to him for some sort of assistance in the matter, something he had hitherto always been loath offer to anyone, but in the case of his assistant felt it was his duty: a suitable enough explanation for him to be going on with.

'The Niffles or the spoons, Miss Lovegood?'

'Well, both, I suppose.'

'We shall be spending the rest of this evening some considerable distance from this castle, digging holes, Miss Lovegood, quite deep ones.'

'And the spoons?' she asked, clearly relieved that the Niffles would be disposed in a manner not only acceptable to her, but to them too.

'What spoons?' he asked, glancing to where the spoons no longer covered the floor.

'What did you do with them?' she asked.

'I put them back in the kitchen, of course.'

'They were out at the edge of the forest last night,' Hagrid said. 'Digging ruddy great holes, they were.'

'Yes, so Filius said at breakfast,' Dean replied, glancing past a pair of feet, which were all that could be seen of Flitwick behind his newspaper, to where the werewolf was slouched in the corner of a settee, as though hoping to spur him into joining the conversation. But Lupin had draped the "Sunday Prophet" over his face, either asleep or pretending to be, as he normally was on a Sunday morning.

'Wonder what they was looking for?' Hagrid pondered, nodding sagely to himself. 'He'll likely be needin' stuff fer research, an' took the girl with him ter show her where ter find the best things. There be a lot of very strange things ter be found in the forest.'

'He's a very strange man,' Flitwick offered from behind his newspaper.

'Strange girl too,' Binns remarked, as he drifted to the window to look out at the rain.

'Where is Snape anyway?' Dean asked. 'He doesn't seem to come to the staffroom much.'

'Bent over a cauldron, most likely,' Flitwick replied, showing his head over his paper, and hiding his feet at the same time. 'Knee deep in research.'

'What's he researching anyway?' Dean asked.

'Who knows?' Hagrid replied with an attempt at lacing his voice with mystery. 'Ain't no one brave enough ter ask.'

Only Lupin didn't see fit to offer an opinion or a speculation on Snape and Luna's late evening ramblings, contenting himself with a slow smile behind his "Sunday Prophet", wondering how Severus had managed to cobble up such a good excuse for peace and quiet at the weekends, when he couldn't think one up himself.

'They went out last night,' Pomona said, her pipe billowing out an enquiring colour of forget-me-not-scented blue smoke. 'I saw them from the greenhouse window.'

'A walk in the moonlight perhaps?' Septima offered, in a rather wistful way that sounded as though she might have fancied a moonlight stroll with Severus herself.

'With two spades?' Sprout replied. 'And a large box.'

'Perhaps burying something of the past,' Sybill said, dropping her voice to a low dark murmur as she nodded to where Irma and Poppy sat together, looking out at the rain, possibly in the knowledge that they were the two least likely to tell her to keep her nonsensical mutterings to herself. 'The past must be buried before the future can begin.'

'I doubt that one buries one's past in a box, Sybill dear,' Aurora said, looking up from where she had been trying to read her newspaper, but kept being interrupted.

'When they came back, they only brought the spades,' Sprout replied, hoping to fuel more than Sybill into speculation. 'The box was gone.'

"And so, thank Merlin, were the Nifflers," Minerva thought to herself, grateful at least one of her concerns had been laid to rest in whatever deep hole they had dug, as she rustled her own "Sunday Prophet" in a way that asked for a little peace and quiet to read.

Footnote

Illegitimus nil carborundum: Don't let the bastards grind you down.

Alma mater vult decipi. Ergo, decipiatur: My school deceives itself. Therefore, let it be deceived.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 12

Minerva imparts some unwelcome news; and Luna starts working.

Chapter Five

'A Yule Ball?' Snape asked faintly. 'This year?'

'Yes, Severus,' Minerva said shortly. 'A Yule Ball, this year, and not only that... but this year, unlike others, you will attend.'

'I most certainly shall not,' Severus snapped back.

'And not only will you attend, you will assist me in the preparations,' the headmistress went on, as though Snape's objections had not been worthy of note.

'I am far too busy for such nonsense,' Severus snarled, glaring first at Minerva, and then at the scheming old busybody in the portrait behind her desk, as though it were his fault, which it probably was. 'Get someone else to do it.'

'I have permitted you to hire an assistant, Severus, so that you are no longer too busy,' Minerva argued. 'No one else, myself included, has an assistant.'

'You have so,' he retorted. 'You have Aurora.'

'It might be fun, Severus,' Luna piped up from his side, making Snape wonder how and why it was that she had accompanied him into a private meeting with the headmistress anyway, instead of telling her to keep out of it, as he would have done to anyone else. 'We could make everyone go in fancy dress,' she added. 'I could go as a Blibbering Humdinger, so everyone would know what they look like. I've always worried that people might pass one on the street, and not realise what it is, and no one would ever find one.'

'I'm not sure Blibbering Humdingers actually exist, my dear,' Dumbledore murmured unhelpfully from his portrait.

'How do you know?' Severus snapped, shooting the old man a murderous glare that might easily have killed him, had he not already been dead.

'Just an observation that Miss Lovegood might find it difficult to dress up as something when she does not know what it looks like,' Dumbledore replied, sitting back, apparently satisfied that he had stirred the water up enough to muddy it a little.

'Oh, I do,' Luna replied. 'And please do call me Luna, Albus.'

Severus smirked at the portrait as the former headmaster drew back a little in what might have been surprise. 'See! You don't know everything, after all. So mind your own business,' Snape said smoothly, in some sort of short-lived triumph, before realising the noose he had tied around his own neck was tightening.

'Well, I'm pleased that's all settled then,' Minerva said, tucking her victory quickly under her belt, and turning to Luna. 'Do you require to go home today, Miss... er... Luna, to collect the remainder of your belongings?'

'May I, Severus?' Luna asked, turning to Snape as though it had been he who had asked. 'I have some specimens to bring, and I quite forgot to tell my father I was coming for an interview. He might wonder where I am.'

Snape was going to ask what specimens she might be talking about, but thought better of doing so in front of Minerva. 'Very well. But I expect to start tomorrow before nine, Miss Lovegood,' he said instead, almost surprised when she stood up and left the headmistress's room, leaving him feeling slightly cast adrift. It caught him quite off guard to realise that McGonagall had begun speaking again, and he hadn't the vaguest idea of what she had said. 'I have work to do, Minerva,' he said, hoping that would suffice as a rejoinder to whatever her remark had been, but he wasn't terribly comforted by the way her eyebrow disappeared into her hat, and the old pest in the portrait chuckled in a way that made Severus almost wish he were still alive, just so that he could choke him.

Severus wasn't quite sure what woke him, not at first. It wasn't the light, he knew that; living underground, as he did most of the time, there wasn't any, save that of his own creation. It was certainly Monday, he knew that too, yet that didn't account for the fact that it felt considerably earlier than his normal frantic scuffle to get to the Great Hall in time for breakfast and social chitchat, one of which he could have forwent quite happily for a cup of dark tea, and the other which was hardly worthy of his disdain. He eventually came to terms with the fact that someone was in his living room. He dragged himself out of bed, confirming the worst; it was shortly after half past six, and he was awake. Whoever the ungracious interloper was who had broken into his rooms, had not only broken and entered to atone for, but also the fact that their actions had added an hour onto the most unpleasant day of the week. All in all, Severus didn't feel particularly well disposed towards his unwanted visitor.

'Miss Lovegood,' he said, instantly regretting the fact that he hadn't seen fit to shower, shave and dress before accosting whoever had broken in.

'Oh,' she said, 'I haven't woken you, have I? I thought you wanted to make an early start.'

'I said before nine, Miss Lovegood,' he replied, terribly conscious of the fact that she was deliberately not scrutinising everything from his bare feet, to his faded black nightshirt, to the fact that his hair would need some fairly advanced wand work to untangle itself. 'I did not say the castle was going to be on fire at seven o'clock.'

'Shall I come back?' she asked, holding him out a glass of clear black tea like she had once before, and he found himself wondering if that were another of her odd little habits, like preceding a response to anything awkward with 'oh', and arriving anywhere she happened to arrive, neither announced nor invited. 'Or shall I just get started?'

'Started doing what?' he asked, dragging his long white fingers through his hair, and regretting that as they got caught halfway, as he realised that he hadn't actually got around to discussing a work schedule with her, and wasn't awfully sure just what it was he had hired an apprentice for in the first place. It was about then that he noticed that the blue and gold box had accompanied her once again.

'I could take the box along to the lab... if that's all right with you,' she said. 'I don't like to leave it for too long.'

'More Niffers?' he asked suspiciously, sensing something in the box, which whilst not quite alive, wasn't quite inert either.

'Snack eggs,' she replied, as though she knew that he really knew. 'Shall I be teaching Potions this morning, Severus?' she asked quickly, changing a subject she wasn't quite ready to broach.

'Take the box along to the lab, Miss Lovegood. I shall be along shortly,' he replied, instead of making a comment along the lines of removing blue and gold boxes of imaginary species from his rooms, and never bringing them back. A myriad of possibilities were rolling themselves out in front of Severus, all centring around his at last being able to stay rent free at Hogwarts and continue his research into matters so profound that they hadn't thus far revealed themselves to even him, yet never again having to engage in the thankless task of teaching Potions. 'And kindly remove that too,' he added, nodding to where she had laid the "Quibbler" on his table, right on the place reserved for the "Daily Prophet". He did notice the headline though, one that caused his lip to twist with more amusement than contempt of the subject matter.

"Should Arabella Figg get the Order of Merlin?"

'She slugged Lucius Malfoy across the back of the head with a string bag full of cat food, and knocked him out cold,' Luna replied to the unasked question, as Severus dragged his eyes back to her.

'In that case they should make the Order first class,' he murmured, 'considering she got a better result than the assembled masses of the Order of the Phoenix ever managed.'

Luna lifted the box and tucked it under her arm, before lifting the "Quibbler" and tucking it between her teeth, much the way a spaniel would do, and opened the door with her free hand, as Severus stifled a smile which had almost crept unbidden onto his harsh features.

'They both left his rooms this morning for breakfast,' Hagrid said at the mid morning break, clearly inviting speculation. 'Argus said they was both in his rooms.'

'Really?' Flitwick replied, from behind his newspaper, as though trying to appear disinterested. 'And what else did Argus say?'

'Wants to mind his own business, if you ask me,' Binns interjected. 'Maybe the girl just went down to his rooms to get something. Nice girl,' he said with a sigh. 'She used to watch me coming through the walls.'

'You don't think...?' Dean trailed off as the rest of the men looked enquiringly at him, as if it were one thing to make unspoken hypotheses, but to voice them was quite another. 'No... no, of course not.'

Lupin dropped his newspaper at last. 'I think our Luna has a lot more sense than any of you give her credit for,' he said, seeming to pick his words carefully, as the door opened, and Snape stepped into the staffroom.

'I hear we're having a Yule Ball this year, Severus,' Flitwick said by way of greeting, as though that was what they had been discussing.

'Fancy dress too, I 'eard,' Hagrid added.

Severus looked at him, wondering what in all creation, apart from perhaps a whale or a troll, the giant could possibly dress up as, and reminding himself that the

formulating of excuses for his own absence at the event had to begin immediately.

'Quite tied himself up in knots yesterday, he did,' Minerva said to Aurora. 'One moment he was refusing to have anything to do with the Ball, and the next he was defending *call-me-Luna* when Albus reminded her that one of her weird imaginary creatures didn't exist.'

'Bless her, with her Glimpies and Crumple-horn thingies,' Pomona said, her pipe puffing a rather sickly-sweet pink cloud that smelled of overblown roses. 'She'll do well for Severus, I think.'

Septima sighed, as though she had thought that *she* would have done every bit as well, and on a first come, first served basis, it might be wise for her to make a move. 'Perhaps I shall ask him to accompany *me* to the Ball,' she said, as though throwing the idea open for approval.

'Perhaps not, dear,' Minerva said in a hurry. 'Do remember what happened last time you invited him to accompany you somewhere.'

'He didn't turn up, did he?' Sybill said, her voice laced with what might have been dread, and waving her arm so dramatically that she almost knocked Pomona's pipe out of her mouth. 'I see the same fate, if you ask again. Perhaps I should ask him myself.'

Minerva and Aurora exchanged long looks, as though perhaps cancelling the Ball would be a safer option than allowing another disastrous race for the arm of a man who had no interest at all in any of the occupants of the staffroom.

'Oh, I shouldn't waste your time, ladies,' Poppy said, from where she sat beside Irma. 'I was just collecting stores for the infirmary from Severus early this morning, well before eight. I was quite surprised to find him not only wide awake and dressed, but in what I could only describe as good humour. It gave me quite a turn not to have my stores thrown at me as they normally are. Miss Lovegood was there,' she added, as though pretending that mattered not a whit, but was the actual reason why she had seen fit to offer an opinion in the first place. 'I wonder why she was there so early in the morning.'

"*So do I*," Minerva thought to herself. What was the man thinking of? If Poppy had seen them together at that time in the morning, a student could just as easily have seen them leaving his rooms. Staff gossip about inappropriate goings on, imaginary or otherwise, was one thing, the students would be quite another. She glanced across to the door as it was thrown open.

'I would never have guessed that teaching Potions could be so much fun,' Luna said brightly, looking down at a purple stain that seemed to be eating its way through her yellow dress.

'Did you say "teaching Potions", dear?' Minerva asked, the smile on her thin lips feeling more like a rictus of horror.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 12

Luna's teaching methods give rise to some problems.

Chapter Six

'It was one thing for her potion to eat her dress, Severus,' Minerva said, shuddering at the thought of what the female staff had witnessed having taken place in any other part of the castle, 'but quite another for it to have eaten the Potions classroom.'

'Did you never have a Potions accident when you were at school, Minerva?' Snape countered, horribly aware that his argument was feeble at best.

'Not of that magnitude,' McGonagall retorted. 'And may I remind you that whilst Miss Lovegood is indeed *at school*, she is no longer a student?'

'Even I can't remember anything quite so spectacular,' Dumbledore added.

'Don't be ridiculous, you meddling old fool,' Severus snorted. 'When I was at school, Sirius Black blew up greenhouse four. If I recall correctly, which I most certainly do, the hole was almost as deep as the lake, and it took four days to find all of the students, most of whom landed in Wales.'

'That was a Herbology accident, Severus,' Dumbledore replied, as though he were making some point or other.

'Shut up, you,' Severus hissed, refusing to go any further down that path. It was bad enough that he had had to come up here to be reprimanded for something quite outwith his control, albeit something that should have been firmly within that very control, without Dumbledore's interference in matters.

'What on earth gave you the idea that a girl with no training whatsoever could be put in charge of fourth years?' Minerva asked, giving Dumbledore a hard look as she took the business back into her own hands. 'Fourth year Slytherins at that,' she added, rather more pointedly than Snape thought was necessary.

'I would have thought that, as the headmistress of an institute of learning, you would be the first to recognise that everyone has to learn,' Severus replied.

'Not at the cost of the very institute of learning you have mentioned,' Minerva retorted. 'We have only just rebuilt this castle, Severus,' she said, drawing herself up, and quite clearly enjoying her superiority in the matter. 'I shall not permit you to allow it to be reduced to a pile of rubble again.'

'Hardly a pile of rubble,' Severus snapped, wanting to be done with the business now. 'One small wall has been damaged.'

'Her potion ate the very stones, Severus,' Minerva replied. 'Just what was it anyway?'

'Perhaps if you would allow me to investigate matters fully, instead of sitting here reminiscing over the recent past, I would be able to tell you.' Severus began to stand, hoping to edge himself out of the room.

'Not so fast, Severus,' Minerva snapped. 'No more unsupervised teaching, not until I have had a chance to assess Miss Lovegood's abilities.'

'What makes you think it was her fault?' Snape replied, wondering if he should have exited without a parting shot, and mulling over the fact that he would just have to put up with sitting behind his desk whilst Luna taught his classes; it wasn't just as appealing as staying in his rooms, reading and drinking whisky and doing nothing much else at all, but considerably better than actually teaching.

'I am not blaming Miss Lovegood, Severus,' the headmistress replied, giving him a victory smile that Snape didn't much like the look of. 'I'm blaming you.'

'I wonder if I might ask why you saw fit to mix potassium permanganate with bat's blood and...?' Severus trailed off, looking down at the hasty scrawl he had made as Luna had evacuated the pupils from the first class after lunch, and Filch and the Magical Reversal Squad swung into somewhat belated action to save what they could of the Potions classroom. 'Why did you add mare's milk?'

'It is a well known aid to the digestion, Severus,' Luna replied. 'In fact I'm thinking of adding it to all of the potions now.'

'No, no, no,' he said, trying to backtrack, and not bothering to point out that only the really foolhardy would see fit to ingest an unguent for spreading on dragon burns. 'Let us return to basics, Miss Lovegood. In Potions we do not mix inorganic matter with organic matter... never... not ever.'

'Mare's milk is organic,' she said.

'Potassium permanganate, however, is not,' Snape replied. 'You are a witch, Miss Lovegood. Might I enquire what such a substance was doing in a potion at all?'

'Oh,' she said. 'Perhaps that's where it all went wrong. I find potions often taste and look horrible, so I added it to turn it from a ghastly milky red to a lovely purple colour,' she added. 'And it worked. I was really pleased about that... my first experiment, and it worked.'

'Miss Lovegood, it is irrelevant if a potion is aesthetically pleasing, as long as it produces results... turning it purple doesn't count towards the efficacy,' he replied. 'No more experiments, if you please.'

'Even if I reduce the amount?' she asked. 'It wasn't too bad when I did it earlier in the day with the first years with Boil Paste.'

'It ate your dress, Miss Lovegood.'

'Yes, but it ate the boils too. Will I still be allowed to teach?' Luna asked, steering away from the disaster. 'I did so enjoy it.'

'Only if I am in the classroom.'

'Oh, I'm sure I won't mind that. You never know, you might pick up a few tips,' she replied in a way that made Severus quite sure that her remark was totally devoid of irony, and all the more frightening for that. 'But don't go stealing any of my ideas.'

Severus was sitting with his feet up on his desk, sipping at his usual after dinner glass of Glenfiddich, the one that more often than not preceded another three or five or so, until the last one was frequently a pre-breakfast one. He felt rather more pleased than intruded upon when the door was pushed open by someone who deemed knocking to be unnecessary.

'What can I do for you tonight, Miss Lovegood?' he asked, waving her and her blue and gold box into a seat. 'More un-hatched eggs?' he asked, nodding across to where a similar box sat on his workbench, one that to anyone without the most vivid of imaginations was quite clearly empty of all but some pink straw.

'No, of course not,' she replied, handing him a glass of clear tea, as he found that his whisky glass was empty, and yet he knew he had at least two fingers left. 'It's advance copies of tomorrow's "Quibbler". Dad owed them over so everyone on the staff of Hogwarts can have one on a Monday night, and not have to wait until a Tuesday morning.'

'How thoughtful,' Severus replied, pushing the tea aside, and pouring another few fingers of whisky, which he downed in one go in case they too disappeared, failing to notice that they tasted suspiciously like cold tea, until he found Luna watching him carefully. 'Miss Lovegood,' he said, 'I have turned a blind eye to your destroying my classroom, to having blue and gold boxes littering my living quarters, and even to you...not me though... arranging whatever nonsense you wish to for Minerva's upcoming Yule Ball.'

'You're drawing a line at the whisky, aren't you?' she asked. 'I thought you might.'

'I am,' he said, rather enjoying the way her eyes sparkled when she knew she had been bested, as though her next efforts would be better, or worse, as the case was more likely to be. 'Now, what can I do for you tonight?' he repeated.

'Oh, yes,' she replied, as if just remembering why she had called. 'I was wondering if I would be permitted to leave an hour early next Friday, straight after the last class. A week this Friday coming.'

Severus shrugged; there was no good reason why she should have to hang about after classes, yet he found he had to stifle a little twist of disappointment that she might have a life beyond her two and a half day tenure as his apprentice.

'I was going to meet up with some old friends from school,' she added when he failed to reply. 'And I was going to ask if you would watch the Snorkack eggs while I'm away, in case I'm late...' She trailed off, biting her lip in a way that he found quite endearing, and he had to push away the speculation as to what her lip, indeed both of her lips, would taste like.

'Yes, of course, Miss Lovegood, that will be fine,' he said, stifling the urge to tell her that the damned Gryffindors he assumed she meant by "friends" were unworthy of her.

'Thank you,' she said, standing from the table, as Severus tried in vain to think up some sort of reason to prolong her company. She was glancing across the room to where a large empty beaker sat next to a bubbling cauldron. 'If that's Lupin's Wolfsbane, would you like me to hand it in to him on my way upstairs? I pass the staffroom anyway.'

'Indeed,' he said. 'In fact you may drop it into him every night this week, Miss Lovegood. Let us call it your quid for my pro quo.' He sat back, watching her measure the thick gluey mess into the beaker, satisfied that he had arranged for a little of her company after dinner each evening for the next week, and had only had to forfeit the dubious pleasure of the werewolf's in exchange.

'Oh, I almost forgot,' she said, turning in the door as she was leaving, and holding out a magazine. 'Your "Quibbler".'

'And I almost forgot too,' he replied. 'Do not add anything... organic or inorganic ... to that Wolfsbane, Miss Lovegood.'

'Not even mare's milk?' she asked.

'I heard they were searching for survivors at one point,' Hagrid said. 'Place were filled with poisonous fumes and rubble.'

'I'd like to know where Snape was at the time,' Dean remarked, wondering if it had been appropriate to do so.

'Over a cauldron, perfecting love potions maybe?' Flitwick offered in a rare moment of frivolity.

'He were called to Minerva,' Hagrid said darkly.

'I'm sure he managed to talk himself out of things. It's a pity about that wall though,' Binns murmured. 'She used to watch me through it.'

'Oh, well,' Dean said brightly, 'from what I heard the hole is big enough for the whole school to watch you through now.'

Lupin sat behind his "Evening Prophet", wondering what Binns had been in the dungeon for in the first place for Luna to watch him through the wall, and then decided it wasn't worth the effort of asking. He hauled himself to his feet, just remembering he should be heading to the very dungeons himself for his Wolfsbane, when the door was flung open.

'Sorry to intrude,' Luna said brightly, 'but I've got a present for everyone.' She walked around the room, handing everyone a copy of the "Quibbler", stopping at last at Lupin. 'Severus said to give you this, Remus,' she said, handing the werewolf a brown paper bag.

'Thanks,' Lupin said, winking at her and holding the door open. 'I'll walk you up to your room.'

'I'm going to pop into the ladies' staffroom first,' Luna replied, 'but you can wait for me.'

Flitwick watched the door close, a frown creasing his forehead, before dropping his head to the magazine in his hand, quite forgetting it was the "Quibbler". 'Oh, Merlin's tits,' he gasped, in a way that was so unlike him that the rest of the male staff members stared at him.

'Oh dear,' Binns remarked. 'One should be very careful of what one says to the press.'

'Blimey,' Dean said, letting out a guffaw of laughter, as Hagrid struggled with the first sentence of the article the rest of them had just read.

'Quite defensive, he was,' Minerva remarked, setting her teacup down. 'Can you imagine if anyone else had done such a thing?'

'I recall he made poor Neville Longbottom late for Herbology once, by making him scrub one tiny stain from a potion he had allowed to overflow,' Pomona remarked, her pipe puffing an angry red that smelled of cranberries. 'As though his mouldy old stone had ever been clean in the first place.'

'Yes, he was always angry for no apparent reason,' Aurora said. 'Quite the most difficult man I have ever encountered.'

'I like angry men,' Septima said. 'There's something incredibly... incredible about anger.'

'Anger is passion,' Sybill agreed. 'I have seen that in his stars, a passionate man requiring a strong and passionate woman.'

'Like yourself, Sybill dear?' Aurora asked dryly, with a sidelong smile at Minerva.

'I'm sure I saw him smile at dinner,' Poppy said. 'I don't think he's terribly angry at all today.'

'Smile? Severus?' Minerva asked. 'Nonsense! He has a delicate stomach. Perhaps the sorbet was too acidic,' she added, sharing a smile of her own with Aurora, and trying to head off the inevitable points scoring of the two witches least likely to curry favour with Snape. She glanced across to the door as it swung open.

'Good evening, ladies,' Luna said, shoving the door shut with her bottom. 'Dad has sent you all a little gift. He's going to do so every week, so that you can all be first to read what's going on,' she said, handing each of the women a copy of the "Quibbler".

Severus poured another glass of the Glenfiddich, lit a cigarette now that he was unlikely to have any more visitors, and hoisted his long legs onto his table. He reached across the table for the copy of "Which Potions" monthly, only to find it was the damned "Quibbler". He was rather comfortable though, and he couldn't be bothered to move. He unfolded it and gazed at the front page, hoping he was drunk, as the whisky seemed to rise in his throat.

"Our campaign to have the Squibs of the world recognised gained substantial weight today by Hogwarts Potions Master and erstwhile war hero-cum-Death Eater, Professor Severus Snape, suggesting that Arabella Figg should indeed be recognised for laying out Lucius Malfoy, by not only an Order of Merlin, but a first class one. Professor Snape also hinted that, except for himself, there hadn't been a member of the once famous Order of the Phoenix capable of landing a decent hex."

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 12

Severus faces the consequences of his indiscretion.

Chapter Seven

Severus laid the "Quibbler" back down on the table, quite at a loss as to how to extricate himself from the fallout of what was undeniably a version of his own remarks. Attack, he had found often in the past, was the best form of defence, whilst failing to admit to himself that that was mainly because that particular option did not ever require him to back down.

He downed the whisky, stubbed out his cigarette and stood up, formulating different parries and ripostes as he straightened his shoulders and swept out of his rooms, quite prepared to come across anyone but the one man who was striding along the dungeon corridor with what looked ominously like a vengeance for company.

'What in the name of all that is sacred are you doing here at this time of night?' Severus asked.

'I would have thought that quite obvious, judging from the number of copies of this offensive rag that have been thrust under my nose in the few moments it took me to cross

the hallway,' Lucius replied, coming to a halt under a wall sconce, as though to show off the effects of the camomile Severus knew he put in his shampoo, and shoving a copy of "Quibbler" towards him.

'No thanks are required, Lucius,' Snape replied dryly, clutching at an idea, a bad one, but an idea for all that. 'I merely sought to add my weight to the fact that not even the Order of the Phoenix was able to better you,' he added, hoping that Malfoy would not miss the derision for which he was famed, and with which he had so liberally laced his remarks.

'But a bag of cat food could?' Lucius challenged, his nostrils flared in anger, in a way that made Snape realise that he would have to do slightly better, and perhaps it had not been a good idea to poke Malfoy with a stick, after all.

'Not my words, Lucius,' he replied. 'I only made an observation on what had already been reported.'

'To a reporter,' Lucius snapped back.

'Not a reporter in fact,' Snape replied, realising just too late what he had said. He hadn't meant to drag Luna into this; in fact Severus had quite failed to take cognisance of the fact that it was Luna who had dropped him into the particular mire he was in in the first place.

'Whatever,' Lucius growled, seeming either to have missed what was said, or to have moved on, as though suspecting a sideways manoeuvre on Snape's part, as was so often the case. 'Do you not think I have had enough of that horrible rag to last me a lifetime?' he asked, his voice turning to the rather unpleasantly plaintive whine Malfoy adopted when he thought he had been wronged. 'They have it in for me, Severus, I'm telling you.'

'I wonder why that would be?' Snape replied blandly, not bothering to point out that imprisonment of the editor's daughter in Malfoy Manor might have swayed Arabella Figg's cause somewhat. 'Anyway, what are you doing here?' he asked, repeating his opening gambit.

'To tell you that I look forward to reading a full retraction and apology in next week's "Quibbler",' Malfoy replied. 'I may look forward to that, Severus, may I not?'

'If it keeps you happy to do so,' Snape said smoothly. 'What were you reading the "Quibbler" for anyway?' he asked, feeling more on top of the matter for a few short moments, until he heard footsteps which sounded worryingly as though they were skipping along the corridor.

'Oh, hello, Lucius,' Luna called brightly along the gloomy stone passage, as Severus groaned inwardly. 'How is your head? Four tins of cat food must have been quite sore. I know that, because a cat jumped on my head once, and it had only eaten half a tin.'

'What on earth is going on, Severus?' Lucius demanded, spinning to Snape, clearly without an idea as to how to respond to Luna. 'What is Miss Lovegood doing here, if I may ask? And...?' He trailed off as Luna grasped his arm.

'Oh, good, I see you've got your own copy,' Luna said, nodding to where Malfoy was still clutching the magazine. 'But do please call me Luna. I wonder, Lucius, as you're here anyway, if I could ask if you would support the "Quibblers" next expedition to the Andes to search for Crease-Toed Bloopers?' she said. 'In view of the fact that you've had so much free front page publicity lately,' she added quickly, as Malfoy's open mouth snapped shut, quite bereft, as its owner was, of a suitable reply.

Severus smiled to himself. That was Lucius dealt with; now all he had to do was face the slightly maligned Order of the Phoenix.

'I heard Snape's got two black eyes, and four of his teeth are missing,' Hagrid muttered.

'He's always had two black eyes,' Binns remarked. 'As to his teeth, I really couldn't comment.'

'I mean Malfoy decked him,' Hagrid said.

'Not the way I heard it,' Dean said. 'I heard that Malfoy got the worst of it. Apparently Severus pulled half his hair out by the roots.'

'Sounds more like a bitch fight to me, if that's the case,' Lupin drawled from behind his newspaper, perfectly well aware of what had actually taken place, having had the story first hand from Luna.

'I really couldn't comment on that either, Remus,' Binns remarked, and the rest of them all turned to him, unsure if he had deliberately made a little joke or not; it was hard to tell though, as his face was the same bland mask it always was.

'Stuff and nonsense. A wizard like Snape wouldn't resort to fisticuffs,' Flitwick scoffed. 'He's more likely to land a few hexes on Lucius, or vice versa.'

'Seeing the rest of the Order of Phoenix couldn't manage?' Lupin asked in a rather more challenging way than was customary for him.

The room fell silent but for rustling newspapers, the rest of the men not seeing fit to comment one way or another, as the door swung open and Snape walked in, with his full complement of teeth, and only the pupils and irises of his eyes black.

'Ah Severus,' Flitwick said, 'we were just talking about you.'

'Really?' Snape replied, with as little interest in anyone else's opinions as ever. He let his eyes sweep the men, stopping no longer at Lupin than he did at anyone else, as the werewolf and former member the Order of the Phoenix gave him a hard look, one that left Severus as moved as being attacked by an indignant mushroom.

'I see Lucius left in rather a hurry,' Pomona said.

'I wonder what tied his hair in knots,' Aurora replied, 'apart from Severus's little remarks in *call-me-Luna's* magazine.'

'I must remind him to tell Miss ... drat it... Luna... that anything that is said or goes on in Hogwarts is strictly off the record,' Minerva snapped, her lips pinching with annoyance.

'Would that be right after you have a few words with him about his remarks about the Order of Phoenix?' Septima asked.

'Either before or after, dear, I haven't decided which,' Minerva replied. 'I rather thought I would allow him to stew first.'

'Oh, I doubt he'll do that, Minerva,' Aurora said. 'I doubt Severus is the stewing type.'

'He can stew me any day,' Septima said, heaving a sigh. 'Mind you, I wouldn't jump over Lucius Malfoy to get to my teddy bear either, come to think of it.'

Minerva was about to mention something along the lines of Septima not jumping over any man to get to anything else, when the door opened.

'Ah, Luna,' she said instead. 'Would you happen to know where Professor Snape is just now?'

'Oh, yes,' Luna replied.

'And?' Minerva invited.

'He's in his rooms, at least he was a few minutes ago,' Luna said. 'I think he was going to go to the staffroom though.'

'You didn't by any chance see Lucius Malfoy this evening, did you?' Aurora asked. 'I believe he called to see Severus.'

'Oh, yes,' Luna replied. 'It was quite fun.'

'Sit down, Luna dear,' Minerva said. 'It's time we all got to know one another better... now that you're staff.'

'You mean you want me to tell you all about it?' Luna asked.

'Of course, dear.' Aurora smiled. 'A nice cup of tea perhaps?'

'You haven't any whisky have you?' Luna asked. 'Only Severus seems to drink a lot of it, and I suppose I should try to get used to it.'

'Not here, Luna, no,' Minerva said, her eyebrow rising into her hat.

'I've got a few slugs of gin left, if you want,' Poppy said, pulling a hip flask from her robe, as Irma shot her a warning look, and Sybill woke up with a snort, though whether at the mention of gin or not, was anyone's guess.

Severus got up early, just in case. He showered and shaved, and even hexed his long tangled hair into obedience. It was too early for whisky, he thought, with a tinge of regret that even his remarkable constitution would not welcome a Caledonian internal body scrub at seven in the morning.

He sighed and poured some hot water over a sprinkling of dark leaves in his favourite cup, watching the leaves until they unfolded to leave trails of darker water in their wake, like little fronds. He stirred it until the tea darkened even more, and sipped at it. It didn't taste quite the same as hers.

An hour, two cups of tea, and five cigarettes later, he decided he would just have to head to the Hall. At least the seating arrangement seemed to have remained to his satisfaction. He hauled himself to his feet as Luna popped her head around the door.

'Oh, you're up,' she said. 'I didn't want to call too early and catch you in your nightie and bare feet again.'

'How kind of you,' Severus replied.

'I thought I'd bring this back, and we could go for breakfast together,' she said, holding out the empty Wolfsbane beaker.

'I could have got that later in the day,' he said, immediately regretting the remark which might make her think twice about calling the next six mornings.

'And I thought you'd like to know that I think I got you off the hook with Minerva,' she went on, ignoring his remark anyway.

'In what way?' he asked, not at all sure he did want to know.

'Well, she was a bit peeved about what you said about the Order of the Phoenix... by the way, Remus was too, but I've cleared that up as well... I just told him it was a misprint... and that in fact you said that *you* were the only one incapable of throwing a hex.' She stopped for a moment as Snape's jaw dropped in indignation, as though to think about what she'd said, twiddling the apple she had on a piece of string around her neck, before taking a bite out of it, and letting it fall to where it rested in the vee of her Ravenclaw school pullover, the one that hadn't fitted her since fifth year. 'I don't think he believed me though.'

'Can we go back to Minerva?' Severus asked.

'Oh, yes. I told her the story of Lucius Malfoy, all of the ladies in fact,' she said, brimming with frightening enthusiasm. 'They all thought it was quite wonderful. Laughed themselves silly, they did, when I told them that his hair caught fire from the wall sconce as he stormed off when you asked him to fund the "Quibbler's" Andes trip... you know, the one for the Crease-Toed Bloopers?'

'It didn't...' Severus stammered, '...I didn't... and I recall quite clearly that you told me that you didn't lie to your superiors.'

'No. I think if you look back, you'll recall that I said I didn't lie in the matter of the stairs to Minerva's office. I didn't generalise. But they look more kindly on you now, Severus,' Luna explained. 'Especially Minerva. And it was such a good story.'

'Ah yes, speaking of stories, Miss Lovegood,' he said, trying to get back on track, any track, and framing his words in a way he had practised since seven o'clock. 'Perhaps it would be best if remarks made by me to you, and vice versa, were regarded between us as confidential.'

'You're right, you know. Minerva tried to say as much to me,' she agreed. 'I can understand you wouldn't like anyone to know you didn't know the soothing properties of mare's milk.'

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 12

A full moon and a nasty shock.

Chapter Eight

Severus looked up at the full moon, at once disappointed that this was the first night he had not seen Luna since her arrival at Hogwarts, apart from the day she had gone home to collect her belongings, yet on the other hand trying to make excuses to himself that she would have found it difficult just to call for no apparent reason. He sighed; it was another three weeks before Lupin would need Wolfsbane again. He wondered if he had squandered the last week, contenting himself, as he had done, to just

watching her as she took his classes, and only intervening if a disaster had been imminent, or if he felt the urge to terrify a student for the fun of it. He had even tolerated Minerva's occasional appearances in a way he would never have entertained them before; he hadn't even been annoyed that her visits were to check the foundations of the castle were not being further weakened, and that he was in fact supervising the class.

He wondered if he should have made some sort of move, yet he was quite unable to work how he could have done so. At first he had assumed Luna to be a child wrapped up in a woman's body, and it had taken him quite a few of the last days to realise that she, rather like himself, only showed the world what it suited her for them to see, and kept the rest a secret. He had wondered if he had been mistaken in thinking that she had seemed as rewarded by his company as he had been by hers, and now, now it appeared he was. The werewolf hadn't required Wolfsbane tonight, in fact, he had required nothing but the cold moon that shone down on Severus, and it seemed now too that Luna had no more need of Severus's company. He hoped he could think up some excuse to bring her to him for the next couple of evenings, especially in view of the fact that the damned Gryffindor thieves had stolen her for Friday. Just a small visit after dinner would do; he would even content himself that her early morning visits would probably cease... no more empty Wolfsbane beakers. He sighed again; the evenings were going to be long, and the weekends even longer, unless he could think of something.

It was a chilly night, but still, and the moon cast a path as straight as an arrow on the flat glistening top of the black lake. Something tugged at Severus's mind as he turned to go back into the castle, and he stopped for a moment. Ah, that was it, he smiled to himself: her ambitions, her Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, and to dance by the light of the moon. He almost gave out a yelp of surprise as he realised he was no longer standing at the lakeside on his own.

'Oh,' Luna said from deep within a cloak that appeared to have been made from a lawn, with Hagrid in mind. 'Do you like the moon too, Severus?' she asked.

He wasn't quite sure what to say. "No", would be foolish, and "yes", was somehow inane. 'I like to think the moon is there, even if I am not looking at it,' he said, quoting Albert Einstein's words in a moment of welcome inspiration.

'Albert Einstein liked to think that too,' she replied, not surprising him a bit. 'It is there, it always is, even though wolves have howled at it since time immemorial,' she added a touch wistfully, and to Severus's mind, a touch out of character.

'It is cold, Miss Lovegood,' he said, wishing he could wrap his arms around her to ward off the chill. 'You should be inside.'

'I always wonder what it would be like to dance by the light of the moon,' she said, turning towards the castle, yet not moving away, and Severus wondered if her words were some sort of invitation.

Just as he plucked up the courage to move closer to her, the area around them was flooded with the harsh yellow light of a search lantern.

'Who's that?' Argus Filch's voice rasped.

'They was out in the grounds last night,' Hagrid said. 'Filch caught them.'

'Caught them?' Flitwick asked. 'Were they making off with the Squid?'

'Yer know,' Hagrid replied, making his eyebrows wiggle.

'Wasn't it a bit cold to be caught flagrante delicto when both of them have perfectly adequate rooms here?' Binns asked, seeming to take an interest in Luna and Snape that he had never, to anyone's knowledge, taken in anyone else.

'Dunno that they was... yer know,' Hagrid replied.

'Well, what were they then?' Dean asked.

'Oh, give it a bloody rest, will you?' Lupin muttered, quite out of sorts, as he always was the day after the full moon.

'Remus seemed a bit more out of sorts than usual today,' Aurora remarked.

'I said that to Irma too,' Poppy said, nodding to Pince as though for confirmation. 'He was a bit off when I checked him over this morning.'

'I rather like Remus,' Septima said. 'Perhaps I'll ask him to go to the ball.'

'Perhaps you should wait for someone to ask you,' Sybill said. 'The stars have told me to wait, and my reward will come.'

'Not in this life,' Minerva muttered somewhat unkindly under her breath to Aurora, wondering to herself just what was wrong with Lupin. Perhaps she would have a quiet word with him when no one else was around.

'I wonder whether Luna will continue calling on Severus at odd hours ... now there is no Wolfsbane to conveniently excuse her?' Septima said, changing direction slightly.

'Oh, do give it a rest,' Aurora replied. 'Just because two people have a walk under the moonlight doesn't mean anything.'

'What walk under the moonlight?' Septima asked.

'No one told me that,' Sybill said.

'Not even the stars?' Pomona asked, her pipe puffing a rather mischievous orange that smelled of melons.

Severus looked back down as Luna looked up from the nesting box she had been peering into.

'There are three, Severus,' she said with an odd little catch to her voice. 'Would you like to see them?' she asked the top of his head.

He was bent again over a cauldron, pretending to be interested in its contents, in just that way he had of saying, without words, of course, that he was not entertaining conversation at that time.

He was in a mood, and he knew it was because it was Friday, and she was leaving. It was Friday already, Friday afternoon, and he knew she had only followed him along from the last class to check her blue and gold box full of pink straw. Another few minutes and she would be away, and he didn't know how to stop her. He was in thoroughly bad humour about the whole damn business, and had taken it out quite nicely on the Gryffindors fifth years who had come into Potions class expecting an easy ride, and had had a dose of Snape at his most vicious instead.

'Three too many,' he grunted in reply, as he raised his head. 'Really, Miss Lovegood,' he said, folding his arms across his chest, 'this is a Potions laboratory, not a crèche for imaginary Dimple-Crowned Snortbacks.'

'Crumple-Horned Snorkacks.'

'The name does not really matter, Miss Lovegood, as they do not exist,' Snape replied, bending his head over his cauldron again to signify that the interchange was concluded to his satisfaction, with him having had the last word.

'One can prove the existence of a species, Professor Snape,' she replied. 'Proving otherwise, is altogether more difficult.'

Severus raised his head again. 'Do not ever speak to me like that again, Miss Lovegood,' he snapped, realising, as the girl drew back as though he had slapped her, that he had sounded as bitter and twisted as he had always done... before she had become his apprentice. He blamed the damned Gryffindor hour thieves for his sour disposition, as he watched her bite her bottom lip. 'You gave me quite a turn,' he added quickly. 'For a moment I thought you had been replaced by Granger.'

That ought to do, he thought, as he saw her nose wrinkle in mutual dislike, pretending that there weren't mutual other things between them too, like a propensity to think *"bugger everyone else, this is who I am, and if you don't like it, bugger off, because I don't like you either."* that sort of stuff. So why, he wondered darkly, did she have to leave him early to meet such people?

He crossed the room to where she stood looking back into the nesting box. Feigning as much disinterest as he could muster, he glanced quickly into the box. Where he had expected to see nothing save the straw and a space that her altogether odd imagination had filled with some mysterious creatures, he found himself looking at three small, but undeniably real, furry balls. Each one had an uncomfortably crumpled-looking horn, growing from what he assumed was its nose; it was a bit hard to tell though, rolled up as they were, and the horns could have equally been growing from shoulders, or knees, for that matter. There was no getting away from it though: they *were* crumpled.

Snape found himself looking into Luna's blue eyes in what he pretended wasn't shock. 'What are these, Miss Lovegood?' he heard himself ask.

'They seem to be Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, Severus,' she replied, and Snape noticed that he rather liked to hear her say his name, and wondered if that were why he had never corrected her.

'But they don't exist,' he argued.

'I know,' she whispered, and he thought there was something frightened in her voice, and he wasn't sure why that should be.

'What do you mean?' he asked. 'For the last ten years, you have been telling the wizarding world at large, through your ridiculous mouthpiece, that they do exist,' he said, glaring at where the "Quibbler", which he had told her on numerous occasions not to bring back to his rooms, sat on the workbench, before peering into the box again. 'They are there... before our very eyes.'

'I know,' she repeated, biting at her bottom lip again. 'But I only made them up.'

Severus drew back. 'Are you telling me, Miss Lovegood, that you are perfectly well aware that all of the imaginary creatures you try to convince us into believing in...' He trailed off, quite at a loss as to how to express himself. 'Are you saying that you know these figments of your imagination are... figments of your imagination?'

'Of course I do,' she replied. 'I'm not crazy.'

'Let us lay that particular observation to the side, Miss Lovegood, shall we,' Severus murmured. It was about then that he felt something odd creep through him, something that seemed to spread its warm fingers through his chest, but as he had never been quite so amused before, he didn't recognise it for what it was, until the laugh exploded from him without permission.

Luna laughed too, a delightful girlish laugh that belied her twenty-six years as easily as everything else about her did. 'That'll show them,' she said, and he was somewhat relieved that she was not laughing at his unaccustomed mirth, but at the fact that she had created... yes, there was no other word for it, she had created a species of her very own.

'It's a day for firsts,' she said, as he sobered slightly. She took his arm excitedly, in the way that made him wonder if he could lurk at her side in the hope that she might do it again. 'The first Dimple-Crowned Snortbacks...'

'Crumple-Horned Snorkacks,' he corrected her. 'But what is in a name, Miss Lovegood?' He noticed she was still clutching his arm, and rather hoped she hadn't noticed the physical contact, or if she had, that it was a conscious gesture.

'I'm just getting to names, Severus,' she said. 'The first Crumple-Horned Snorkacks ... the first time I've actually seen you laugh,' she went on. 'Although I know you do it inside all the time.'

'Quite, Miss Lovegood,' he replied, arching his eyebrow. 'How are we going to nurture these?' he asked, pretending that he hadn't noticed that he had just assumed joint ownership of the whatever-they-weres.

'These will be easy, Severus. The hard part is done,' she said with frightening faith. 'Now, back to firsts. And names,' she added. 'In fact, first names. We have the first Crumple-Horned Snorkacks... the first time I've seen you really laugh. Do you think there will ever come a time when you can call me Luna?' she asked, without looking at him. 'I promise that it would only embarrass you the first time, Severus. I know you would hate that... But the second time would be easier, and Luna is so much more economical than Miss Lovegood, don't you think?' She looked up at him at last, and Severus was sure that the increased pressure on his arm was deliberate.

'Well,' he said, wondering how not to feel foolish. 'In the interests of economy, Miss Lovegood, and the wear and tear on my larynx, not to mention the obvious offence to your ears, speaking of which, you are wearing potato peelings as earrings, Luna,' he said, hoping she had not noticed the address, as it fell much more effortlessly from his tongue than he had expected; then again, he had voiced it often enough when visiting his castles in the air.

'Oh. These aren't earrings,' she said, squeezing his arm again, and untwisting one of the peelings from where it had got caught in her hair, and holding it over the nesting box. 'They're dinner.'

He watched in fascination as one of the furry balls uncurled, and a tiny horn, indeed in the middle of the Snorkack's snout, reached up and speared the peeling.

Luna clapped her hands like an excited child as the other two balls uncurled, and the little creatures began to snuffle about the potato peeling. She squeezed Severus's arm again, quite painfully this time, but he manfully managed not to wince, as the Snorkacks began to eat.

'I'm sorry I snapped at you earlier,' Severus said somewhat rashly by his own standards, wondering if it were the first time he had uttered such an apology, and enjoying the way her warmth was spreading from his arm, in directions it had no business travelling in.

'Not as sorry as I am that I sounded like Hermione Granger,' she replied, pouting rather prettily in a way that Snape suspected was totally subconscious, as he resisted the urge to ask her why she was meeting with the same Mrs Granger-Weasley, or whatever other pretentious name she had cobbled up for herself. She was still clutching his arm. 'Oh, look,' she said, nodding to the box, 'they're all cuddled up again. Isn't that sweet?'

'Perhaps it would be wise for you not to leave early... Just in case they wake up again,' he suggested carefully, as his mind rolled out all sorts of possibilities for the care and nurture of the creatures he had suddenly become enormously fond of.

'I'm sure they'll sleep for hours,' she replied, letting go of his arm at last, so that it felt cold without hers wound around it. 'They're very small, and they ate the skin of a whole King Edward potato. That's a lot for very young Snorkacks.'

In view of the fact that she had no benchmark with which to measure that particular opinion, he wasn't quite sure of her reasoning, but he let it pass. 'Perhaps you should call in later though, Miss... Luna,' he said. 'I'm not sure I'm familiar enough with Snorkack husbandry to tend to them all weekend on my own.'

'There is no Snorkack husbandry, Severus,' she replied. 'Not until we make it.'

Severus liked the word "we"; it meant that there were two halves to some whole, and he was one of the halves. 'Quite,' he replied. 'I still think it would be wise if you checked back,' he said. 'Shall we say, after dinner... if you're back in time?'

'I'm not sure you should leave them alone, not for a while,' she said, a trace of anxiety creasing her forehead.

'Perhaps not,' he agreed, instead of responding as he would have done to anyone else, along the lines of not being a ruddy Snorkack babysitter. 'I shall dine here.'

'Oh, thank you,' she said, standing on the tiptoes of her odd shoes, and kissing his cheek, in a way that made him gasp, and want to pull her back from where she was already flouncing to the door, and make a decent job of returning the compliment.

Fool, he snapped to himself, she's twenty-six, and you're long past it. He peered into the nesting box, before he remembered that he had been so surly about her meeting her friends that he still hadn't actually asked who they were, only assumed that they would comprise of a handful of the most Gryffindor Gryffindors it had ever been his misfortune to encounter. They had stolen not only an hour from him, but her company at dinner, he snarled to himself, quite put out that they couldn't have met her on a Saturday, or better than that, not at all. At least he knew where she was going, he mused, pretending that he hadn't already decided to follow her, just to make she got there safely; the Snorkacks were asleep anyway.

The Three Broomsticks was busy as Severus slipped in the doorway. He'd fed the Snorkacks again, and left them a small saucer of water in the corner of the nesting box, but they had fallen asleep, and hadn't seemed interested in drinking, or indeed eating much of the potato peel.

He dropped his hood, confident enough of his charms to know that no one would recognise him, easy work for a man who had spied on Voldemort for as long as he had. He didn't see her at first, not looking, as he had been, for a table of noisy Gryffindors. She was there though, but instead of multiple Gryffindors, there was only one, and not even one he expected. Severus felt his stomach clench in what he didn't even recognise as rage, as Remus Lupin reached across the table and put his hand on top of hers.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 12

Severus jumps from one set of conclusions to another.

Chapter Nine

'Ah, Severus, I didn't recognise you for a moment,' Septima said, as Snape dropped the charms he had quite forgotten about, and strode across the hall. 'Could I have a quick word with you?' she called to his back. 'About the Yule Ball.'

'No, you may not, not now, or ever,' he snapped, as he walked on without breaking his stride, anxious only to reach his rooms and his whisky, and caring little what he left in his wake. 'Professor McGonagall is in charge of that, I believe.'

'Oh, I meant on a personal basis,' Septima called in a hopeful anxious tone, as she almost ran to keep abreast of his long strides.

Severus spun. 'Go away, Professor Vector,' he growled. 'I have no interest in Yule Balls, and even less interest in you.'

'I just thought that if you didn't have a partner...' she said, faltering under his stony glare, '... and I haven't picked one either... that perhaps...'

Severus didn't want to deal with this right now; he didn't have the mental energy, and couldn't trust himself not to hex the stupid witch through the main doors. He stalked off, ignoring what had become her stumbled entreaties, and walked straight into damned Peeves.

'In a tiz, Snape?' the poltergeist asked, hovering a few inches above Severus's head as he walked quickly down the dungeon steps, scattering a couple of second year Slytherins who were making their way up to dinner, with a scowl even he rarely bettered.

Severus raised his wand and blasted through Peeves's stomach, leaving a gaping hole as though he had been hit by a cannonball, as the poltergeist swooped off, cackling in delight at having elicited such a delicious response.

'I'll report you to the Baron, Snape,' he called. 'Then I'll tell Moony Loony that you're cruel, and she won't be running along the corridors to see you at odd times of the night.'

Severus slammed his door shut, trying not to notice the blue and gold box that sat on his workbench, and sat down heavily at his table, quite unsure of what to do. The last thing he wanted to do, of course, was what came to him first.

It all fitted so well now, he thought, pouring his first glass, the one to prepare his senses for the assault to come, the one he knew would not be put off. It all fitted perfectly: her interest in taking Lupin his Wolfsbane; her wistful little remarks as he, Severus, the man so clever he had duped himself, had listened to her under the full moon; even her damn name: Luna... lunar... of the moon. It would never fall from his lips again, he thought bitterly. He shook his head at his folly. He had even talked himself into believing she had come outside to be with him, allowed that misplaced hope to flare in his heart, when all she had been doing was communicating with the damned moon, and thinking about another man who could not be at her side, who could never dance with her in the light of the moon. Severus nursed it all along nicely, until he was a maudlin drunken self-pitying mess.

It wasn't nearly as long as it felt until someone knocked at his door, and for a moment the hope flared again, only to be doused as he remembered she had never knocked.

'Go away, I'm busy,' he snarled at the door, far too drunk to open it to a student, and not caring to open it to anyone else either, not anyone likely to be behind it.

'Severus, I need to speak to you about the Yule Ball,' Minerva said as she pushed the door open. 'Oh,' she said pointedly, her eyebrow rising under her hat as she took quick stock of him, 'perhaps another time... when you're sober.'

'I thought I had made it clear that I was not interested in Yule Balls,' he said. 'Not drunk, sober, or any state between the two.'

'And I thought I made it clear that your interest was not required, just your input,' she replied, quite able to deal with Snape in whatever mood he happened to be in, having seen them all. She turned to leave, peering into the blue and gold box as she did so. 'What are these, Severus?' she asked. 'I don't recognise them.'

'I really could not say,' he replied. 'They are Miss Lovegood's, and before you ask, I am not interested in them either.'

'I shall ask her then,' Minerva said tartly, not at all put out by Snape's remark. 'By the way, Miss... Luna seems to think that she has to learn your enviable drinking habits, as well as anything else you might have to teach her. I do hope she is not lying around drunk somewhere too.'

'I really would not know that either. Why don't you ask Lupin?' Severus snapped. 'Goodnight, Minerva.'

Minerva gave him a long look, peered into the box again with a puzzled frown, and left the room without replying.

He had just reached for another bottle, had its neck in one hand and a glass in the other, when his door was shoved open, leaving him feeling like a schoolboy with his hand caught in the biscuit tin, rather than the composed disinterested façade of a man he had intended to present to her.

Luna hadn't seemed to notice though, and went straight to her blue and gold box and peered over the edge, as he watched her and tried to see signs of whether she were dishevelled in any way, or if the lips he had so admired had been kissed by another man, or if she were wearing the same clothes that she had worn earlier, but he couldn't remember what they had been. She looked up before he realised he was staring at her.

'Remove the box, Miss Lovegood. I find I am no longer entertained by the fact that you have charmed small rodents to appear like the creatures you pretend to imagine exist,' he said, quite off balance, yet pleased to hear himself sound like the old Severus Snape, the pre-Luna one, the one he hadn't much liked.

'I have not charmed anything,' she said, drawing back a little unsurely. 'You know that, Severus.'

'Please, Miss Lovegood, it is no longer amusing; now it's just boring. Really, how naive do you think people are?' he asked, pretending to feel gratified by her shocked look. 'In fact, the ambitions on your original curriculum vitae were about right. Suitably unattainable. You see, you haven't conned anybody,' he said, glad he was more than a bit drunk; drink always honed the edge of his tongue to a perfection few could withstand without wilting, and yet it didn't seem to matter much if he failed to make any real sense. 'You'll never con anyone into believing those are anything but a sack of rats,' he said, nodding to where she had moved to stand defensively in front of the Snorkacks. 'And you'll never dance by the light of the moon either... not the full moon anyway. How does that feel, I wonder?'

'It's a lot better than what some poor souls have to put up with at full moon,' she said, confirming the worst to him, biting her lip, and lifting her blue and gold box. 'Goodnight, Professor Snape.'

Severus watched the door close. He was almost shaking in a horrible mixture of rage and remorse. He waited for a long few moments, trying to compose himself before finally whispering, 'Goodnight, Luna,' wondering if revenge were supposed to be sweet, why its aftertaste was so bitter.

'Nearly killed Peeves, he did,' Hagrid said. 'He were in four pieces before the Baron put him back together again.'

'Peeves has been dead for longer than I have,' Binns remarked.

'Yeah well,' Hagrid muttered. 'He blasted him good and proper.'

'About time. That damn poltergeist is a bloody pest,' Dean said, watching Binns carefully to check that he hadn't broken some unspoken code that the dead were not to be maligned.

'He didn't go for dinner, come to think about it,' Flitwick observed, turning to where Lupin was hiding behind his newspaper as he usually did, the only evidence that he was actually there being the steady column of cigarette smoke. 'You weren't there either, Remus. Menu not to your liking?'

'I went to meet some friends,' Lupin drawled, hoping to end his participation in the conversation.

'Snape went out too,' Dean said. 'I saw him leaving as I was going into the library.'

Lupin sighed and stood up, wondering why he ever went to the staffroom at all.

'I've changed my mind about taking Severus to the Yule Ball. I think he's too old for me,' Septima said lightly.

'He's a good five or six years younger than Lucius,' Pomona replied, puffing out yellow smoke that looked slightly sulphurous, but smelled of custard. 'And you said you wouldn't jump over Lucius to get to your teddy bear.'

'Yes, I heard you say that too,' Sybill remarked.

'I have changed my mind,' Septima replied. 'You may have him, Sybill.'

Trelawney narrowed her eyes behind her spectacles, peering at Septima in suspicion. 'I'm not sure what the stars will say about that,' she said, looking towards the window to where all that could be seen was rain.

'I'm pretty sure what Severus would say though,' Minerva muttered sotto voce to Aurora.

'I don't think he'd be much interested in either of you. Isn't that right, Irma dear?' Poppy said, nodding to Pince as she always did to confirm her remarks. 'We think he'd be interested in a much younger model than either of you... and if I'm not mistaken he's a good deal younger than either of you two anyway. He can't be more than about forty-three or four.'

'Forty-five at least,' Septima snapped, running along a path she hadn't intended, widening her eyes and sucking in her cheeks as though that would make her look younger, and not just as if she were startled to find she was sucking a lemon.

'Perhaps he told you he prefers someone younger?' Pomona suggested, the yellow smoke turning more citrusy in smell and colour.

'Miaow,' Minerva said to Aurora, without bothering to change form to do so, as the door swung open. The headmistress took one look at Luna, and stood quickly, ushering the young woman back out of the door. She didn't care for the other women, except perhaps Aurora, to recognise what she had seen below Luna's scant charms, that the girl had been crying. She was about to turn to Luna when she caught sight of the werewolf slouching along the corridor, with his ubiquitous cigarette dangling from his lips.

'Professor Lupin,' she called, stifling the urge to tell him yet again not to smoke in the corridors or classrooms. 'I wonder if I might have a word with you?'

She didn't call before breakfast the next day, and Severus didn't bother going to the Hall. There were no classes, and for that tiny mercy of it being Saturday, he was grateful. No one would notice his absence; it was not unusual for him to confine himself to his rooms at the weekends, and he had often found that having an elf bring him a tray was a small price to pay for forgoing the dubious pleasure of the rest of the school, particularly when he didn't really need to endure it. Now, it just seemed empty, much like the fireplace and the whisky bottles, and Severus himself.

He avoided looking in the mirror as he shaved, still managing not to cut off his nose, and he was just about to make for Hogsmeade for vital supplies of the cigarettes and whisky he had dosed himself with the night before, when the door swung open, without a knock, and something flooded through him that he didn't recognise.

'Oh good,' she said. 'I was hoping you would be sober.'

'Miss Lovegood, what are you doing here?' he asked, quite unable to think of anything more suitable to say.

'I was going to ask you to watch the Snorkacks, Severus. You weren't going to drink all day today again, were you?' she replied, looking around the room, as he basked in the way she used his name, until he reminded himself just why he had been so drunk anyway. 'Only I'm not sure that the Snorkacks should be witnessing such goings on,' she went on.

'In that case, perhaps you should try Professor Lupin,' he suggested with a liberal dose of acid to his tone.

'Oh, no. I was going to Hogsmeade with Remus to meet some friends again.'

'Really,' he replied. 'So I shall just stay here and baby-sit; is that the idea? While you and your boyfriend spend the afternoon...'

'... Boyfriend?' she repeated. 'Don't be silly, Severus. Lupin isn't my boyfriend. He's old enough to be my father.'

Severus wasn't quite sure where that left him, being, as he was, the same age as the werewolf, but some instinct of self-preservation kicked in, and he found himself agreeing, mainly because he knew if she left her box, she would need to come back for it, and maybe he had misunderstood what he'd seen, and it was only reasonable to give her the benefit of the doubt, although he had never given such a thing to anyone else since the first day he had drawn breath. And then he remembered how it had been her own admission that she didn't always tell the truth, and it all fell apart again.

'Then when I come back, we need to talk about what we're wearing to the Yule Ball, Severus,' she went on. 'Minerva seems to be getting a bit touchy about it.'

'I am not going to any Yule Ball,' he replied, still riding the rollercoaster of his doubts and emotions.

He watched her turn to leave, with her school skirt on over a pair of odd-looking trousers that he thought might have belonged to her father; and her necklace made of a few bent teaspoons, ones that made him wonder if she had dug up the Nifflers; and her hair tied up in a strange ponytail at the front of her head, so that it had the opposite effect of what it supposed to have, and she had to brush it off her face; and her odd shoes, one white, one yellow, but both on the correct feet, and Severus knew in his heart that nothing about it was contrived, and it had just been what had been at hand.

'Miss Lovegood, why didn't you call before breakfast?' he asked before he realised he was about to do so.

'Oh, I didn't want to trouble you,' she said, looking surprised as she paused in the doorway. 'Snorkacks can be hard to deal with if you have a hangover. By the way, your tea's getting cold,' she added, nodding to where a cup of clear dark tea sat steaming invitingly back at him.

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 12

Severus does a bit more eavesdropping.

Chapter Ten

Snape watched Lupin accompany Luna to a seat at the same table they had sat at the night before. This time, however, a young woman with a shock of red hair stood to greet her. It was Ginerva Weasley, the last, and to Severus's way of thinking, admittedly the best of the string of Molly and Arthur's offspring to offer him their impertinences, and to feel the benediction of his scathing criticism in return for their efforts. No sooner had one lot disappeared, than another lot appeared on the horizon, Snape thought sourly, having been informed that Bill Weasley's son was coming to Hogwarts in a couple of years, and not caring to wonder the mathematics of just how many redheads Molly's seven would produce between them; they'd need a ruddy annexe to the castle for themselves.

Severus sat at the empty table next to the one Lupin had left Luna at, and it wasn't long before it became apparent that he wasn't returning immediately. The girls began chatting, firstly about families, before turning to more confidential matters. Severus didn't think twice about eavesdropping; he had heard so many derogatory things said about him to his face, that he didn't worry much about how people could improve on their endeavours behind his back. He had almost switched off, flicking idly through the book he had brought with him, when his interest piqued.

'Are you expecting again, Ginny?' Luna asked, and Severus supposed her speculation led him again to the answer to why the Gryffindors always outnumbered the Slytherins. 'Only I thought you had decided that one was enough... especially if you're not going to be around for long enough for Harry to assume joint parenthood.'

'I had,' Ginny replied. 'Harry decided otherwise, so I shall let him believe what he wants to believe... for the time being.'

'Ah well,' Luna replied. 'Two is an even number.'

'There is no baby, Luna, not one that belongs to Harry-I-saved-the-world-and-allowed-you-to-be-my-wife-Potter. And what about you?' Ginny asked, in a way that made Snape think she wanted to change the subject quickly away from her husband, just when he had developed a keen interest for the first time in his life.

'Oh, no, you silly thing. Severus and I have got quite enough with the three babies we have for now,' Luna replied, as Ginny stared at her, and Severus split the tea that Rosmerta had just put in front of him.

'Any progress in your master plan, I mean?' Ginny went on, seeming to dismiss Luna's remark, whilst Snape felt rather anxious that she returned to it, so that any misunderstanding could be cleared up.

'I just don't know,' Luna replied, as Snape moved his seat as close as he dared. 'Sometimes I think it's all going well, and other times I wonder if I should ever have let Remus talk me into coming.'

'Where is he anyway?'

'Who?' Luna asked. 'Remus?'

'No, silly. I always know where he is,' Ginny replied with a little smile. 'Where's Snape?'

'Babysitting the Snorkacks,' Luna replied, as Snape held his breath, and Ginerva Weasley rolled her eyes in what he thought was tolerant amusement.

'Subject change time, Luna. Here come the others,' Ginny said, glancing across to a noisy party, who had just come in the door, and had stopped to allow some sycophants to fawn over them. 'Talk about Christmas shopping, or something.'

'Oh, I'm thinking of giving everyone a Niffler,' Luna replied. 'That way they can have all the shiny things they admire on other people, and it wouldn't really be stealing when they just acquire them.'

'Severus too?' Ginny asked, in a way that made Snape realise that she was happy to listen to Luna's odd reasoning, without wasting her time with criticism.

'Of course not,' Luna replied. 'What would Severus want with something shiny? I wonder, though, if he could smuggle one into Gringotts, and that way he could buy all the books and cigarettes and whisky he wants, without having to pay for it with his own money.'

'I'm not sure the Goblins would care for that,' Ginny replied.

'I wish I hadn't come,' Luna said as the party began to move again. 'I wouldn't have, if Remus hadn't talked me into it last night.'

'It's okay, Luna. None of them know anything about anything,' Ginny replied, reaching her hand over the table to put it on Luna's, the way Lupin had done the night before. 'I know you did it for me and Remus, and we love you for that.' She moved her hand, smiling over to the bunch of Gryffindors Snape had expected to see the night before, as he hugged his charms closer to him.

The Granger-Weasley twosome, Harry Potter, and a rather bored looking Lupin all sat at the table and began to talk at once, so that it was almost impossible for Snape to get the drift of any sensible conversation, and he had to resist the urge to lean over and tell them to speak one at a time. He was so busy straining to listen, that he didn't notice McGonagall and Aurora come into the bar, and scan the room, looking for a table.

'Would you mind if we sat here?' Aurora said, startling Severus, who was in two minds whether he should leave, spill his tea again, or just trust his charms under Minerva's sharp eyes.

He nodded curtly, and stumbled slightly to his feet until the two professors sat, with their back to the table where the Gryffindors sat, in a way that made Severus smile to himself, almost tempted to let Potter and his horrible clan, Luna and Ginerva and maybe even Lupin excepted, of course, know that not only was he listening to their pathetic little conversation, but Minerva quite clearly had the same intention.

'She wants to get out more,' Potter said, addressing himself to Ginny, and dragging Snape's scattered wits back to the table next to the one he sat at. 'You and Hermione should take her out somewhere nice; introduce her to guys her own age.'

'She's here, you know. You don't need to talk about her as though she's not,' Ginny responded with a flare.

'Harry just means that it's not healthy for you to spend all your time cloistered at Hogwarts,' Granger said, poking her nose in, and addressing Luna as though she were a child who was hard of understanding. 'Either down in the dungeons or making up imaginary animals, Luna,' Granger went on so patronisingly that Severus actually felt his wand hand itch, and he had to restrain himself from hexing her into the next week.

'I'm not unhealthy,' Luna objected. 'And I don't imagine things, and perhaps you're all crazy, and I'm the only sane one?' she offered, smiling around them. 'Anyway, I work in the dungeons, in case you didn't know.'

'Yeah,' Ron Weasley put in. 'That's another thing. Dad's managed to get you a position in the Ministry. That's what we wanted to meet you for. It's a great job, Luna, perfect for you, good money, and best of all, you wouldn't have to suffer Snape all day.'

'Perhaps she's quite happy where she is, guys,' Lupin offered, surprising Severus by winking at Luna, and then pulling slightly closer to Ginny Weasley than Severus thought was quite appropriate, given the fact that her husband was sitting at her other side, and her brother was sitting opposite, and he began to wonder just how many women the werewolf had tucked under his belt.

'I'm very happy where I am,' Luna declared. 'And guess what?' she added, and Snape groaned to himself, anticipating she was going to talk about Snorkacks. 'Minerva's going to ask you all to the Yule Ball,' she said, just to prove him wrong, but equally horrified. 'We've got three Snorkacks too,' she added, as Potter and Weasley rolled their eyes.

'Luna,' Hermione said impatiently. 'You're twenty-six. This has got to stop.'

'Yeah, I agree,' Potter supplied. 'In fact, I'm going to have a word with McGonagall. Maybe she can get you another post in Hogwarts, if you're so keen to stay there. I'm sure she'll be more than willing, if I have a word with her,' he went on importantly. 'I mean, I can understand you staying there, but if she got you away from Snape, I think you'd be better off.'

'Better off than what?' Ginny asked. 'So she can be like all of you, peering into someone else's life, and criticising what you don't understand?'

'We're doing this for you, Luna,' Hermione reasoned, speaking to Luna, and ignoring Ginny in a way Severus didn't care for, and seemed to leave the werewolf even less impressed. 'We hardly ever see you now, and you've become... well, quite frankly, you've become even more odd than you ever were. Damn it, Luna, you're wearing two odd shoes, cutlery as jewellery, and your school skirt.'

'So?' Luna asked, and Severus wondered if her mode of dress were deliberate, after all, and then he wondered why, apart from the odd mention of potato earrings, he had never actually commented much on her little foibles, and was very pleased that he hadn't.

'It's got to stop, Luna,' Weasley said, imitating his wife's words, and Snape agreed wholeheartedly with him, as he suddenly saw a larger picture, one that painted the abominable Potter-Weasley-Granger trio in the foreground, and everyone else in the wings, as though they were bit part players in the wizarding world. He understood too that that was why Potter had failed to even notice the werewolf's quite obvious closeness to his wife, and wished Remus Lupin well in whatever his efforts were, as long as they didn't include Luna Lovegood.

'Leave her, Ron. It's not your place to criticise anyone,' Ginerva said, glaring at her brother, and turning to her husband and Granger. Severus was taking rather a shine to Ginerva Weasley, the fact that her name was now Potter notwithstanding. If he recalled correctly, Luna and Ginny's year had been a fairly easy one by Hogwarts standards. Then again, coming in the immediate wake of Potter and his cronies, not to mention Draco Malfoy, anything would have been. 'You two, as well. I don't see why what one person does is another's business,' Ginny added.

'Nonsense, Ginny,' Granger said, as though dismissing her opinion as of no importance, as though only what she or Potter or even Ronald Weasley thought was what should be believed, and everyone else was just there to make up the numbers. 'Harry's right, of course. We'll sort it all out for you,' she said, patting Luna's hand in what

looked like insincere sympathy, as Severus stood up before he leaned across the two tables and ripped Granger's arm off for daring to touch Luna.

He went out to the street, changed his appearance to his own, and made his way back through the bar to where Luna was still being bombarded with bad advice. He took a deep breath, and forced himself to use her name.

'Luna... I hoped I would find you here,' he said, ignoring everyone else, except for a curt nod to Lupin, who gave him what he failed to recognise as a knowing look, and a brief neutral glance to Ginerva. 'The Snorkacks were awake again. I gave them water, but I don't know what else to give them.'

'You shouldn't be encouraging her,' Potter snapped at him.

Severus turned slowly, fighting down the urge to hex the sanctimonious little prick. In fact it was only Lupin's intervention that stopped him

'Leave it, Severus,' he said quietly, then looked across to where Weasley and Potter were watching Snape with unconcealed dislike. 'Why don't you two guys leave it too?' he suggested, slightly more firmly than Snape would have given him credit for. 'It seems that Luna's quite happy, and who are you to criticise that?'

'She's not happy,' Weasley objected, but Luna had already stood up, and was following Severus into the street, with not only the Gryffindors watching them, but McGonagall and Sinistra too.

Luna turned to him once they got outside. 'I didn't think you'd want to leave this,' she said, handing him the book he had forgotten he had left on the table before he went outside to drop his charms.

'I have never seen that before, Miss Lovegood,' he said blandly.

'You know something, Severus,' she said, 'you tell as many lies as I do.'

He walked on a little with Luna at his side, mulling things over and wondering how to frame his question.

'Are you going to ask me about what you think you overheard?' Luna asked.

'About Lupin and Ginerva Weasley?' he replied, cocking an eyebrow.

'I don't really think that's any of our business, Severus,' she said, somewhat primly in view of the fact that she had broached the subject in the first place, if that were indeed what she was referring to. 'But I think she's going to have Lupin's child. Isn't that lovely... a baby werewolf? I wonder if it will be pink or blue.'

'I thought you said Lupin was old enough to be your father,' Snape pointed out, instead of the multitude of other observations he could have made. 'And Ginerva was in the same year as you.'

'You were in the same year as Remus, weren't you?' she said, as though that made any sense at all. 'By the way,' she added, turning so her teaspoon necklace tinkled, her eyes flashing in what looked ominously like some kind of victory, 'it was Minerva who slipped the book to me.'

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 12

Another meeting in Minerva's office leads to a surprise... closely followed by a shock.

Chapter Eleven

'I have already informed you, Minerva,' Severus said, sighing heavily, 'that I am not going to any Yule Ball, not dressed in my dress robes; nor, as Miss Lovegood would have me dressed, as Merlin alone knows what creature of her own imagination; or even bollock naked. In fact, I am not going at all.'

'Yes, yes, Severus,' Minerva said, waving aside his objections, 'but you were drunk, if I recall.'

'In vino veritas, Minerva,' Luna piped up from Severus's side, and he wondered how that helped him at all, and just how she had managed yet again to accompany him to a private meeting.

'You're going,' Minerva snapped. 'I do not see why I should have to be the one who has to patrol the grounds, and the entire castle, to make sure that there are no inappropriate goings on... going...on,' she said, seeming quite displeased that she had finished on a low. 'That's my final word.'

'Oh, very well,' Snape conceded sourly, in the understanding that he wasn't expected to participate in any frivolities, only in the quashing of them, an altogether more entertaining prospect. 'But I'm not dressing up.'

'I am,' Luna said brightly, and Snape wondered why he didn't tell her not to poke her nose into what she should consider to be his business.

He had already stood up when there was a respectful knock on the headmistress's door, and Minerva looked over as though she had been expecting someone, and had only been interrupted by Severus's tiresome tirade.

'Ah, Professor McGonagall,' Harry Potter said, striding across the office and holding out his hand. 'So good of you to see me... in private,' he said meaningfully, looking at Snape, who had sat back down, and Luna, who hadn't stood up anyway, as the other two parts of the gruesome threesome walked into the office behind him. 'Luna,' Potter added in some belated type of greeting, 'Snape.'

'Professor Snape,' Luna corrected him, her eyes wide and innocent. 'But you can call me Luna. And if it's a private meeting to talk about me, surely I can stay?'

'Who said I'm going to talk about you?' Potter asked, seeming a bit flustered at being so easily seen through.

'Why are Ron and Hermione with you, if it's private?' Luna asked in her way of answering a question with another.

'It's a private matter between us, Luna,' Granger explained, the way one might reason with a recalcitrant toddler, 'between us and Professor McGonagall. So if you don't

mind...' She trailed off, nodding suggestively to the door, a condescendingly hopeful smile pasted on her face, as Snape felt his temper rise, but bided his time, feeling Luna quite capable of removing the smile herself.

'Mrs Weasley,' Minerva said, cutting in quickly, as though she sensed Snape was about to hex whichever of the trio was nearest, and possibly all three at once, as not only Dumbledore grunted himself awake, but so also did Phineas Black, as if the Slytherin-Gryffindor ratio might have been tipping too heavily for even Severus to handle. He obviously hadn't accounted for the Ravenclaw wildcard, Snape thought rather smugly. 'This is my office, my dear,' Minerva went on, even more patronisingly than Hermione, 'and as such, I would consider it a favour if you would allow me to finish the meeting I have with my staff, before engaging in the few minutes of Hogwarts's time I have allocated to Mr Potter.'

'Harry's a busy man, Professor,' Ron Weasley said anxiously. 'He's got a meeting with the Minister of Magic later. He can only spare you a few minutes.'

'Mr Weasley,' McGonagall replied, and Severus hoped that none of the three saw the twin danger signals of the pursed lips and pinched nostrils that indicated that the Headmistress considered herself slighted, 'I am a busy woman. That said, I was courteous enough to grant Mr Potter five minutes of my valuable time, when he asked to see me.' She dipped into her robes and withdrew the fob watch she wore around her neck, and was just putting on her spectacles when Luna piped up again.

'They've had three minutes, Minerva,' she said. 'So they've only got two left. Come on, Severus,' she said, picking up a smaller version of the blue and gold box, a box that Snape supposed contained whatever vegetable peelings the kitchen elves could spare that she wasn't already wearing as jewellery. 'If they're going to talk about us, they haven't got long left, and we need to feed the Snorkacks before class.'

Harry shook his head, as though sadly. 'This is what we want to talk to you about, Professor ... Minerva, if I may,' he added, stumbling on when McGonagall made no attempt to accept his invitation to familiarity. 'Luna seems to have a problem, and... well, quite frankly I, that is, we, feel that she may need a change of surroundings.'

'She's just had a change of surroundings, Mr Potter,' Minerva replied, emphasising her "Mr Potter" only very slightly. 'She has just joined the staff of Hogwarts. Didn't she tell you?' She looked across to where Luna and Snape still sat in front of her desk. 'Run along and feed the little Snorkacks, Luna,' she said, much the way Dumbledore would have done at his most annoying, as Potter, Weasley and Hermione exchanged pained looks with one another. 'Perhaps I shall call down before dinner to see them again, if I may,' Minerva went on, over-gilding the lily to Snape's way of thinking. 'I would like to check a few things before we get in touch with Ministry Department for the Classification of New Species.'

'They are real, Minerva,' Snape said dryly, breaking his silence for the first time since the trio had come in, content to be party to anything from which the incredible threesome were excluded. 'I have already run every test I can on them.'

'Harry,' Weasley said, nudging the boy-who-saved-the-world and became the most-self-important-bore-of-the-day in the process, 'I think we should go.'

'Yeah, you're right,' Harry replied, smiling tightly, and Severus was gratified to see he was resigned to trying to make the best of what had become a bad job. 'See you at the Ball, Luna. Make sure you don't make Dean as crazy as everyone else,' Potter added, looking around at McGonagall, who drew back in surprise; Luna, who waved as though through a window to someone in the distance; and Snape, who sat frozen to the spot, with an all too familiar knot sitting in the middle of his chest.

'Well, I never,' Minerva said, watching the door close, but Severus didn't really hear her, and wouldn't have much cared if he had.

'You didn't tell me you had tested the Snorkacks,' Luna said, turning to Snape.

Short of replying along the lines of, "*You didn't tell me you were going to the Ball with Dean Thomas*," Severus couldn't think of anything to say.

'Dean Thomas?' Aurora said. 'But I thought... well, I had rather hoped, I suppose...' She trailed off.

'It's his own fault,' Minerva replied. 'If he weren't so stubborn, he would have agreed to go to the Yule Ball right at the start, and taken Miss... damnit, Luna... with him.'

'He has rather let the grass grow under his feet, hasn't he?' Aurora murmured.

'I'm really quite vexed,' Minerva said. 'I had just managed to bully him into going. Of course, it had to be Potter, of all people, who dropped the bombshell.'

'Oh dear, Severus wouldn't have liked that,' Aurora replied. 'Perhaps we've been wrong all along, Minerva, and the girl has no interest in Snape at all.'

'After dropping everything she was working on in the Andes, and travelling halfway around the world to be with him, on the strength of a single owl Lupin sent her?' Minerva said. 'And I just know I'm not mistaken about Severus either.' She stopped talking as the door opened, and the rest of the ladies began to come in: Sybill bickering with Septima, as they were in the habit of doing; Pomona happily puffing a rainbow out of her pipe; and the inseparable Irma and Poppy, chatting like the couple of gin-soaked old maids they were.

It was only a few moments later when the door opened again, and a large blue and gold bird hopped over the threshold. It had four legs: two arms and two legs to be precise. 'I bet you all guessed it was me,' Luna said, transforming back into herself, and spitting out a couple of feathers.

'I didn't know you were Animagus, dear,' Septima said sweetly.

'Oh, I'm not... it was just a charm.'

'Have you checked to see if Severus is allergic feathers?' Poppy asked.

'Oh, Severus isn't going to the Ball,' Luna replied, 'so I asked Dean to take me.'

"*Stubborn, stubborn man*," Minerva snarled to herself, as Septima and Sybill cheered up enormously. Minerva had been quite put out with Harry Potter and his friends, coming so soon after the distressing meeting she had had in Hogsmeade earlier that day with Ginny, and she was determined to make one last ditch attempt to save the situation before the Ball, one or two situations, if she could.

'What are you all dressing up as to go to the Ball?' Dean asked.

'I'm going as Hagrid, and he's going as me,' Flitwick replied, as Dean laughed, Lupin rolled his eyes behind his newspaper, and Hagrid seemed to be trying to work out the complicated logistics.

'I'm not sure if I shall go or not,' Binns said from where he stood at the window. 'Last time I went to a Yule Ball was the night Nearly Headless Nick nearly lost his head. Horrible mess it was; it quite put me off my dinner.'

'What are you going as, Lupin?' Dean asked enthusiastically, in a way that made Lupin realise that he wanted someone to ask what he was going as.

'A sheep, of course,' Lupin said, still behind his newspaper. 'What else would a wolf go as? Go on,' he said with a disinterested sigh. 'You're dying to tell us.'

'Well, Luna's going as a huge blue and yellow bird, called a Burping Chumper, and I've to go as a fish,' Dean replied. 'I just hope I'm not her dinner.'

'A fish?' Flitwick asked Dean, as though the Burping Chumper were to be expected, but the fish was altogether odd.

'Like a cod perhaps?' Binns asked Dean, as though he had never heard anything so strange.

'Or a haddock?' Hagrid asked Dean, just trying to think up another species of fish.

"Luna?" Lupin asked himself, wondering how it had all fallen apart again so quickly, as Minerva popped her head around the door.

'Remus,' she said, 'I wonder if I could have a word?'

Severus's head was pounding. He didn't know how often he could go through all the remarks she had made, and those that Ginerva Weasley had made, and yet keep coming back to her expostulation about Lupin being old enough to be her father. Dean Thomas, he snarled to himself, another ruddy Gryffindor, a boy barely out of ruddy Hogwarts, conveniently forgetting Dean was a year older than Luna.

'Who is it?' he snarled at the door. 'Go away, I'm busy.'

'I want to talk to you, Snape,' Lupin's voice came though the door, followed by the slouching werewolf himself.

'What do you want?' Severus snapped. 'And put out that ruddy cigarette, and stop fouling up my private space.'

Lupin looked at the overflowing ashtray on the desk, and the cigarette Severus was holding, and sat down. 'Severus, why is Luna going to the Yule Ball with Dean Thomas?' he asked, without preamble, or removing his own cigarette from his lips either.

'Why don't you ask Miss Lovegood that?' Snape retorted, without mentioning that she and Lupin seemed cosy enough with one another to have such a conversation. 'I am not her father, only old enough to be so,' he added pointedly.

Lupin sighed, at last taking the remnants of his smoke from his mouth, now that the hairsbreadth of white paper above the filter tip had disappeared. 'Oh well, have it your own way,' he said. 'I kind of thought you might have had a passing fancy for her.'

'I am not a cradle-snatcher, Lupin,' Snape replied, bridling uncomfortably. 'By the way, speaking of cradles,' he said, a thin smirk crossing his face.

'Why don't you mind your own business?' Lupin suggested quickly, standing up.

'And why don't you mind yours?'

Severus watched the door close, wondering if he could bear to give it one more try, if he could bear to find out just whether the mixed signs were actually pointing to "lost" or "found", in case the answer wasn't the one he had finally admitted to himself that he hoped for. He had just settled on some kind of plan, when Luna came in, or at least he assumed that was who the blue and gold bird was; he certainly wasn't expecting another.

'What do you think?' she asked as she transformed herself to at least looking like Luna, though every bit as oddly dressed.

'You look like your box with a beak and feathers,' he replied, succeeding, as he had promised himself, not to snap at her, having recognised that he could do well without another dose of self-induced remorse to add to his self-pity.

'And guess what?' she said. 'I've talked Dean into going as a Fugu... a Japanese Pufferfish.'

'I am aware of what it is, and I think that suits him very well, Miss... Luna,' he replied dryly, omitting to add his satisfaction that it was one of the ugliest sea dwelling creatures ever created, and resisting the urge to tell her not to eat him unless he was prepared by an experienced Japanese chef, and then hating that he had even entertained any thought of Luna eating anything to do with anyone. 'Why are you going with Dean Thomas?' he asked, not having intended to do so at all, and wondering where the words had come from, or if the werewolf had slipped back into the room and was standing at his back, pulling his strings.

'Oh,' she said. 'Is that inappropriate, Severus? I didn't realise. Is that why you're not going?' she replied, answering his question with a couple of questions of her own, as she was wont to do, and leaving Severus no further forward.

'No, not at all,' he replied, giving up, and contenting himself to his original plan. 'Attend to your Snorkacks, Luna, and get off to your bed. You have a busy weekend ahead of you.'

He watched her back, as she busied herself feeding her little creatures and fussing over them, mulling over the fact that it had become so much easier to use her name, and how he had enjoyed her bringing Potter down for calling him "Snape", and how he got a warm little thrill every time he heard her call him "Severus".

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 12

The Yule Ball

Chapter Twelve

That year's Yule Ball was as interminably awful as it always was, and had it not been for the fact that Severus had the daunting task of keeping a steady eye on Dean Thomas, he would have headed to his lair long before the fancy-dress parade. He stuck it out though, gritting his teeth at everything from the ridiculous to the absurd, not failing to notice that those who considered themselves to be his peers, were those who had made the biggest fools of themselves.

He had twice been accosted by a rather drunken Septima Vector, dressed in what she assured him were seven veils. It took a considerable effort on Snape's part to assure her in turn that he took her word there being seven veils, and that she had no need to remove any of them to prove the fact. He found he was quite unable to show any enthusiasm for the play on her own name though, even though she repeated the words 'seven' and 'Septima' several times, like some kind of mantra only the extremely

astute would understand, and he refused point blank to have anything to do with any dances of seven veils, or any other amount of veils, come to that. He had just got shot of her, when Sybill Trelawney made a beeline for him, and he almost considered denying he was Severus Snape at all, but decided against that, just in case her eyesight was clearer than her second sight appeared to be, and settled for being downright rude instead.

He panicked for a moment when he realised that he had lost sight of Dean and Luna, cursing Trelawney for having distracted him, and cursing himself for not having taken Luna to the damn ball himself, thus getting rid of not only Vector and Trelawney and Dean Thomas, but actually getting what he wanted for himself.

'She's over there,' Binns said vaguely. He was dressed in sombre dark grey as he always was, the only one of the male staff, save Lupin, whom Snape hadn't seen, and Snape himself, of course, not to have made total asses of themselves. 'She's just behind the pillar at the door over there.' Binns floated off, feet not quite touching the ground, before Snape could get the chance to deny he was looking for anyone, female or otherwise, or wonder how Binns could see through pillars in the first place, or know he was looking for Luna in particular. But the fact that Luna had moved to the seats just beside the door, behind a pillar, meant she was just a few steps away from being outside, and Snape didn't intend to miss a thing.

'I always thought it was a shame about Harry,' Luna said, taking not Dean Thomas's hand, as Severus had feared, but a charmed young woman's, a woman Severus guessed was Ginerva. 'His parents died, and he had such a lot to do, and he suffered from some bad press, and then he became a hero, and nobody seemed to have noticed that underneath it...' She paused and sighed deeply. 'Well, he wasn't a very nice person anyway.' Luna sighed again. 'It was a shame nobody realised that.'

'Not even me,' Ginny replied, turning away quickly as her brother came towards them, lest her charms failed her, and moving off to where Severus assumed she had left Lupin.

'Harry wants to see you,' Ron said, clearly not noticing he was being used as a messenger boy for the young man who stood watching them from the bar, or perhaps he was just used to it.

'He's not very happy with you, Luna,' Hermione added, shaking her head so that her huge Marie Antoinette wig moved ever so slightly to the left, 'and quite frankly, neither am I.'

Luna stared at her, and Severus wondered for a moment if, unlikely as that seemed, she were stuck for words. 'Oh, I took my Burping Chumper charm off ... I thought the fancy-dress parade was over,' she said, her eyes fixed on the white wig.

'It is,' Ron replied, 'but she got all hot and sweaty, and her hair's gone all funny underneath...' He trailed off as Hermione shot him a look just short of loathing.

'If Harry wants to see me, he doesn't have far to walk,' Luna said, reverting back to Ron's original comment, and Snape suspected she had contented herself with having played whatever little game she was playing with Granger's self-esteem.

'Who do you think you are, Luna?' Ron said, and Snape could see he was a little the worse for drink. 'Who do you think you are to try to make fools of us in front of McGonagall the other day?'

'Oh, that wasn't me,' Luna replied, seeming shocked at the suggestion. 'Didn't you know, you did that all by yourselves?'

'It's all an act with you, isn't it? All the stupid nonsense of odd clothes and ridiculous animals,' Hermione hissed, her face twisted in a rather ugly sneer that Severus thought suited her, as though it were an expression often donned in private that had just slipped out for a public airing. 'Don't think we can't see through it.'

'And to think I was willing to use my influence to get McGonagall to help to get you away from Snape,' Potter added, from where he had ambled over. 'Leave her, guys, she's not worth our bother. She deserves Snape, and I hope she's stuck in the dungeons for a long time. Come on, the "Daily Prophet" guys want our pictures.'

'What about Ginny?' Ron asked, as though wondering whether he should have or not. 'Are we not waiting for her to arrive?'

'I don't think so,' Harry replied. 'I mean, she's not really one of us... if you know what I mean. I don't know where she is anyway... I don't think she's coming.'

Luna had stood up, and she seemed to wait until the threesome had begun to turn away to lap up whatever adulation they felt was their due. 'Why would I want to be away from Severus, when I came halfway around the world on the off-chance of making my most secret dreams come true?' she asked, a puzzled frown crossing her face.

'Snorkacks?' Hermione asked, turning to face Luna again, her face twisted in disdain. 'Oh, don't worry, they'll be exposed for the frauds they are, just like you... Harry will see to that,' she said, as Ron nodded his agreement, and Potter pretended not to preen.

'Oh, that was only part of the dream,' Luna replied serenely, looking out of the door and up to the sky, past where Snape had hidden himself behind the yew hedge that edged the path from the door. 'I've still to dance by the light of the moon too.'

'Maybe she is mad,' Ron remarked, not that either of the other two were listening to him as he trailed behind Harry and Hermione like some kind of pageboy.

'Oh, Hermione, when you're finished with that lovely big hat...' Luna called innocently, waiting until Granger turned, and nodding to the huge white wig in a way that made Severus actually have to bite his knuckles to stop the laugh exploding from him, '...can I have it for nesting material?'

'Oh, there you are,' Dean Thomas said to Luna, walking across the lawn towards her, and Severus gritted his teeth, having quite forgotten him for the moment, and Potter began to drag the enraged Granger-Weasley back into the Hall. 'I thought I'd never find you.'

'I just wanted to say thanks for looking after Dean for me,' a young woman, whom Severus couldn't quite place, said from Dean's side. 'He wouldn't have come if you hadn't asked him to take you, and I just couldn't get away early from work.'

'Oh, that's all right, I was arriving on my own anyway,' Luna replied. 'And he made a very fine fish. Pity we didn't win.'

'Who did?'

Luna cocked her head to where Ron had stomped off in what looked like a bad mood; either that, or he had been sent to get another round of drinks for Harry and Hermione. 'Harry, of course, who else? I thought Minerva was going to hex the man from the Ministry who did the judging,' she replied.

'Em, I think that was the Minister of Magic, Luna,' Dean supplied.

'Of course it was, Dean. He's a man from the Ministry, isn't he?' Luna replied, as though the man from the Ministry, Minister of Magic or no, was similar to the man who fixed the taps, or delivered the onions. 'Of course, Harry made a lovely speech he seemed to have brought with him for the occasion, about how he felt he couldn't accept such a prize, as he was no longer really attached to Hogwarts. They gave the prize to Pomona, but I think that was for setting fire to Hagrid's beard with her pipe when she was dancing the tango with him, and not for being dressed as a pumpkin. I told her that; I told her she always looks like a pumpkin, so nobody would think she had bothered to dress up.'

The girl laughed, and Severus recognised her at last as a very slim, and quite pretty Lavender Brown, with whom the years between leaving Hogwarts and returning as a woman had dealt kindly. 'There seems to be one person too many in that marriage,' she said, nodding across to where Harry and Hermione were posing for pictures, and Ron was stomping back towards them with a tray of drinks.

'Yes,' Luna replied. 'It's a pity it seems to be Ron.'

'Come and spend the rest of the evening with Dean and me,' Lavender said. 'There's no point in sitting on your own.'

'Oh, I'm not on my own, not really. I'm just waiting for someone to realise that,' Luna replied.

'Is there really anything else you need to know?' Lupin asked, making Snape start as he realised he was no longer alone behind the yew hedge.

'No, I don't suppose there is,' Severus replied, watching Luna refuse Lavender's invitation, as Lupin moved away again, with the other unknown young woman at his side, the one only Snape and Luna, and, of course, the werewolf, knew was Ginerva Weasley. Then again, Snape mused, as he caught sight of Minerva looking down from her office window, maybe she knew too.

He had to do it now, Severus knew that, before he could think too hard, before his courage failed him, and the most perfect of nights snatched itself away from him, like a precious gift he didn't take the time to unwrap.

He moved away from behind the yew hedge where he had been watching her holding her peculiar court at the doorway, as though she had been checking those coming and going between the grounds and the Hall, as if looking for someone or something she was determined not to let pass her by, and touching everyone in her odd little way.

'Luna,' he said, stepping into the Hall, ignoring Dean and Lavender. 'I've been looking for you. I want to show you something,' he said somewhat lamely, wishing he had made up his lines before he opened his mouth, and finally recognising the actual words didn't really matter anyway. He glanced through the open door, and felt her eyes following his to where the still fat waning gibbous hung in the night sky. Severus closed his eyes, just for a moment, as he felt her slip her arm into his, almost gasping at what a perfect fit it seemed to be, and walked out into the grounds.

Minerva McGonagall looked down again, her lips pursing in disapproval. She hadn't seen Severus for a while, and she was quite put out that he hadn't seemed to take his patrolling duties just as seriously as he normally did. It was definitely coming to the part of the evening when goings on that shouldn't be going on would indeed be going on. She was about to turn from the window, when she caught sight of a man and woman alone at the lakeside, dancing together to the thin strains of music that filtered from the Hall. As the slow waltz that had issued from the ballroom fell to silence, the couple at the lakeside drew even closer to one another, and he tilted her chin to him, and kissed her.

Minerva drew herself up. Well, really, there were students around the grounds who should be being actively discouraged from this type of behaviour, and it was completely inappropriate that the very man she had put in charge of such discouragement was indulging himself in such a manner, and she fully intended to tell Severus Snape that it was one thing to be led by the admirable nose to the horse trough, but quite another to be seen drinking in public. She put on her hat, and straightened her shoulders, before she felt her mouth twist again, this time without her permission.

She turned to the window again, and she felt her throat close, as a tear trickled from the corner of her eye and fell unchecked down her wrinkled cheek, and she remembered that she, too, had once been a young woman, and she, too, had had a beau more years her senior than Severus was to Luna, and though now long dead, she could still remember how he had felt, and how she had felt the night they had danced by the light of the moon.

Epilogue

Four Years On

Severus looked up from the potion he had been making, as Luna came in the door, the bells tinkling happily on a hat he had never seen.

'It has been months,' he said, looking vaguely to the calendar on the wall, omitting to say he had begun to fret that she wasn't ever going to come back this time, despite the fact that she always did. At least he didn't have to teach when she was away; Minerva had given the position of Potions Mistress to Ginerva Weasley after her rather public divorce from Harry Potter, whom Rita Skeeter had quite charmingly, to Snape's way of thinking, named "Potter Rotter". Severus even managed to fool himself that his research would one day produce results to even eclipse Luna's spectacular success with her rare species, now funded jointly by Hogwarts and the Ministry's Department for Endangered Species. The bottom line for Severus was that he didn't really have to work, which was just as well, as he had quite forgotten what he was researching anyway.

'Oh, I know,' Luna replied. 'I always expect the unexpected to happen when I'm away on a field trip, and then when the unexpected becomes unexpected I get waylaid,' she said, putting a large blue and gold box down on the table, before peering over the edge and fussing with whatever specimens she had brought back from wherever she had been.

'What have you brought back?' Severus asked, as he tried to make sense of all the "unexpecteds", and decided that it wasn't worth the bother, and didn't matter anyway, not now that she was back. He looked around the living quarters they shared in the dungeons, when she wasn't wandering the world looking for that which he was sure didn't exist until she found it. The quarters had been extended almost the full length of one side of the corridor to house the finest collection of new and rare species in the wizarding world, so large that the Hufflepuffs had had to be re-homed a year before, much to Pomona's displeasure.

'Would you like to see them? They're still quite little, but very nice.'

'What are they?' he asked, still wondering what manner of odd creatures she had brought back this time, and what protuberances would be growing from where. 'Puffer-Backs? Crease-Toed Bloopers?'

'No, silly, I made the Crease-Toed Bloopers up for Lucius. They're babies,' she replied, taking off the red three-cornered jester's hat she wore, and laying it beside the blue and gold box, as the bells on each corner continued tinkling.

'Baby whats?' he asked, failing to mention that she had made up most of her species, a matter which hadn't prevented her from discovering them. He dropped his head to his cauldron, content with his lot, not really much interested in anything but the fact that she was back again, back with him. Severus Snape hadn't noticed he was becoming every bit as odd as the woman with whom he shared his life.

'Baby babies,' she replied.

Snape looked up again. 'You haven't stolen someone's babies, I hope?' he spluttered. 'Take them back.'

'They're mine,' Luna replied, digging into the box and pulling out a naked infant with a shock of black hair almost as long as the child itself. 'This is Boo,' she said, laying the boy down on the table, and digging into what Severus assumed were blankets, but were rustling a bit oddly, to produce another child, and he wondered just how many were in the box. 'And this is Peeky,' she said, holding up a girl baby, with a similar shock of long yellow hair.

'Peeky and Boo,' Severus said slowly, crossing the room to peer into the box to see not the blankets he had expected, but a pile of straw, and to satisfy himself that, except for the straw, it was otherwise empty. 'And you brought Peeky and Boo home in a box of straw?' he asked, warmth spreading through him as she slipped her arm into his and squeezed tightly.

'Yes,' she agreed. 'All the way from the Andes. I Apparated to Hogsmeade, and made a very smooth landing. They were very carefully packed, Severus. Straw is the best thing to pack fragile things in.'

'And are they going to stay here?' he asked, still rather confused. 'I mean, I'm too old to be a father,' he said, 'assuming that was the role you wanted me to play.'

'Apparently not, Severus,' she replied, 'although I confess at first I was as surprised as you seem to be.'

'And are you sure about the names?' he asked, bristling only slightly at her failure to fully disagree with his ageist and not entirely sincere self-criticism. 'I only enquire because they seem slightly odd...' He trailed off, watching her crestfallen look; and her necklace that seemed to have been made of dried prunes, but could have been dried anything; and the little bunches of grapes that hung from her ears, that he knew she would have snacked on; and the Ravenclaw school pullover, the one that didn't fit her anymore; and the fact that she was wearing her yellow summer Wellington boots on the wrong feet.

'I stopped off in Hogsmeade to buy you some whisky as a coming home present, and met Hermione Granger, and that's what she said too,' she said. 'Shall I change them? They're little enough not to notice one name from another, I think.'

'Certainly not. I forbid it,' he replied, finding one naked baby in the crook of one arm, and one in the other, and wondering just how they had got there. 'I said odd, odd but perfect.'

Luna smiled to herself. You're so easy to manipulate, Severus, she thought happily, feeling not in the least guilty about having lied about meeting Hermione. Then again, she thought, a girl has to work hard to dance by the light of the moon.
