

Can't Be Too Careful

by severina

When Professor McGonagall is found murdered in Diagon Alley, Draco and Ginny are assigned to the case. Can they work together to uncover the truth? Can Mad-Eye Moody keep from meddling?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 3

When Professor McGonagall is found murdered in Diagon Alley, Draco and Ginny are assigned to the case. Can they work together to uncover the truth? Can Mad-Eye Moody keep from meddling?

A/N: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Sadly, JK Rowling came up with it first. I started this extremely old fic post-HBP, but pre-DH so the DH events aren't all reflected in this post-Voldemort story. It's AU as well, for JKR killed off all my favorite characters and paired up the survivors incorrectly.

I haven't done much fic since about 2007 (this story actually includes a 'Lucky Louie' reference!), but the movie has inspired me to finish this. It's the third in a series of fics with a Moody/OFC pairing. For a better context, please check out the first two: Constant Vigilance and Black Roses Red, both posted on TPP.

* * *

"... a damn sight better than fuckin' hags. So anyway, then ol' Will says t' me, 'e says, "Ere, Dung, where didja get all them toads from? 'Cos some son of a Bludger's gone an' nicked all mine," an' I says 'Nicked all your toads, Will, what next? So you'll be wantin' some more then?' An' if you'll believe it..."

The hoarse, croaking voice of Mundungus Fletcher, punctuated by childish giggles, filtered up the stairs to where Polyxena Moody was busily working on an advert for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. "Bloody hell," she muttered, before throwing down her quill and stomping toward the staircase and down into the lounge, where she saw Dung, pipe belching its acrid smoke, seated between her two children on the sofa.

"Mundungus Fletcher," she snapped, voice rising to an almost shrewish pitch. "I will not have you turning our house into the set for 'Lucky Louie!'"

Hastily stowing his pipe in the pocket of his tatty overcoat, Dung fixed her with a toothy grin. "Beg pardon, P'lyx'na. Just keepin' an eye on things."

"Uncle Dung was showing us some toads he nicked!" piped up Emmeline, or Emma, the eldest.

"*Uncle Dung?*" Wrestling a Venomous Tentacula seed from Albus' hand, Polyxena thrust it unceremoniously at Mundungus. "Go wash up for lunch, you two."

Dung looked at her hopefully.

"Oh, all right then." Polyxena sighed, but she was smiling. "But only if you wash your hands, too."

Dung rubbed his dirty hands together in glee as he followed the children into their small, aquarium-motif washroom just as Polyxena heard a familiar stumping across the kitchen's lino floor.

"You're just in time for lunch," she greeted her husband as he hung his bowler hat. "Will you have chicken or ham for your sandwich?"

Moody grunted and shrugged, but gave Polyxena a lasting kiss. "Missed you today," he growled in a rare spate of affection. "I assume you've heard?"

"Heard? Heard what? It's not the Dark Lord...?"

"Mummy, what's 'fuckin' hags?" Her five-year-old son affected Dung's speech perfectly. "Why is 'screwin' the life outta button'd up ol' Ministry cows' better than 'fuckin' hags?"

"Dung's here?" Moody focused his magical eye on the wall. "So he is *Scourgify!*" he added nonchalantly and pointed his wand at the boy's mouth.

"Alastor! It's hardly his fault." Polyxena performed a hasty countercurse.

"True enough." Alastor trained his wand on the ragged form of their guest as he skulked into the kitchen. *Scourgify*. No, it's not You-Know-Who; that's one we're well and truly rid of, thank Merlin. No, there's been a..."

"Daddy!" Shoving Dung aside, the little girl raced over the threshold and launched herself at Moody, who scooped her up and settled her on his good leg. "I love you!" she added, kissing his scarred cheek. "And *guess what?* Mr. and Mrs. Snape are coming with Toby and Monica, and they've got new toy broomsticks, and we're going to play Aurors and Death Eaters, and last time I was Tonks, and Albus was you, and Toby was Mr. Snape, and Monica was Bellatrix..."

"It wouldn't do to cast a Silencing Charm on your own child." Polyxena set a plate of food on the table. "So don't even ask. I forgot to tell you that the Snapes are coming; is that all right?"

"Whatever." Moody clenched his fists in frustration. "Can't a bloke even get a second with his wife, for Merlin's sake?"

"I'm touched, Alastor, deeply touched." She laughed. "Since that hasn't been the case for the past, shall we say, seven years, you might as well just spit it out."

"There's been a murder in Diagon Alley."

"A *murder*? Whose? Is it...someone we know?"

"It's...yeah. It's someone everyone knows." Alastor took a deep draught from his hip flask before continuing. "It was Minerva McGonagall."

The plate of sandwiches clattered to the floor along with Dung's pipe.

"McGonagall?" repeated Mundungus. "I'll be a son of a motherfuckin' Hippogriff. Who'd wanna off McGonagall?"

"How did she die?" asked Polyxena, after shooing the two nonplussed children into the lounge. "Was she Killing Cursed?"

"No." Alastor took yet another swig from his flask.

"Y' shouldn't use drinkin' t' solve all your probl'ms," grumbled Dung. "I been readin' a book by this Muggle by th' name Dr. Phil, an' he says..."

"She was stabbed. Knife in the back like the Muggles do, but it was in Diagon Alley. It can't've been a Muggle."

"Dung, you've been reading a book?" Polyxena shook her head in disbelief. "Stabbed? You think it might have been Harz's lot?"

"Man's gotta do somethin' on the loo..."

"That was my first thought, too." He rubbed at his one remaining ear and shuddered. "But what beef could Harz's lot have had with McGonagall? It certainly bears looking into."

"No," Polyxena said. "Oh, no. You're bloody retired, Alastor Moody, you even said you meant it this time. You can't go, you can't, please." With a flick of her wand, she swept the sandwiches and broken glass into the bin. "Dung, help with the new sandwiches. Alastor, I don't want you investigate. You've been through enough, we've been through enough."

"Harz's lot are Squibs," he said. "And You-Know-Who is gone forever. Even I can admit that."

"But you..." Polyxena squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head to blot out the pain that still rose when she thought of the months she'd spent thinking that her husband was dead, those long months when she was pregnant with Emma. "You don't know what it's like."

"I don't know what it's like?" Moody roared, rounding on his wife. "I don't know what it's like? I don't know what it's like to have the people I care about die on me?" His weathered face turned scarlet. "Or be kidnapped by You-Know-Who?"

Rather than discreetly leave the room, Dung opted to conjure a red-and-white-striped bucket of popcorn and settled in to watch the fight.

"You don't know what it's like to carry a baby and try to live for its sake after they've come back from a suicide mission and told you your husband's dead and they can't find his body." Tears began to flood her big, silvery-grey eyes. "After you came back...when the battle was over..." The seven years since Voldemort's death had done nothing to ease Polyxena's memory.

"Ah now, lass." Moody wrapped her in a brief, tight embrace. He didn't relish his months as prisoner in Azkaban, minus an ear and only well enough to escape when the battle raged at Hogwarts. "I won't go. Hush, Polyxena, I won't go."

"Knew she'd beat ya down in th' end, Mad-Eye." Dung gave the old Auror a satisfied nod. "P'lyx'na's odds are six t' one, no beatin' 'em. Aren't y' gonna kiss an' make up?"

Moody and Polyxena glowered at him, and she called the children back into the kitchen.

"Hello?" called Hermione as she and Snape entered through the back door. "Sorry we're late, we nearly didn't get out at all. Monica got hold of Severus's wand again, and then we heard the news about Professor McGonagall on the wireless."

"Dreadful, isn't it?" Polyxena dabbed the last remaining tears from her eyes, not glad, but certainly appreciative of the excuse. "I just heard as well. And to think, the Aurors thought they'd have an easy time of it now that the Dark Lord's out of the picture."

"I spoke to Ginny via Floo before we left." Hermione handed her children each a sandwich from the plate. "The Auror Office is in an uproar."

"Mummy, this tastes like pipe smoke," said Hermione's oldest, six-year-old Toby. "I want something else."

"Don't complain at someone else's house," snapped Snape.

"Dung, I told you to wash your hands," snapped Polyxena.

"I don't know how you manage with three children." Snape raised a brow at the scraggly, ginger-haired man who was hunched over the table. "Mad-Eye, can we assume that you will be coming out of retirement yet again?"

Moody snarled something and took an indelicate bite of ham.

"He won't be." Polyxena smirked and set a glass of tap water before her husband, who growled and scowled and replaced it with water from his wand. "Emmeline Hecuba Moody! What on earth do you think you're doing?"

Emma dropped her father's Secrecy Sensor and returned to her lunch. "Checking the area for possible spies."

"When I'm grown up," announced Albus. "I'm going to steal a load of thin-bottomed caldrons an' make me a decent living." He took a long pull on a stray bubble pipe. "It'll be a damn sight better than fuckin' hags."

"*Scourgify*," Moody said, and this time Polyxena made no move to stop him. "Are the Aurors on this yet? Who's Potter assigned to this one?" He flicked his wand at Albus and performed the countercurse.

"Draco Malfoy and Ginny." Hermione spoke through the last bite of her sandwich. "Although why, I have no idea. I'm sure he's trying to punish her for leaving, but..." Her cheeks brightened, and she left the thought unfinished.

"Trouble in paradise?" Dung began to cackle and tapped his pipe against his teeth. "'nless they're havin' more fun than anybody thought. Coupla th' hags down Knockturn want th' punishin' and th' "

"I was rather surprised when she and Harry broke up," Polyxena said. "But not as surprised as when Malfoy joined the Auror Office."

"Hmph." Moody let out a growl that heaved through his entire body and thrummed through his slash of a mouth and bits of remaining nose. "Place gone to the Kneazles, I don't care what anyone says about the 'Chosen One.' Carries his wand in his back pocket and hires Death Eaters."

"Former Death Eaters," Snape felt compelled to point out.

"To do a serious job. And it is serious," Moody thundered. "We've been too lax since You-Know-Who died, and now look what's happened."

"A stabbing happened." Polyxena kneaded his uneven shoulders. "Alastor, your blood pressure, please. A stabbing is not Dark magic. I know plenty of Dark magic. It really sounds to me like Harz's lot."

"Who the bloody hell are Harz's lot?" Hermione asked, and Toby said in delight,

"Mummy, you said a bad word. Is Daddy or Mr. Moody going to do the*Scourgify*?"

"Sorry, Toby, that was very bad of me. Why don't you four go play Aurors and Death Eaters in the backyard?"

"Stay behind the fence," Polyxena said and when they had gone, continued: "Harz's lot is a band of Squibs who used to avoid detection by giving the Death Eaters credit for their crimes. It's actually Alastor's and my little how-we-met story. They kidnapped my father before the Death Eaters took him, so they could stop him from making a new wand for the Dark Lord."

"Couldn't they just read 'Constant Vigilance'?" Dung mumbled.

"Oh good heavens, Dung, we went through this in 'Black Roses Red.' It's too confusing, we have to summarize. So anyhow, we found him in the lair of Avery Harz, a.k.a. Lucretius Thurkell, a relation of the Squib-riddled Thurkell family."

"'N Harz's lot will run y' through with a knife like a Muggle," put in Dung.

"And you think that a gang of thieving Squibs killed the Headmistress of Hogwarts, do you?" Snape raised an eyebrow at the Moodys and Dung. "That theory seems implausible at best."

Moody shrugged and reached for a pinch of Floo powder. "Agreed. Best go to the source. I'm Flooding the Auror Office, not " He held up a hand to Polyxena's forthcoming outrage. " to come out of retirement. But I don't trust Potter. Kids are playing Aurors and Death Eaters now, they're not going to take this seriously, McGonagall or no. Nothing wrong with doing a little consulting."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 3

Deputy Chief Ginevra Molly Weasley is on the case, but Moody's meddling threatens to put Harry in a closed ward.

A/N: Still not mine. Please review!

Moody's head emerged amid a dozen scattered leaflets, a scale model of a Firebolt, and a basket of merchandise from Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. Ash flooded his unprotected nose and forced out a whine that was neither sneeze nor cough. No one came, and he grumbled, finally cleared his throat, and gnashed his teeth.

"What? Oh, Mad-Eye." Harry Potter swept a lock of dark hair from his eyes and started toward the fireplace. "What now?"

"McGonagall."

"Obviously." Harry's tone was pure exasperation, but his expression was more resigned than anything. "But honestly, we're not even sure this falls under our jurisdiction. Aurors are Dark wizard catchers..."

"Don't talk down to me, boy." Moody blew a puff of soot at the young department head. "And a woman's dead. Minvera McGonagall's dead, and you're bothered about protocol?"

"Look, we're totally worried, okay? I put Weasley and Malfoy on the case, but a stabbing isn't exactly our territory. Magical Law Enforcement and Misuse of Muggle Artifacts want a piece of the pie, too." Harry pinched his nose in his fingers and rubbed absently at his scar. "I can share case updates with you, as you're retired personnel, but I don't even know how much I'll have. Honest."

Nearly knocking his head against the fire grate, Moody nodded. "Potter, if you need something, Floo. I can't get my hands dirty so much anymore Polyxena, you know but I want to be damn sure you're doing everything in your power."

"She was my Head of House," Harry said quietly. "I'll do more than that. I appreciate the offer, Mad-Eye."

Moody snorted, grunted, and pulled his head back toward his body. A grimy sleeve across his face caught the worst of the ash, and he turned to face the assembly in his kitchen.

"Well?" Polyxena tossed him a damp towel.

His answering shrug illuminated the entire conversation.

"Typically arrogant Potter." Snape caught the edge of Hermione's glower, but went on. "Admirable as defeating the Dark Lord was, I find that he's rested on his laurels these past years. Potter performs his duties as though encased in a permanent Bubble Head Charm."

"Mmph." Moody shifted, discomfited that he and Snape were in complete agreement.

"It has been seven years." Hermione hovered before the window to watch the children zooming around the garden on waist-high broomsticks. "Seven years gone, seven Horcruxes. Perhaps a copycat?"

"That's plausible." Snape joined her at the window in time to see Monica apprehend Albus and plunge a stick through a cheap, plastic locket. "But would a copycat not have used Dark magic?"

"No one is foolish enough to use Dark magic anymore." Hermione beckoned to the children. "And it's hard to find a store of Dark knowledge any longer. Too much was confiscated and destroyed." The Ministry's destruction of suspect books rankled with her a bit. Books were books and knowledge was knowledge, after all.

"Durmstrang teaches the Dark Arts," Polyxena said. "And many such books are still privately held. Papa's library has never been raided. If someone went to the trouble of stealing "

"But they didn', did they?" Dung croaked. "Jus' ran 'er through."

"Yes." Polyxena gave an anxious sigh and waved to her own children. "Yes. It feels dangerous, though. I hate it, it's as though the Dark Lord's back."

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"Victim fell facedown from the pavement into the street. Contusions on her forehead and hands consistent with the fall." Ginny suppressed a shudder and walked a slow circle around her former professor's body. "Knife gash in the back, about ten centimeters deep. No sign of magical interference. Where's the coroner?"

"Here, I'm here." Luna Lovegood crouched beside the body. "No sign of Dark magic anywhere."

"And no Dark Mark," Ginny said. "Luna, we need to get her out of the street. Can you give us a time of death?"

"Between six and eight AM." Luna's wand hovered in the air as she performed a standard spell. "Based on the rate of decomposition."

"She was bloody well stabbed, Ginny. With a Muggle weapon." Draco bobbed his foot up and down on the curb. "It was probably some Mudbl- Muggle born's parents."

"And the theory behind that?" Ginny tightened the belt on her pink trench coat and scowled at him. "The parents of 'some Muggle born,' who, by the way, have no idea who Minerva McGonagall is, bring a knife to Diagon Alley while they shop for school supplies?"

Draco smoothed his thinning blond hair. "Look, maybe some kid's Muggle sibling was pissed off they didn't get into Hogwarts. Surely their wizard brother would have pointed out the Headmistress."

"That makes no sense." Ginny motioned to the quill that was taking notes behind her. "There was no one out on the street when it happened, no witnesses. We talked to everybody who was in the Leaky Cauldron, and no Muggle came in or out. More likely it was a wizard who wanted a Muggle to get the blame. Malfoy, Floo Headquarters and get Potter for me. Luna, get Professor McGonagall to the morgue and let me know when you plan to autopsy."

Draco glowered, but shuffled off toward the Leaky Cauldron. Luna cast a quick *Mobilicorpus*, and McGonagall's sheet-covered body drifted toward Luna's Portkey.

"Get Potter for me." His lip curled as he whined Ginny's orders under his breath. Really, why had he even bothered to become an Auror? It wasn't as though he was struggling to make ends meet, even after the war. But Potter was suspicious, despite the life debt Draco owed him, and what better way to prove his good intentions than by taking the Auror exam? Of course... Draco heaved a sigh as he threw a pinch of Floo powder into the grate. Of course, Harry might have encouraged him to join only to humiliate him at the hands of Deputy Chief Ginevra Molly Weasley.

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"It's worrisome." Polyxena spoke through the foam of her toothpaste, spat, and gazed into the thick, pink bubbles in the sink. "It's just...will you check on them again?"

Moody's magical eye spun until the blue disappeared completely. "Emma's asleep...wait...reading a Muggle comic under the duvet. Albus is...yes...there he is...sneaking leftover pudding."

"Bloody hell," she muttered, but made no move to leave. She threw herself down on the bed, picked up a book, tossed it aside, circled the room once, and threw herself down once more.

"The wards I've set up around this house," he growled. "We'll know if so much as a squirrel walks past."

Polyxena bit her lip. "But there's always a chance for surprise attack."

Moody dived across the bed and brought his lips roughly to hers. "Don't talk vigilance to me unless you mean business, lass."

"I always mean business." Their clothing fell away at the touch of her wand. "And I mean this: I want you to help the Auror Office. But do it carefully. Constant vig " But the rest of her statement was lost in a tumble of blankets and limbs.

* * *

"How are you and Ginny getting on?" Potter smirked through the flames at his least favorite employee. "Enjoying each other's company, are you?"

"We're on the clock," Draco felt compelled to point out. "Maybe calling her Deputy Chief Weasley would be more appropriate?"

Potter laughed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Right, Auror Malfoy. So what've you got for me?"

Draco repeated the details in the dullest voice he could muster. Not that he was willing to admit it to Potter, but the Head of Gryffindor's death had shaken him to the core.

"Any theories?"

"A Muggle-born, maybe? Chief Weasley thinks not, but who else would use a knife?"

"Harz's lot," came the growl in Malfoy's left ear. "That's who."

Draco started and leapt three feet toward the fireplace.

"CONSTANT VIGILANCE, laddie, constant vigilance." Moody stumped toward him. "Thanks for the details, Potter."

Harry glowered from the fire grate and vanished without another word.

"You've retired more times than Streisand," Draco said. "What the bloody hell are you doing here?"

"You listen to me, laddie, that's no way to address a fellow Auror. I'm retired, but I'm consulting for you lot. Looks like you need it, too. Using the Leaky Cauldron's grate for official communications?" Moody's magical eye spun in every direction, finally fixing upon Draco. He scowled and continued in the voice Polyxena termed 'the crusty old general in his bivouac': "Anybody in this pub could be listening to the details of your case. Now, you'll address me as Auror Moody, and you'll show me the bloody crime scene."

"I didn't know you could leave the house without your wife's permission, Auror Moody," Draco said, but trudged back toward Diagon Alley.

"Changed her mind," Moody snapped. "Reckon she's worried about another attack, Auror Malfoy. Dark attacks, Stealth and Tracking. Seems to me, you should know all this. When did you start with the office? Yesterday?"

"Last week." Draco blushed and kicked a stone along the street. "Here's Chief Weasley."

"Auror Moody," Ginny extended a hand to him over the crime-scene tape that floated in midair. "Not here to take over my case, are you?" Professor McGonagall's death was personal although not so personal she couldn't handle the case and she wanted to solve it herself. She owed that much to her family, to Hermione, yes even to Harry. To all the Gryffindors she'd ever known.

"Depends on how you're running things," he grunted. "Officially, I'm here to consult."

"Ah, yes. Polyxena's rules." Ginny fought a smirk. "Well, you're welcome to observe, sir, but I don't think you'll find any problems on my end. We were here all night, and we're just about to release the crime scene. Not much evidence, honestly. No magic, no blood but the victim's. Thoughts?"

"Some. Nothing that makes much sense." Alastor took a swig from his flask. "You ever heard of Avery Harz?"

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 3

As a mysterious and cliched evil stranger plots in a cave by the sea, the Aurors (plus Polyxena) strategize.

A/N: Nothing you recognize is mine. Certain passages are intended to be melodramatic and over-the-top with clichés. Please review!

* * *

Wind howled at the craggy face of the cliff and rushed through the cave where he had spent the past few nights. The floor was damp and hard, and the Dark magic of the place filled him with a deep dread. He took another swig of Firewhisky and stuffed the knife further beneath his rucksack.

"Another one," he muttered. "Soon."

He didn't mind drawing out his task, no, on the contrary. He relished his time away from Germany, from Wiepersdorf, from the shadow of Schloss Durmstrang, and from the site of all his failures. England wouldn't be another land of failure for him. It was his time now.

He would be triumphant.

* * *

"Avery Harz," Moody repeated in the quiet gloom of the Leaky Cauldron. "Otherwise known as Lucretius Thurkell."

"A Squib?" Ginny squinted at him and cast a Muffliato Charm on the table beside them. "That fits. We've considered the possibility, of course. Thaddeus Thurkell's family produced more Squibs than anyone and "

"And maybe one of them wanted a Hogwarts letter," Draco said.

"That would make the killer about eleven years old." Ginny rolled her eyes and dragged a Cauldron Cake from her handbag. "An eleven-year-old wouldn't murder Professor McGonagall over a letter of admission."

"Never say never," grunted Moody. "But it's unlikely. No, Harz Thurkell leads a gang of criminals. Used to let You-Know-Who take credit for his work."

"A bunch a Squibs?" Malfoy began to tilt his chair back as far as it would go, until he had to hold it upright with his wand. "This is your big consulting tip? Squibs?"

"Look, there are plenty sorts of danger that aren't magic. You ever seen a Muggle fireleg, Auror Malfoy?"

"Firearm," Ginny whispered.

"Right, well. They're nothing to play around with. We underestimate Muggles and Squibs to our tactical disadvantage. We underestimate anything to our tactical disadvantage. Information. Tracking. And, goddamn it, CONST "

"ANT VIGILANCE!"

"What. The. Bloody. Hell. Are. You. DOING HERE?" Moody roared so loudly that the Muffliato Charm broke.

Polyxena conjured a sleek Eames chair and sat down beside him. "I fancied a drink. The usual, Tom."

The bartender sent an apple martini sailing toward the table. Moody caught it and tossed it on the fire grate.

"Go home," he hissed. "This is serious Auror business, we're dealing with a murderer..."

"Don't patronize me." She caught the second drink and took a brief sip. "I may or may not have helped him foil Harz eight years ago," she said to Draco and Ginny. "And..."

"She may or may not have been kidnapped by You-Know-Who in the process."

"And it was all rendered a bit pointless when the Dark Lord made off with my father a few months afterward. But we're still here and where's the Dark Lord now?" Polyxena smirked. "My father's well and making wands again, we're..."

"Making wands?"

"She's Ollivander's daughter, she has his damned eyes." Ginny scowled and added, "Auror Malfoy. Polyxena, Hermione told me something you said...I don't want to pry, but you told her you know 'plenty of Dark magic'? And you call You-Know-Who the Dark Lord; I'm not accusing you of anything, but..."

"It's really nothing sinister." With another sip of her apple martini, she settled back in her seat and smirked at her husband's glower. "My father always had an aesthetic interest in every type of magic. He was Ravenclaw like me, and I think manufacturing wands gave him a certain curiosity about their limitations. Anyhow, he taught me things, theory mostly, but I've certainly never...well, I've turned the Cruciatus on a Death Eater or two in my day, but..."

"For Christ's sake, Chief Weasley, would Mad-Eye Moody have married a Dark witch?" Draco thumped the table, eager to get back to Harz's lot. His own knowledge of Dark magic and the fact that he called Voldemort the Dark Lord were bound to come up.

Ginny went a bit pink and said, "Like I said, not accusing. Just curious."

"Right." Draco nodded jerkily and said the first thing that came to mind: "So, Auror Moody, weren't you supposed to have died? The Dark Lord said he'd killed you himself, and then you turned up after the Final Battle."

"Auror Malfoy, we haven't got time for this." Ginny brushed aside the crumbs of her half-finished Cauldron Cake. "We've got a case to solve..."

"...and no leads or evidence. What are we supposed to do with that?" Draco tousled his hair again so that the sleek ridges stuck up in the back. "Can Squibs wear Invisibility Cloaks?"

Ginny's eyes lit. "Good thought. Anyone can wear one, as it happens. The magic's contained in the fabric, not in the wearer. They're rare, so we could do a decent search. Contact the office and have them locate all Invisibility Cloaks sold in Europe over the past three years. If it's a Squib, he'll have to have bought it. Well, well," she continued when Draco had hastened to a more private fireplace. "A stroke of genius from Auror Malfoy. Who'd have thought?"

"If it's a matter of the cloak, I can help you there," Moody said. "If there's another attack planned and you lot manage to stake out the site in time. Could Dung help us, d'you think?"

"Probably," Polyxena said. "If it's to do with Harz. The cloak might have been stolen, after all. He's watching the kids right now, but I can..."

"He's doing what right now?" Moody choked on the contents of his hip flask.

"Oh, come on, he's Emma's godfather, isn't he?" Polyxena whacked her husband on the back a few times. "He'll keep them perfectly safe. He might teach them a bit of vulgarity or how to firewire the neighbor's car, but he'd never let anything happen to them."

"You're friendly with Mundungus Fletcher?" Ginny tilted her head and gave the Moodys each a quizzical stare. "Pardon, Auror Moody, but didn't he Disapparate and leave you to You-Know-Who?"

"Oh." Draco sneered and rejoined the table. "I thought we didn't have time for this."

"You-Know-Who's curse knocked my ear off," Moody grumbled. "Curse of the night, wasn't it? And yeah, I fell off my broom. Someone "

"Severus Snape," Polyxena put in. "What? Credit where it's due. You hate to admit it, but he saved your "

" cast a Shield Charm that nobody noticed with all the curses and hexes flying everywhere. So I didn't break every bone in my damned body, but the blood pouring out of my head almost did me in. Wand was broken. Thought I was a goner."

Polyxena's eyes became overbright, and she began to fuss with the sleeves of her robes.

"But I fell near a Wizarding house, bit of Potter's luck, that, and the old woman cleaned up my wounds. She was a Muggle-born, though, so when they took her away after Thicknesse got control, they found me and threw us both in Azkaban. Didn't get away 'til the Battle of Hogwarts." He groaned and shifted until his leg was propped on another chair. "Wasn't in any condition for battle, though. Found Polyxena and Emma at Grimmauld."

"Yeah, and who was looking after us but Dung?" Polyxena finished. "He proved himself a decent bloke in the end. I think he felt guilty he had to bother about Emma and me at all."

"Right, well," Draco said. "This is all very fascinating, but what about this Harz bloke? You really think he might have offed McGonagall?"

"It wouldn't be entirely shocking," Polyxena said. "But it's not really his style. His business is what's most important to him, and I can't believe Minerva McGonagall would have gotten in the way of a thieving gang of Squibs."

"Right," Ginny said. "I'd imagine she didn't even know they existed. It's worth a visit to this Harz bloke, though. Auror Moody, you know where he lives?"

* * *

A low, strangled hissing echoed from the craggy walls of the dank cave, and a sea snake wriggled over the threshold. The hissing grew louder, more violent, and the snake slithered to the left, to the right, then further into the shadows.

"*Half past seven,*" hissed the sea snake.

"*Can you tell me how to reach the nearest train station,*" came the voice from within the cave.

The snake reared up in confusion. "*Human, what do you want?*"

"Wait...just...talk...a...little more slower...slowly...I mean..."

A loud beep sounded from the darkness, and a strange, emotionless voice said in perfect English: "End of lesson."

He clicked the button to stop the tape player and sighed. The snake regarded him with an expression of disdain and slithered away.

He reached for the tape and crammed it into a yellow box that read "Rosetta Stone: Parseltongue."

Soon...tonight...he would succeed again.