

Fare Thee Well My Faerie Fey

by quaffswinegaily

While the Golden Trio are on their grand camping trip, someone has to stay home and hold the fort at Hogwarts.

Fürst

Chapter 1 of 17

While the Golden Trio are on their grand camping trip, someone has to stay home and hold the fort at Hogwarts.

Fürst

Disclaimer: Dinna fash yersel', Jo, hen. Ah hav'nae made ony siller fae this.

Translation: Scots/Doric Don't worry, Ms Rowling. I've made no money from this.

Slamming the door open dramatically as he entered the classroom, the dark-haired wizard smirked briefly when several students jumped in their seats. He strode to his desk and whirled round to face the class from the front of the room, a scowl marring his features.

"Books out. Let's start." Observing a raised hand, he paused. "Malfoy?"

"Please, sir. I just wanted to say I hope you had a relaxing holiday and I'm looking forward to having you teach us this year, sir."

The dour professor grimaced slightly. "Thank you, Malfoy. Shall we proceed?"

"As this is a senior class, you were expected to read the allocated text over the summer holidays. So, if you've read the book, you should know the facts. Those who are Muggle-born may also have seen the recent movie. I am aware the film changed the storyline slightly, but you understood the basics, didn't you?"

His glare elicited a few nods before an arm shot into the air.

"Put your hand down, Malfoy. I am acquainted with the fact your precious father would not allow you to watch the movie in case it corrupted your pure-blood soul. Although I'm more inclined to think it was because he was not portrayed in a benevolent light."

"Yes, sir," muttered the youngster.

"Many of you will have heard reminiscences from your mums and dads, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters. However, the history text you have in front of you explains it more fully. In a nutshell, the build up to the battle was all about good versus evil and family values versus anarchy.

"What is it now, Malfoy?" He sneered at the blond with the hand raised in the air.

"Please, sir. I don't believe this text has the full facts. I don't think it was as simple as that."

"Indeed. Perhaps you could enlighten the rest of us with your theory, then." The older man paused, observing the slight blush of embarrassment on the teenager's pale cheeks.

"Um..."

"Fascinating, Malfoy. Could you elaborate on that statement?" He paused again. "No? Anyone else? Potter? Weasley?"

He was met by a restless quiet from the class.

"Open your books. I want you to finish Chapter One, and we will discuss it at the end of this period."

Sighing slightly, he sat down at his desk and started to mark homework. As he glanced up without lifting his bent head from his pile of parchments, he caught sight of Malfoy gazing dreamily out through the classroom window.

His second sigh was deeper. It was bad enough teaching History whilst Professor Binns was on spectral leave, but having to teach this shower took the biscuit.

~*~

Draco watched the British countryside roll past the windows of the speeding Express. When his mother had seen him off at Kings Cross, her gentle squeeze on his shoulder had been a little tremulous, but with a regal lift of her head she had told him, "Stand tall and be strong, my boy. Act like a Malfoy and do not dishonour the family name any further." Leaning forward to kiss him delicately on the cheek, she had murmured in his ear, her low voice quavering slightly "... and take care, son."

Straightening up, she had squared her shoulders before stepping away from him and wending her way through the crush of well-wishers on the platform. Behind the crowd, he had spotted his father waiting for her at the platform exit. Lucius had inclined his head towards Draco, raised his cane in farewell, and slipping Narcissa's hand into the crook of his elbow, they had disappeared.

As Draco gazed out of the train window through tear-glazed eyes, London suburbs had given way to intermittent urban sprawls. After a stop in Bradford to pick up the Patil sisters, the Hogwarts Express picked up speed, hurtling northwards and across the border into Scotland.

The tame countryside of England gradually changed to rugged moorlands and mountains the closer they got to the school.

Light summer drizzle grew steadily heavier as they travelled further north, and the clouds lowered and darkened. The miserable weather mimicked Draco's darkening mood, with the rain tracking through the grime on the outside of the train windows mirroring the tears sliding down his cheeks.

Swiping a dismissive thumb under his eyes, Draco leaned his forehead against the glass pane, feeling the rhythmic vibrations judder through his skull. He was glad Goyle and Crabbe had left him alone in the compartment when they went in search of the sweetie trolley. Their presence had been starting to wear on his nerves, and their absence allowed him some time to reflect. It also meant no-one was there to observe his misery as another silver tear slipped quietly down his cheek and hung in a quivering droplet from the tip of his chin.

His forehead creased in a frown as he recalled his holidays. The expected peace and relaxation in the summer sun at the manor had been shattered by the presence of Voldemort and his grim entourage. A wave of nausea surged through the pit of his stomach as he recalled the horrors he had been forced to witness, with his father's hand clamped firmly on his shoulder and his own fist stopping screams from escaping his mouth.

Merlin, he never wanted to see anything like that again. Draco shuddered and the teardrop fell to his knee, darkening a small patch of the grey material.

As he dropped his gaze to watch the dampness spread, a small hand brushed past his shoulder and headed rapidly towards his ear, startling him. With mercurial reflexes, Malfoy caught the slim wrist in a vice-like grip, twisting the arm of his would-be attacker viciously. A slim, feminine body landed on the seat beside him, toppling across his lap and banging her head on the window sill.

"Lovegood!"

"Horny Golloch!" she declared, wriggling backwards as she tried to right herself, bony elbows digging into his knees and wispy, blonde hair tickling its way under his nose.

"What the hell...?" Draco shoved her away from him.

"It was a Horny Golloch, Draco," Luna answered, pushing her wayward tresses off her face and rubbing her bruised temple. "It was nearly in your ear, and you wouldn't have wanted that, would you? My Scottish granny... that's my mammy's mammy... she used to say, 'You have to be careful of the Horny Gollochs, Luna'. Apparently, they crawl into your ear, hold on with pincers on their bottom, lay eggs in your brain and drive you quite mad."

"They're not the only thing to drive people mad," muttered Malfoy, shimmying back into the corner of the carriage away from the eccentric witch.

"No, seriously, Draco. You should always have someone looking out for them, protecting you. They can be a real nuisance, especially when you're camping."

"Malfoys never camp."

"No, I don't suppose Malfoys do." Luna hummed quietly. "My friends are camping, and I'm worried the Horny Gollochs might get them, causing untold anguish. You never know what could happen." Fixing him with her clear-eyed regard, she continued, "Looking at you, I can tell you're no stranger to misery. Have you had a Horny Golloch infestation?"

"Are you bonkers?"

Luna continued to watch him without answering.

"What would you know? Have you been living with the worst Death Eaters this summer? Has the Dark Lord been staying at your house? No, I don't think so." Draco spat the words dripping with vitriol, his eyes flashing with anger. "What do you know of misery?"

"You might be surprised," she answered quietly, undaunted by his animosity. "You only know what has been happening in your household, Malfoy. Perhaps you should speak to someone at Hogwarts. Your mentor... A confidant..."

"Lovegood, you don't understand. She... She... and then... they..." Closing his eyes when his voice trembled, Draco turned his head away, his mouth thinning into a tight, grim line. A gentle touch on his hand stilled the fine tremors he had previously been unaware of.

"Hey!" a rough voice barked from the compartment doorway. "Looney, get your creepy hands off! What d'you think you're doing in here, crackpot?"

"It's all right, Crabbe. Miss Lovegood was just leaving." Draco opened his eyes and settled his flinty gaze on the Ravenclaw. "She is well aware she is not welcome in the presence of groups of Slytherins. Aren't you, Lovegood?"

"No groups... no..." Luna murmured, catching the slight widening of Malfoy's expressive, grey eyes and the minute inclination of his head as he addressed her.

Goyle's bulk loomed over her. "Get out, Looney."

"Well, I'd best go. I've got to find some wacky earrings to maintain my image. Remember my advice, Malfoy," she called back over her shoulder, making nipping motions with her fingers as she skipped out into the corridor.

"What was that all about?" Crabbe stared after her, mouth agape.

"Something to do with Gollochs. Just ignore her. She's a Ravenclaw." Tapping his temple with a finger, Draco returned his attention to the passing scenery.

Goyle's head nodded in agreement, as if Malfoy's comment explained everything.

~*~

Headmaster! Severus could hardly believe they had made him headmaster of Hogwarts. Of course, it was an honour, but one he would rather have let pass at this stage. Peering out through the small leaded panes of the headmaster's... his... office window, he found the diamond-shaped glass which allowed him to watch the train approaching with this year's consignment of children. All those innocent, talented young people, ready for him to guide and enlighten. Thanks to the Ministry's decree making school attendance obligatory, there would be an influx of unschooled, home-schooled and previously expelled larrikins. What a delightful challenge; Snape sneered at the thought.

Rubbing the base of his spine, he straightened up. The spying pane was still set for Dumbledore's height, marginally too low for Snape to use comfortably. He wasn't sure if he wanted to change it or leave it as it was, realising his tenure there was only temporary.

He knew in his heart he had come by his new job by ill means. Bribery, corruption and murder were not the tools he would have chosen to use to gain this post. A long time ago, he had hoped that one day the headmaster's chair would be his due to an exemplary career as a teacher at the school, an outstanding research project or for being a role model to the students.

Who was he trying to kid? That was a pipe dream, and this was reality. A Board of Governors overrun with Death Eaters and their cronies, a staff of teachers who mistrusted or hated him and a bunch of feeble-minded, idiot students. At least he wouldn't have to deal with Potter and his minions, but there were still plenty of other dunderheads to be shielded from the vile ministrations of...

"Alecto and Amycus! The Dark Lord has been most generous allowing you to leave his presence. He assures me you will be most conscientious in assisting with the running of the school."

Amycus grunted as he plonked his lumpy carcass onto the leather sofa, patting the seat next to him to indicate to his sister to sit down. "Severus, we are mere servants of our great master, are we not? All of us working for the greater good." An unpleasant grin smeared itself on his sweaty face.

"Indeed."

"I'm looking forward to this very much. I've never been a professor before, and now I'm to teach Defence Against The Dark Arts. That's a laugh, isn't it?" A wheezy giggle escaped from the large man.

Smiling indulgently at her brother, Alecto clapped her hands with enthusiasm. "Oh, this is going to be such fun."

"I don't know what you're so excited about, Alecto. You get to teach Muggle Studies." Both Carrows shuddered in unison.

"I'm sure I can think of some way to turn that to my advantage."

"Mmm, I'm sure you can, my sweet sister. You have such talent when it comes to everything Muggle."

Alecto's gruff bark of laughter joined her brother's high-pitched giggle. "Oh, Amycus, you are such a card. We shall enjoy ourselves, shan't we? Think of all those young, impressionable minds for us to mould."

Wiping a grubby handkerchief over his thick, moist lips, Carrow's lopsided leer increased. "And Alecto, dearest, just think of all that lovely, juicy, untouched flesh..."

"Enough!" growled Snape, fixing the siblings with a fearsome glare.

"Oooh! Grumpy!" Amycus sniggered.

"That's enough for now," Severus repeated. "We've got work to do."

The Carrows' heads nodded in agreement.

"Yes, work."

"Um... What exactly do we have to do today, Severus?"

"This year's Head Boy and Head Girl must be elected."

"Oh, goody!" The witch clapped her bony hands again. "Has electing got anything to do with Muggle trickery?"

Snape sighed and rubbed the furrow between his eyes where he could feel a migraine brewing. "No, Alecto. Unfortunately for us, it is a much more mundane chore. The students who were supposed to be Head Boy and Girl are... unable to take their posts."

"Did one of us nobble them?"

"No."

"Shame!"

Clearing his throat, Severus continued. "Instead, we will elect one student from each house to represent their fellow..."

"But how can we choose? We don't know any of the filthy little tykes," whined Amycus.

"Which is why I've already chosen four students for us to elect... with your approval, of course." Snape's lips thinned as he looked to the Carrows for their agreement.

"Yes, yes. Let's just get on with it. I'm dying to get down to the Great Hall for the Welcome Feast. I can almost taste the spotted dick already."

~*~

The four students standing in the headmaster's office were not his favourites, nor, in the normal course of things, would they have been anywhere on his list of candidates. Snape had picked them because they were the least likely to cause any problems during the coming year, which was bound to be fraught with difficulties. He needed the students to be as invisible as possible, to avoid the attention of the Carrows and not distract him from his own plans.

The exception was Draco Malfoy. Snape had chosen to keep him close, to try and prevent the stupid blond from getting himself into any deeper trouble. Promising to kill

Dumbledore had been foolhardy in the extreme; Severus couldn't imagine what idiocy Draco would conjure up this year. However, as his assessing gaze swept over the young man, he could sense a change in him. Maybe, just maybe, the youngster would manage to keep his expensively clad feet out of the poo.

As for the others, well...

"Headmaster Snape, will you be kind enough to introduce us to these delightful young people." The leer on Amycus' face was directed equally between the two blonds in the small group.

"Indeed, Professor Carrow."

Snape's jaw clenched as he noticed the proud look on Alecto's face as she mouthed "Professor" to her lecherous brother.

"To represent Gryffindor we have Neville Longbottom." Snape indicated impatiently for the nervous boy to step forward.

Neville shuffled out of the line to shake the professors' hands, but the Carrows looked him up and down with disdain, ignoring his proffered hand.

"Is *this* a pure-blood?"

"Yes, he is."

"Ugh! You would hardly believe it to look at him. Go away; I don't wish to look at you."

Blushing and stammering, Longbottom sidled behind the other students.

"Slytherin will be represented by Draco Malfoy."

Draco stepped forward with confidence, grasping Amycus' hand in a firm handshake, before turning to his sister and lifting her knuckles to his lips for a gentlemanly kiss.

"Charming! So like your father, young man. And with as much prowess, I'd wager," Alecto remarked.

"Have no doubt about that, Professor," Draco purred, winking at the simpering woman and ignoring the vicious glare from Snape as he returned to the line.

"For Ravenclaw we have Luna Lovegood."

Everyone stared at Luna, who appeared oblivious to the proceedings and was gazing up at the roof.

"Miss Lovegood!" Severus growled.

"Professor Snape, did you realise this roof has an oculus? What an unusual aperture." Luna's smile was beatific.

Snape felt his gaze drift unintentionally upwards before he gave himself a mental shake. "This is not the time to be whimsical, Miss Lovegood."

"Indeed it isn't. It is a time for ridding ourselves of unwanted infestations, is it not, professors?" She turned her smile on the Carrows.

"I couldn't agree more, my little beauty," replied Amycus. Grasping her hand, he brought it to his fleshy mouth and placed a wet kiss on her palm.

"Oh, sir, I can tell you are a true gastropod," said Luna as she inspected the moist patch.

"I certainly am," replied Amycus, patting his paunch. "I love my food."

Only Draco noticed the narrowing of her eyes when she turned away, discreetly wiping the slime from her hand.

"Is that it, then?" asked Alecto.

"No. We have four houses, so there is one more."

Alecto sighed melodramatically.

"And finally, our representative for Hufflepuff, Justin Flinch-Fetchingly..."

"Flinch-Fetchingly? Does he?" Alecto clapped her hands in the air close to Justin's face. "Look, boys. He does flinch fetchingly. How... delectable..." Her tongue flicked out over her pale lips.

Amycus chortled.

"It's F-finch-Fletchley, M-miss," the Hufflepuff stuttered.

"Of course it is." Snape's rejoinder appeared absentminded, but there was a slight curl of the lip for the more observant to see.

"Well, congratulations to all of you. I'm sure we shall all get along divinely and have a wonderful school year, shan't we?" Alecto's gaze became pointed at the lack of response from the house representatives. "Hmmm?"

"Yes, absolutely, Professor Carrow. We're honoured to have you on the teaching staff. We can't wait to start working with you and..."

"Flench-Flummery!" snarled Snape.

"It's... it's Finch-Fletchley, sir."

"Desist!"

"Delightful as this has been, my sister and I would like to go and freshen ourselves up before dinner. If you would excuse us please, Headmaster, gentlemen and gentle lady." Amycus winked broadly at both blonds as he escorted his sister from the room.

Luna gave a delicate shudder. "As I said... a nasty, slimy infestation," she commented under her breath.

"Indeed, Miss Lovegood," Severus murmured, "how uncommonly astute of you."

Fixing his dark gaze on the four students in front of him, he continued aloud, "Well, what are you waiting for? You all have duties to attend to before the Sorting Ceremony."

Neville and Justin were out of the room and running down the circular staircase in a flash. Draco caught the door before it swung back in Luna's face.

"Plebs!" he growled. "Have they no manners? Allow me, Miss Lovegood." Opening the door fully, he swept a hand elegantly through the air, indicating for her to precede him out of the office.

"Why, thank you, Mr Malfoy. What a gentleman."

Draco smirked as Luna passed him. Of course he was a gentleman, even towards the dippy Ravenclaw, if it meant he could walk behind her down the stairs with a view over her shoulder of her surprisingly delectable cleavage. A Malfoy understood he should never miss an opportunity.

On reaching the foot of the stairs, he was surprised when Luna stopped him with a light touch on his hand, turning her face up towards him. Her clear, grey gaze reflected his darker grey, her eyes seeking something in his. "You're a gentleman, Draco, a prince among commoners..."

Draco straightened his slim frame with pride, only for his shoulders to hunch forward sharply as Luna's pointed finger jabbed him hard on the sternum. "So, behave like one. Ogling is most undignified, Malfoy." Crossing her arms underneath her rounded breasts, she continued, "If you want these puppies, you'll have to work for them."

Aghast, Draco stared at her for a moment. "What? Want... what? Want you?" He sounded appalled.

A quick smile flitted across her lips as her finger twirled one of her button mushroom earrings. "If we're going to work together this year, you'll have to get used to it."

Pulling his shoulders back in a good imitation of his father, he bestowed his haughtiest look on the elfin blonde. "I can assure you, I do not fancy you, Looney, and I will not be working with you."

Luna's light melodic laugh fell tinkling from her smiling lips. "You Slytherins can be so detached from reality. When you need me, let me know. Until then, don't get caught up in the *pestilence*." With the last word, her petite nose wrinkled.

"Reality? What would you know about reality, Lovegood? You're as nutty as a fruitcake."

"So they say." She replied, giving his arm a gentle squeeze and winking at him. "Don't believe everything you hear, Draco." Turning daintily on her tiptoes, she hummed as she skipped away down the corridor.

Malfoy shook his head, trying to clear the feeling of confusion.

A/N: I was asked to write a story to fill in some gaps around the Deathly Hallows, featuring the relationship between Snape and Luna. Well, you know me and sticking to what I'm told...

This is about Snape and it's about Luna, but there are heaps of other people involved, and, perhaps, not exactly what was envisioned. Sunny33 requested this, I hope she enjoys it.

Translations:

Fürst German head of a principality.

Flench-Flummery roughly translates as "cut the crap". (flench = to strip or cut the blubber off, flummery = complete nonsense.)

Fealty

Chapter 2 of 17

Fealty – *n.* fidelity, faithfulness.
Some loyalties are questioned

Fealty

Disclaimer: Ye ken fine, the hale jing-bang belongs tae Jo.

Translation: Scots / Doric You know the whole lot belongs to Ms Rowling.

Another double period, another discussion. The teacher could almost envisage the inverted-commas, double-fingered wiggle the Divination professor would have used.

"Sir, sir!" A hand waved in the air.

"What is it now, Malfoy?"

"Weasley hexed me, sir!"

"You deserved it, sissy tattletale." The whispered tone was scornful.

"Shut it, Snotter."

The dark-haired wizard in charge of the class scowled at the alleged, offending redhead. "Weasley? An explanation, please."

"Please, sir. Malfoy called my family blood traitors. We may not have the same financial riches as the Malfoys, but we've always been loyal. We've never been traitors." A blazing, blue-eyed glare was focused on the slim blond.

"We are not here to discuss family... attributes. This is a schoolroom; please show some decorum."

The professor tried not to sigh as he pondered for the umpteenth time why the headmaster continued to insist Gryffindors and Slytherins were to work together when it was evident they couldn't. He knew the answer would be, 'They have collaborated in the past, and they must learn to be tolerant for our future.' Obviously, it had been a long time since the headmaster had graced the inside of a classroom and dealt with the constant sniping and hexing.

"Today, we will focus on how petty intolerances, such as these, encouraged the larger schisms in our society prior to the war you have been studying."

A groan rippled around the room.

"Please turn to Chapter Two in your text books, and we'll get started."

~*~

Harry's hands drooped between his knees, his shoulders hunched forward as the weight of his despondency pressed down on him. The Horcrux hung heavily around his neck, dragging his head and his mood down. His reactions were slow and apathetic when Ron clapped him on the back.

"Hey, mate! How's it going?"

"S a'righ'," Harry muttered halfheartedly.

"C'mon, cheer up. It could be worse."

"How?"

"Blimey, Harry! Stop being such a misery guts. You could be camping on your own without me and 'Mione."

"Hate camping."

"At least you've got the two of us sharing the work."

"Hmph! You're not much good with your arm still in a sling."

"Oh, for goodness sake! Give me that bloody locket and get out of the tent for some fresh air before you end up completely down in the dumps."

"Ta, mate," Harry managed to murmur as he shambled out of the tent. It wasn't long before he poked his head back round the canvas flap. "Ron, it's pissing down out here. Is that why you came back in early?"

Ron grinned, shrugging his shoulders in apology. "I didn't want to catch cold. I'm still fragile after my splinching, remember. Can you pick some more of those yummy blaberries while you're out?"

"Twat," grumbled Harry, grabbing his cloak and heading back out into the inclement weather to find Hermione.

Pushing his way through the dripping forest undergrowth, Harry felt his spirits lifting the further he moved away from their temporary shelter. Getting out of its malodorous, canvas confines made him feel more cheerful. He knew Hermione had done her utmost to make it habitable, but no amount of magic could rid it of the mustiness, or the plague of earwigs which dropped off the tent roof onto him while he slept. Harry shivered under his warm cape; he detested creepy-crawlies. Perhaps not as much as Ron hated spiders, but they still made his skin crawl.

He found Hermione perched on a large rock overlooking a rushing, peat-browned stream not far from their tent. Her eyes were closed and face turned up to the persistent falling rain, which ran in rivulets down her cheeks, soaking her hair and dripping from her chin.

Approaching quietly, he cleared leaves and pine needles from the rock next to her and parked his bottom on the damp, unforgiving surface. "Hey, 'Mione, love, how's it going?"

Her face scrunched up as she turned to look at him, and she sighed deeply before replying. "It's miserable, isn't it?"

Harry nodded silently, and drops of rain fell from his damp fringe. "Ron let me out of the tent early. He wants me to take some blaberries back for him as payment. D'you think there'll be any left?"

"It's getting a bit late in the year for them, but we can have a look."

"I'm a bit worried about Ron; he's not coping too well with all this traipsing around."

Hermione bumped her shoulder against his. "How about you?" she asked.

"I hate camping in the rain. I thought this was supposed to be summer."

"It's Scotland, Harry. This is their summer."

"Really?"

"Well, in truth, it's late summer, early autumn. Haven't you ever been to Scotland in summer?"

"Never. The Dursleys always kept me at home during the holidays. Then, when we were at Hogwarts at this time of year, we were straight into Quidditch training. I don't mind flying a broom through a light drizzle, but sitting around like this is doing my head in."

"Even I'd take up flying to get out of this constant dampness and apathy."

"What are we doing, Hermione? I feel like we're gaining nothing and getting nowhere. We've had no help. I don't think anyone knows where we are. I don't even know where we are."

"Scotland."

"Being facetious isn't helpful," Harry grouched.

"Actually, I have a good idea where we are."

"Hermione, you're great. I knew you wouldn't get us lost. So, where are we?"

"Do you see that mountain?" she said, pointing out through the trees at the edge of the wood, across purple, heather moorland to a spectacular semicircle of dark cliffs, half hidden in swirling mist. "I recognise it. My dad took me climbing up there last summer."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, it's definitely Lochnagar, which means this stream flows down to the River Dee and on to Aberdeen. I reckon we must be quite close to the castle."

"That's brilliant. Why didn't you tell us? We could be back at Hogwarts in a jiffy and get some help." Harry leaped to his feet in his enthusiasm.

"Sorry, wrong castle. You're more likely to run into Queen Liz and her corgis down there."

"Eh?"

"We're near Balmoral Castle, Harry," Hermione explained. "Don't you remember Byron's poem *Dark Lochnagar*?"

"I don't do poems."

"Prince Charles's book, *The Old Man Of Lochnagar*?" Seeing his puzzled expression, she continued, "Maybe not. It wasn't exactly a literary classic."

"You know me and reading, 'Mione."

Hermione's replying sigh was deeper than the last. "Come on, Harry, let's go foraging for blaeberreries on our way back to the tent. I don't like leaving Ron on his own, and without food, for too long."

Accepting her hand to pull him to his feet, Harry brushed damp fir needles and bits of grey lichen from his clothes. "So, you know where we are, smarty pants, but it doesn't help us much if the Order members can't find us. No-one's been in touch at all."

Hermione levelled her amber gaze on him. "And whose fault is that?"

"Aw! Come off it, 'Mione. I had to persuade Lupin not to come with us."

"You didn't have to call him a coward, Harry."

"Why are you sticking up for the werewolf?"

"He was clearly upset."

"Upset? His reaction was rather weird. A bit over the top, if you ask me," Harry mused. "It was as if he really, really didn't want to stay with his wife. I know he's worried about passing on his lycanthropy, but he just didn't seem to be concerned about Tonks at all. He even said it was a mistake marrying her."

"We all make mistakes," replied Hermione, "but I'm sure he's wrong. Tonks entered their marriage fully aware of the problems. She'll be a huge support to him."

"What did he say to you just before you asked him about her?"

Hermione's forehead creased a little as she tried to recall Lupin's exact words. "He said something like *I need to be with you. My mate'll die if I leave you unprotected*. It was a bit melodramatic, and I'm not sure who he was talking about. That's why I asked him about Tonks. He shouldn't be thinking of running away from his marriage to protect us three."

"Not us, Hermione, you. He was talking to you."

"No!" She gasped, her hand covering her mouth.

Harry watched her reaction carefully. "Tell me, Hermione, what's going on between you and Remus Lupin?"

~*~

"Pansy! Pansy! Wait a moment, please." Draco nearly sped up to catch the girl who was hurrying down the corridor away from Slytherin's common room. Instinct told him not to run after her. *Malfoys don't chase after girls*, he thought, *they run after us*.

Behind him, he heard a rough, troll-like chuckle. "Losing your touch, Malfoy?" a low, raspy voice asked. "Maybe, she's heard you can't finish the job properly."

"What do you mean?" Draco stopped in his tracks, looking down at the flagstone floor, his breathing deep and quiet.

"Maybe she's heard you're a bit of a pussy when it comes to important business... the Dark Lord's business."

Draco spun around, his robes flaring gracefully. His tone was low and threatening as he came face to face with his tormentors. "And what would you know about that, my friends? I don't recall seeing either of you at the top of the Astronomy Tower or at Malfoy Manor this summer."

Goyle had the grace to blush slightly under Draco's questioning gaze. "Well, I got an owl today from my da', and he says..."

"We heard you weren't up to it," Crabbe interrupted. "Not able to do the Master's bidding with the old coot of a headmaster and squealing like a girlie when they tortured..."

Draco's wand was at Crabbe's throat in an instant. "Silence!" he hissed.

Ignoring the threatening wand, Crabbe grabbed the front of Malfoy's shirt in his meaty paw and shoved the lighter wizard up against the rough, stone wall, snagging the blond's fine silk robes. Leaning in close, the brawny boy's rank, raw onion breath washed over Draco, whose nose wrinkled in disgust as he turned his head away.

"You weren't so quick to draw your wand on Dumbledore, were you, pal? We've stood up for you all these years, but we're not sure if we should any more." Glancing at Goyle for support, Crabbe continued. "Our families have been acquainted for a long time, but my dad says we need to be sure we're in with the right crowd. I don't think you and your poncey family have got what it takes. Maybe Parkinson got the same owl message as we did, or maybe she's just figured out you're really a pansy. What d'you reckon, Greg?"

Chuckling maliciously, Goyle lifted his little finger in the air in answer and wiggled the fat pinkie.

"I couldn't have said it better myself, Greg, my man. Are you a gay-boy, Malfoy? What are you, Draco, a poker or a bender?" With that Crabbe gave the slender blond a final shove before turning back towards the common room.

"I prefer someone with less grazes on their knuckles than you boys," Draco drawled with a hint of nonchalance.

Goyle stepped forward, and Draco flinched, certain the thug was going to kick him. His stomach clenched in fear, then with disgust as Goyle hawked loudly and spat a sticky glob of phlegm at him.

"Come on, Greg. Don't waste your grolly on him," called Vincent from the doorway. "He's still a Slytherin, after all. When push comes to shove, we'll still have to stand next to him against the other houses. Just don't let him stand behind you in the showers."

Crabbe guffawed loudly as Goyle grunted and stomped into the Slytherin common room, leaving Draco to slide down the corridor wall until he sat crumpled on the floor, shaky hands covering his face.

"Fuck, fuck, fuckfuckfuck," he chanted to himself, his nerves and speech steadying as his anger increased. "Gay? They think I'm gay? Shit. How did they..."

"Fascinating, Malfoy." The disinterested voice cutting into his musings startled him, having not heard its owner's approach. Before Draco could respond, a firm grip around his upper arm hauled him to his feet. "I would love to stand in the corridor listening to your miserable maunderings, but your presence is required at the student representative's meeting shortly. Make yourself presentable and be on time."

Draco wiped the back of a hand across his flushed, spittle-streaked face.

Without waiting for a reply, Snape gave him a terse nod then strode away toward the stairs, his teaching robes billowing behind him. Malfoy pulled the front of his own robes down to settle them before following in the professor's wake with only a marginally shorter stride.

~*~

It took less than five minutes to reach the gargoyle at the foot of the headmaster's stairs, and Severus swept up the steps with Draco close behind. As he approached the office door, Snape stopped abruptly, indicating with a sharp hand motion for the young man to be quiet. Leaning in close to the heavy wooden door, the two men listened.

A light, feminine laugh wafted through the cracked-open doorway, followed by a shushing sound. Draco lifted an enquiring eyebrow at Snape, who raised a finger to his lips and frowned in reply before bending to bring his ear closer to the door.

"I do believe, my dear," a haughty, nasal voice intoned from inside the Head's office, "we have someone earwiggling on the threshold. Would you be so kind as to let them in?"

Snape straightened up, wand at the ready, just as the door swung open.

"Do come in, Headmaster. Malfoy." The witch, who ushered them in, stepped back, inclining her head in greeting as they swept past her into the room.

Snape's gaze raked the large office. Finding no-one else present, he returned his scrutiny to the young woman who stood with hands clasped lightly behind her back, humming gently and drawing her foot back and forth in semi-circles over the wooden floor boards. With arms crossed over his chest and robes drawn tight, the tall, dark wizard glared down his nose at her.

"I presume you have an adequate explanation, Miss Lovegood."

"I'm here for the house reps meeting, sir."

"Indeed. However, that does not explain how you gained access to this office without my presence."

"Oh, that was easy!" Luna beamed.

"Easy? Please, enlighten me how you bypassed my personal wards."

"Well, I knew you weren't in when I arrived a bit early, and rather than hang about in a draughty corridor with that grumpy old gargoyle, I thought I'd just pop up for a chat."

"A chat?" Snape's voice rose slightly with incredulity. "Let me get this clear, Miss Lovegood. You trespassed in my office for a conversation with someone who wasn't actually here?"

"Exactly, sir."

Draco sniggered and tried hard not to smirk as Severus rubbed the furrow between his brows with a thumb pad, muttering under his breath, "Merlin, preserve me from this Ravenclaw."

"Young lady, it appears Headmaster Snape does not understand you."

Snape whipped round, seeking the owner of the upper-class, nasal voice he had heard whilst eavesdropping on the doorstep, but there were still only the three of them in the room. The sound of a man clearing his throat had him swirling back in the other direction, wand raised.

"Uncle Phin, stop teasing."

"I am not your uncle, young lady." The haughty rejoinder was accompanied by a sharp rapping on glass. "Up here, Headmaster."

"Headmaster Black!"

The portrait nodded in courteous acknowledgement. "Headmaster Snape."

"Uncle Phin?" Draco queried with some scepticism, looking to Luna for clarification. Appearing to be restraining a giggle, the pale witch gave him a small smile in reply, and to his surprise, Malfoy felt the corner of his own mouth twitch. He bit down on the impulse, pressing his lips firmly together.

"I assure you I am not her uncle. The little madam has always been too forward for her own good," Phineas Nigellus Black replied haughtily.

Luna's nose wrinkled as her smile widened. "Of course you're not, you old stuffy."

"Are you going to explain, or are you going to overwhelm us with whimsy, Miss Lovegood?"

"I'm sorry, Professor Snape. It's been a while since Phin and I had a chat, so instead of making me wait outside, he let me into the office."

The glare Severus directed at the man in the portrait had paint-stripping qualities. "You can do that?"

"I was headmaster here at one time," the painted wizard replied in an offhand manner with an elegant shrug of his shoulder, though he did take a small step back.

"You can let anyone into my office?" Severus growled.

"I'm not just anyone," said Luna. "Headmaster Black's family and mine go back a long way, ever since..."

"I believe this is my story to tell, missy." The ex-head wagged a finger in her direction. "Give them an inch, and they take a mile, these youngsters," he muttered, but did not appear particularly vehement in his admonishment.

Straightening his cravat and robes, Phineas Black cleared his throat before speaking. "The Blacks are a venerable and proud, pure-blood family. When my youngest sister ran off with a... a..."

Black paused, with a slight shudder, and cleared his throat again. "When our sweet Isla married a... a Muggle..." His voice dropped to a faint whisper on the final word, regaining its normal volume as he resumed his story. "Our family was thrown into turmoil. My parents disowned Isla, forbidding us from having any contact with her, and we all obeyed their wishes.

"She and Bob moved almost as far away from the Black ancestral home as they could without leaving Britain. It's ironic that the type of home they lived in is known as a Hebridian Black House, though it was little better than a one-roomed, rough-stone-walled, thatched hovel on an island in the back of beyond. They lived there for many years, just the two of them. They never had any children because Isla knew Bob would age and die before she did, and she wanted only him.

"Then, one summer, a bedraggled short-eared owl brought a note to me at Hogwarts. The poor bird had been to every member of my family and been turned away; it arrived on my windowsill close to expiring from exhaustion. The letter it carried was brief. Isla had been transferred from their island home by Muggle flight to the non-

magical hospital in Inverness. She was expecting an unplanned baby and was seriously ill, having left childbearing until so late in her life. Bob wrote he suspected the problem was magical, and the Muggle doctors were unable to help her or the baby. Without magical intervention, they could both die.

"Within minutes of reading the missive, I was on my way to Raigmore Hospital. I was married to my darling Ursula with our own children already, so I understood the strength of love and family ties, and felt I could not abandon my little sister. I shall never regret the decision I made that day. My only regret is I did not make it earlier." Phineas paused to wipe an oily tear from the corner of his eye.

Snape and Malfoy shifted uneasily, seeing the aristocrat's obvious distress, whilst Luna continued to smile wistfully and nod encouragement, light glinting off her shiny crabapple earrings with the movement. "Please, carry on when you're ready."

"Isla was desperately ill when I arrived, but with the help of the obstetrician, and his emperor's bit..."

"Caesarian section," Luna interrupted.

Phineas Nigellus frowned down at her and continued. "With his Muggle wizardry and my magical input, Isla and Bob's baby daughter was born. They called her Mhairi Bhan. It translates literally as White Mary, but means Fair Mary in Gaelic, and the name suited her well. She was the palest-skinned, blondest-haired, clearest-eyed child I have ever seen."

"She was beautiful, wasn't she? And she was clever."

"Yes, very clever, my dear." The wizard smiled thinly. "Perhaps it was fortunate they lived on the edge of the world, for she grew up into a wayward, elfin child, precocious with her magic, which she hid from no-one. Her father loved her dearly, but, being a Muggle with a short life span, he died whilst she was a child. Isla was heartbroken and never left the island again.

"The islanders are a strange community, at once straight laced and purse mouthed in their religion, and at the same time fully accepting of the otherworld. Our mourning Isla they called their own bean-sidhe or wailing woman. Whereas Mhairi Bhan, with her love of the wild Atlantic Ocean, unfettered blonde hair and untamed magic, they believed to be a selkie. She had them completely enchanted.

"I tried to get my family to reconnect with Isla and her daughter, but they were unyielding. However, having made contact myself, I could not break the bonds of love that tied me to my sister and her small family. I kept in contact after that, visiting regularly during school holidays, and watched Mhairi grow into a stunning young woman. She was home-schooled and led a wonderful, free life in the outer wilds of Scotland, but was innocent in the ways of the world and fell for the first wizard who crossed her path. A bumbling idiot of a man, he got her in the family way and insisted on marrying her and taking her away to some wretched place in England where they brought up their mewling brat."

"Uncle Phin!" Luna objected, causing the elegant man to smile slyly.

"Which explains why Miss Lovegood is not just anyone, and I am not her uncle."

"It does?" asked Draco with obvious confusion.

Peering down from his portrait, Phineas Black gave the young Malfoy an assessing look up and down. "Are you sure this is the right one, Luna?"

"Absolutely."

"He doesn't appear very astute to me."

"Excuse me," Draco interjected, "I am smart. I'm top of my year now that Granger's gone, and I'm a Malfoy. I just didn't follow the non sequitur at the end. How does that make you *not* Luna's uncle?"

"Because he's my great-uncle, silly. His sister, Isla, was my Scottish granny - my mammy's mammy. I told you about her already." Luna rolled her eyes.

"Oh! So, the bumbling idiot was..."

"My dad, Xenophilus."

"And the mewling brat?"

"Was me. But, Uncle Phin's just teasing. He loves me really," Luna answered. "Don't you, you big softy?"

"Like a hole in the head, my dear," replied the old wizard with a resigned look, which made Draco smile in acknowledgment.

"That means we are distantly related, Lovegood." Draco's voice was not filled with enthusiasm.

"No, Isla was magically expunged from the lineage. When his parents disowned my granny, their magical bonds were cut permanently, so we're no longer part of your family."

"But, Phineas Black is your great-uncle, and also my great-great grandfather, which makes you a Black."

"Perhaps the Malfoy spawn is more intelligent than he appears," muttered the ex-head.

"Which, in turn, explains a few family resemblances, like the hair and the mental instability," Draco continued. The stinging hex Luna sent his way brought tears to his eyes.

"Or, perhaps not," sighed Phineas.

A/N: Sunny33 - beta wizard.

Lochnagar is a mountain situated on the Balmoral Estate in Royal Deeside, Scotland, owned by HRH Queen Elizabeth the second of England and first of Scotland. It's a lovely, long walk to the top on a fine day, but treacherous around the tops of the cliffs in bad weather.

A black house is a traditional Hebridean Island dwelling, made of a double dry stone wall packed with earth for insulation and a roof of turf or reed thatch placed on top of wooden rafters. With no chimney the peat smoke from the hearth had to seep out through the roof, making the inside very black. Some good pictures of one are here http://www.suite101.com/view_image_articles.cfm/195207

Translations:

Fealty fidelity, faithfulness.

bean-sidhe Gaelic banshee, wailing/keening woman, fairy

selkie, selchie or silkie Scots from selch, a seal. A selkie can become human by shedding their seal skin, and return to being a seal by putting the skin back on.

Fankle

Chapter 3 of 17

Fankle - Scots - *n.* a tangle, a state of confusion.
Irritability and confusion abounds.

Fankle

Disclaimer: Dinnae gi'e me the malky. Ah huv'nae ta'en onything.

Translation: Scots Don't beat me up. I haven't taken anything.

The dark-haired wizard could sense someone's gaze upon him, but every time he lifted his head to check the students, they all had their heads bowed, eyes glued to their text books. Shifting in his seat, he bent his head lower to his paperwork, just enough for his sleek curtain of hair to shield his eyes. Then, with a swift sideways glance, he caught the perpetrator.

"Malfoy," he growled, "stop the delaying tactics and get on with your work."

"Yes, sir." The blond head ducked downward but soon bobbed back up again, eyes on the man at the front of the room.

"What is it now?"

"I was just wondering, sir, if you could explain your part in all this." A fine-boned hand waved across the unruly pile of books on the school desk. "It would make it so much easier to learn, rather than reading from a text book. My father assures me you had a key role." The grey eyes held a mild challenge, though the student's facial features maintained their apparent deference to the professor.

"Not now, Malfoy." The reply came through gritted teeth, as the young blond tried the professor's patience. "I deal with facts, not myths and legends."

~*~

The gargoyle at the foot of the headmaster's stairs glowered at the small crowd in the corridor.

"Slytherin serpent!" yelled Alecto Carrow.

Raising an enquiring eyebrow, the statue shuffled its feet but did not move out of the way.

"Shift over, dear, and let me try. Slytherin serpent!" Amycus spoke with conviction, but the gargoyle remained in place.

"Open up, damn you!" Alecto slapped the sculpture's hard shoulder.

"Perhaps, we have the time wrong... or... or the password?" Justin queried meekly.

"Don't be so pathetic, Flinch-Fetchingly."

"It's Finch-Fletchley, miss."

Alecto Carrow snarled. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

Without waiting for an answer, she turned back to the guardian of the stairway, threatening it with her wand. Justin swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down with nervousness and a grey tinge colouring his complexion.

"Let us in, you granite-faced monstrosity," she shrieked.

A spark of scarlet shot from the tip of her wand and struck the gargoyle between the eyes. With a low rumble, the carving bared its teeth and scowled stonily, remaining solidly in place.

Neville Longbottom approached the gargoyle from its other side, stroking a soothing hand over its flank. "I'm sure there's a simple explanation for the problem. I suspect the headmaster is distracted by some tedious matter involving the two house reps who aren't here. Am I right?"

The gargoyle nodded stiffly, leaning into the gentle caress, but keeping its eyes fixed on the Carrows.

"And as soon as he is free, you'll let us in to see the Slytherin serpent," Neville murmured, rubbing the hexed spot on its forehead as the gargoyle hummed and butted its head against the young wizard's chest.

"Did I ask you to intervene, Longbottom?" The Carrows looked daggers at Neville.

"I sense a detention brewing," Amycus muttered to his sister who smiled wickedly in return.

~*~

Meanwhile, up in the headmaster's office, Severus and Draco were coming to terms with Luna's ancestry claims while she chatted quietly with Phineas Nigellus Black.

"Horny Gollochs! I knew it!" Luna exclaimed suddenly, wrenching the Slytherins from their discussion about her recently divulged lineage.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Lovegood?"

"What?" asked Draco.

"I told you my friends who are camping would be pestered by Horny Gollochs. Uncle Phin says they've got a bad infestation. Apparently, Ron's... um..." Her voice petered

out. "Oops! I may have said too much." She glanced down at the toes of her sandals, one of which was starting to trace a semi-circle across the floorboards.

"Miss Lovegood, please explain." Snape's dark-eyed attention focused on the dithering witch as her eyes flicked from her shoes to the portrait on the wall.

"Phin?" Luna's voice had a plaintive edge. The ex-headmaster's gaze was almost kindly when he looked down at her. She nodded towards the Slytherin wizards, keeping her eyes fixed on the painted effigy and raising her eyebrows in inquiry.

"I believe my great-niece is wondering where your loyalties lie." Black looked pointedly at the two men.

"You know my allegiances very well, Headmaster Black," Severus responded, "as you have been privy to many of my private conversations in this room, and... elsewhere. I'm sure you can vouch for my loyalty appropriately."

"Indeed, Headmaster Snape. And you, young Malfoy?" The old wizard pinned Draco with a long, hard look.

Draco appeared flustered for a second, then, drawing his slender frame up to full height and straightening his spit-streaked robes, he declared, "I stand beside Professor Snape. My loyalties lie where his do."

"A typical Slytherin, tortuous response," muttered Luna, "answering the question without elucidation."

"Are you certain of that, young man?"

This time everyone's eyes were on the blond wizard. Colour seeped up from under his collar with the intensity of the scrutiny, tracking up his cheeks. Biting his lip with apparent uncertainty, he took a deep breath then nodded. "Yes."

"Excellent, excellent!" The ex-headmaster beamed and rubbed his painted hands together. "Now, I believe there are people waiting at the door for a meeting. Shall I let them in?"

Snape's only reply was a grinding of his teeth.

~*~

Harry shifted lethargically on his bunk. No matter how many times he moved and repositioned himself, he couldn't get comfortable. His clothes had a musty dampness, and his skin felt sticky with old sweat. He scrubbed his knuckles along the rough, stubbled edge of his jaw, then lifting a hand, he inspected his ragged fingernails.

Scraping some dirt from underneath his thumbnail, he mused it was a good thing he had split up with Ginny; no-one would fancy him like this.

Huffing, Harry turned onto his side, and, feeling the weight of the locket slide across his chest, he let his gaze drift apathetically round the inside of the tent. Hermione and Ron sat crouched over a small stove. Harry knew they were talking about him and hated them for not hiding the fact.

"Mione," whinged Ron, "can't you cook something better? You know me and Harry are growing lads. Look at us; we're wasting away. How am I supposed to keep body and soul together with fungus stew?"

Hermione's reply was terse, and inaudible to Harry. Probably saying she would give Ron a bigger portion and less for him, he thought dismally.

Ron got to his feet, his face dark with fury, and stomped over to Harry's bunk before shoving a plate of grey slop towards him. A spoon slid over the edge of the plate and clattered to the floor, splattering food everywhere.

Listlessly, Harry brushed sticky globs from his bedding, only managing to smear them deeper into the fabric.

"Here's your dinner. Give me the bloody locket," Ron snarled, his mouth an angry twist. "Apparently, it's my turn for misery."

Hermione's hand on his shoulder made him whirl round and level his ill temper on her. "What? I did what you wanted, didn't I?" he shouted in her face. "Geez, I can't do anything right in this place, can I? Don't complain, Ron. Eat what you're given, Ron. Help Harry, Ron. Forget it! I'm out of here!"

Side-stepping Hermione's concern, he strode out of the tent, slapping the canvas flap back as he left.

"It's not quite as effective as slamming the door, is it?" Hermione murmured.

"Hmph!" Harry dragged himself up to a semi-sitting position and started to spoon the foul-smelling, tasteless mush from his plate into his mouth. Even chewing seemed like too much hassle, and he stopped half way, mouth sagging open.

With gentle hands, Hermione closed his mouth and removed the chain from his neck. "Here, I'll take this. You finish eating, Harry. Then, maybe we should go and look for Ron. I'm really worried about him."

Harry nodded, his eyes glazed and expressionless.

As Hermione slipped the locket over her head, she felt the weight of her own depression descending. Sighing deeply, she lay down next to Harry on the bunk.

"We've got to do something, Harry. I can't stand much more of this."

He slid an arm around her thin shoulders and kissed the side of her unkempt fuzz of hair.

"We'll think of something, Hermione. I promise."

~*~

Snape's mind wandered as the student meeting dragged on. Petty inter-house rivalries did not interest him and appeared unchanged since the days of his youth, so he took the opportunity to observe the others.

The bickering over which house had more time on the Quidditch training pitch was interminable. He knew he should intervene, but was intrigued by the increasingly physical interaction between Malfoy and Lovegood.

He had noticed the ill-grace with which Draco had taken a seat on the couch next to Luna. Positioning himself as far away from the girl as possible, Malfoy had been unable to conceal his sneer. But, leaning back into the softness of the cushions, his expression had changed somewhat as he breathed in Miss Lovegood's scent. Severus recalled how she smelled clean and fresh, like moonlight and apples. Its effect was apparent and seemed to soothe Malfoy's irritation.

That was until the discussion about Quidditch erupted, at which stage Draco sat forward on the edge of the sofa, turning towards the blonde witch. With a finger wagging in her face then prodding her shoulder, he flung some heated comments about the intelligence of Ravenclaws in general and Luna in particular.

Luna smiled gently, nodding and patting Draco's knee soothingly in response. As his colour rose and his ire increased, his face got closer and closer to the witch's until he was breathing hard, inches from her nose. His hands came up and clenched the loose cloth at Lovegood's shoulders. Luna's hand stilled on his knee, then gave an imperceptible squeeze.

"I agree with you, Malfoy. Perhaps you would like to have a further discussion after this meeting, and we could work this out together. Hm?"

Draco looked in horror at his hands fisted in Luna's robes. "As if, Looney," he snarled, shoving her away from him and turning his back on her.

Snape noticed the slight tremor in Malfoy's hands as the young man folded his arms across his thin chest and the continued nervous jiggling of his crossed legs during the ensuing discussion about house points.

Interesting, thought Severus. Just as interesting was the small knowing smile on Neville's face as he too watched the interaction. One of Snape's informants had advised him Lovegood and Longbottom were up to something, but he didn't think Malfoy baiting was their focus. No, he was certain they had other nefarious plans.

Severus took a closer look at Longbottom, observing how the young man appeared to have matured since last year. Minerva had always extolled his Gryffindor virtues; perhaps the cauldron destroyer was more switched on than Snape had given him credit for previously.

Allowing his mind to drift back to the Quidditch issue, Severus realised all they required was someone to draw up a roster. He had neither the time nor the inclination himself. What they needed was someone with an organised mind, like the Granger girl. He actually missed her in a peculiar way. Rather like missing a thorn after it has been removed, he had a strange sense of loss.

Life as headmaster would have been much easier with her alongside him as Head Girl instead of this bunch of dunderhead misfits. Severus could even have put up with Potter as Head Boy. No, he could have chosen another Head Boy. Maybe his choice of Malfoy wasn't so bad after all, he mused. At least he had the young Slytherin's ear and could exert some influence on him.

Light tapping from the office window derailed his train of thought. A small owl pushed through the slightly open window, gliding silently to Snape's shoulder where it alighted, hooting quietly. It rubbed its soft, feathered head on the man's cheek and nibbled at his ear lobe.

"Just give me the letter, bird-brain."

The little owl bobbed its head up and down and lifted its leg for Severus to untie the attached mail. Overbalancing with the movement, the small bird dug its needle-like talons into Snape's shoulder and grabbed his ear with its sharp, curved beak.

"Ow!"

The owl screeched and flew off as Severus swiped at it, landing on a nearby bookcase.

"Bloody, idiot bird, you're as useless as your owner," Severus grumbled, wiping a small smear of blood from his ear. As he reached for the owl, it hopped away, just out reach. "Stop being such a chicken. Give me the letter before I have you gutted and plucked."

Fluffing its feathers, the diminutive bird gave him a scornful look, then, with reluctance, held out its leg, wobbling a little as it pecked ineffectually at the attached mail. Severus laid a hand on its back to steady it before removing the note. "You look exhausted, little one," he murmured. "Go to the owlery for some rest and food before you fly home."

Reading the brief message, Snape turned back to the small gathering in his office.

"I apologise for the interruption to our edifying discussion, but I must adjourn this meeting. Perhaps, we can defer some of the issues to our next get-together.

"The issue of detentions I will leave in the capable hands of my esteemed colleagues, the Carrows, who will continue to refer all pupils requiring punishment to my office."

Alecto simpered and patted her brother's chunky shoulder.

"As for the Quidditch issue, Malfoy is the man for that. Draco, you and..." Severus scanned the group in front of him. "... Miss Lovegood can work together on a roster." He answered Draco's black look with a small smirk.

"And the other two, I'm sure you're aware of what is required of you."

"Sir?" Justin queried.

"Longbottom, take Finch-Fledgling under your wing and keep him out of trouble; my presence is required elsewhere," Snape said, his dark gaze locked with Longbottom's. Neville nodded, but Justin appeared confused.

"It's Finch-Fletchley, sir."

"Perfect," replied Severus as he ushered the group out of the room, scarcely waiting for the door to close before he grabbed his cloak and Death Eater's mask.

~*~

A short time later, Snape hurried out from the gloomy shadows of the castle walls, his robes flapping round his legs in the stiff breeze. Striding downhill towards the old town, he muttered under his breath as brightly-clad clots of happy people obstructed his route down High Street. He ignored the hawkers' cries and the street performers' antics as he dodged on and off the pavement, avoiding the slowest of the ambling pedestrians the ones who did not move at the sight of an imposing Death Eater bearing down on them.

"Stupid tourists, shift your dawdling arses."

A smoky whiff of whisky tempted his nostrils as he passed the open doorway of a pub. Peaking in, the swing of a kilt caught his eye moments before the wailing skirl of bagpipes assailed his ears.

"For the love of Merlin! Scottish, tartan shite," he grouched.

Rechecking the details on the small note in his hand, Severus was relieved to find this was not the allocated meeting place. He loved Edinburgh, but at the height of the festival and tourist season, it tried his patience to the limit.

Striking out into the centre of the cobbled street again, he narrowly escaped being engulfed in a swarm of Muggles with camcorders glued to their eyes and heads rubber-necking back and forth. They gawped at his cloak and mask, whispering and pointing.

"Hey, big man, I like your costume. Are you in a show or something?" a snot-nosed youngster shouted after him.

He grinned behind his Death Eater's mask. It was one of the things he liked about Edinburgh at this time of year; you could get away with anything.

Heading further down the street, he swung left on to Bank Street, pulled open a door a few paces down the road on the left, and stepped off the busy thoroughfare into the cool, dim interior of Deacon Brodie's Tavern. He knew where he was going and made straight for the stairs ahead of him.

Suddenly, he was grabbed from behind, his elbows pinned to his sides by a strong pair of encircling arms. He caught the man's familiar animal scent as he was dragged backwards into the gents' toilets. Unable to reach his sheathed wand, Severus trod hard on his assailant's foot.

With a yelp, the man tightened his grip, and with a sharp yank of Disapparition, they both disappeared.

A/N: I have sunny33 to thank for her beta skills and Jokay for aiding and abetting with the destruction of my brain cells.

Deacon Brodie's Tavern is on the corner of The Royal Mile (High Street) and Bank Street in Edinburgh. Named after an interesting Edinburgh character, Deacon William Brodie, who was a town councillor and well respected carpenter by day, and a burglar of the properties he made security systems for by night. He and his accomplice were hanged in 1788, using gallows Brodie had designed and paid for the year prior.

The door on Bank Street used to lead to the upstairs bar, where I did a good deal of my underage drinking. The pub has changed owners since then, and I'm sure those kind of misdemeanours are no longer allowed.

Translation:

Fankle Scots a tangle, a state of confusion.

Fadge

Chapter 4 of 17

Fadge - 1. New Zealand - *n.* wool pack. 2. English - *v* to agree. Woolgathering and agreements.

Fadge

Disclaimer: It's tatties o'er the side for me, gin Jo losses the rag.

Translation: Scots It's a bad outlook for me if Ms Rowling loses her temper. (literally: It's potatoes over the side for me.)

The two men arrived gracelessly, feet slipping on polished wooden floorboards and landing with a heavy clatter. As the person holding his arms paused to draw breath, Severus wrenched himself free and withdrew his wand. Sending off a volley of hexes and a smoke screen as he turned to face his kidnapper, Snape attempted to right himself but caught the heel of his boot on the edge of his cape. The material snagged, unbalancing him, and with a muttered expletive he staggered backwards, arms wind-milling wildly.

The other wizard tried to distance himself from Snape's flailing limbs, only to be tripped by a hefty dragonhide boot connecting with his shin. He landed awkwardly, sprawling full length and striking his chin hard on the floor. Reaching a hand out, he grabbed the edge of Snape's cape, yanking the tall wizard completely off balance.

Severus toppled over backwards, falling like a sack of potatoes and striking his head with considerable force on the unyielding, metal bars of a sturdy cage.

"Enough," his assailant growled, grabbing the front of Snape's robes and dragging him to his feet.

"Get off, you mongrel," grumbled Severus. He gave the other man a shove as he rubbed a tender spot on his scalp, checking his fingers afterwards for any signs of bleeding.

"How's your head? Any damage to that thick skull of yours?" The query was accompanied by a small snigger.

"You attacked me from behind. What was that all about?"

"Constant vigilance, mate. You were drifting along, woolgathering."

Severus huffed and re-sheathed his wand before straightening his robes.

"I spotted this Death Eater, complete with cape and mask, entering the pub where I was going to meet my friend for a quiet pint," explained the shaggy-haired wizard. "I didn't think he'd want to come face-to-face with another Death Eater in Edinburgh, so I was going to whisk him away. Then I realised it was you."

"So you brought me here, and now I'm missing out on my drink at the pub."

"Take your mask off and sit yourself down, you grumpy git. I'm sure I can find a bottle of Firewhisky somewhere in the flat." With a cheery grin and a flick of his scruffy hair, he scooted out of the room.

As Snape removed his Death Eater garb and took a seat on the couch, he could hear kitchen-cupboard doors being opened and closed until there was a welcome clink of glass. Soon, Remus Lupin came back into the room waving a bottle in one hand and a packet of shortbread in the other.

"It's good to see you, mate. It's been a while since you last visited the old bachelor pad."

"I wasn't exactly planning to come this time, either. You just dragged me in off the street."

Remus chuckled as he plonked himself down on the sofa next to Severus and handed him a tumbler. After pouring a couple of generous drams and stretching his lanky legs out in front of him, he patted Snape's thigh. "So, tell me, what are you doing in full costume?"

"Your message was, *Pint at DBs*, which I took to mean Deacon Brodie's. But the next line had been pecked by Spangle, your useless owl. I thought it said *Just the DEs*. So I came prepared for Death Eaters."

"My owl's not useless, he's so small no-one notices him, which can be very useful. Besides, I'm sure he wouldn't damage a message on purpose, unless you were rude to him." Remus gave Severus an interrogatory stare, which Snape ignored. "Anyway, the note said, *Just the DBs*. The dog's bollocks, you daft wassock. Why would I want you dressed as a Death Eater?"

"Who knows what goes on in your mind, Lupin." Severus shrugged his shoulders, raising his hands and shaking his head. The werewolf's hearty laugh brought a small smile to the dour man's lips.

"Geez, I've missed you, Sev. It's been too long since we last caught up. C'mon, let's give this whisky a skelping."

~*~

Touching his wand to the small coin in his hand, Neville already knew who he was going to contact, but reviewed his choice quickly in his head before sending the message. Luna, he needed for the break in, and Ginny, as a second Gryffindor, for the smash-and-grab. He wondered whether he should involve anyone else, but decided against it. Things were getting too dangerous in the castle as it was with the Carrows prowling the halls. They were almost as sneaky as Professor Snape himself, somehow managing to appear as if from nowhere, but their presence was much more malevolent. Imagining Alecto Carrow's bony fingers grabbing his shoulder as he crept down a night-darkened corridor made Neville shudder.

Focusing, he communicated his instructions via the coin. Clear enough for those in the know, but obscure enough to confuse unwanted observers. The lettering glowed brightly for a moment before fading back into the dull metal.

Fins 10p.

~*~

"No, don't tell me where they are." Snape's hands were held up protectively in front of him, pushing the uninvited knowledge away.

"You need to know, Sev."

"Why, Lupin? They've left school, and they're no longer under my feet; why should I care where the precious prats are?"

"Because I've been keeping an eye on the boys from a distance, but I wouldn't be welcome in their camp after I had a falling out with Harry."

"And I would?"

"... maybe..."

"No."

"Aw, c'mon, Sev. Do it for me. You know you want to." Remus made pretend puppy dog eyes at Severus, batting his eyelashes vigorously.

"Fuck off!"

"They're going to need you."

"No. I don't want to get involved. I've got enough on my plate with the Carrows at Hogwarts, our esteemed Dark Lord becoming more and more psychotic, a battle looming and a bunch of useless dunderheads for pupils. Not to mention the staff, who all think I'm a murdering sociopath."

"Not all of them. I've had a quiet word in a few ears."

"Well, that changes everything."

"Good. So you'll do it?"

"No."

"Harry's struggling with focussing on his quest."

"That doesn't surprise me, but doesn't change my mind."

"Ronald Weasley's not coping with the lack of food."

"The answer's still no. He'll get over it once he's back in his mother's molly-coddling arms."

"And Hermione's amazing brain is withering away through lack of intellectual stimulation."

"Ooh, you nearly got me with that one... Miss Granger... Hmm..." Severus paused, lifting a finger to his lip and pretending to think deeply before answering. "No!"

Remus sighed, swirling his Firewhisky dregs around in the bottom of his tumbler. He watched as golden currents eddied through the amber liquid; the colour reminded him of Hermione's eyes. His hands curled tight round the glass, and he took a deep, calming breath before turning his pleading gaze back to Snape. "This is really important to me, Sev. I need to know Hermione is well, and she needs more than a couple of teenage ne'er-do-wells for company."

Snape scowled at him. "Why are you so concerned about Miss Granger?"

"It's a bit complicated..." Lupin's eyes dropped to the whisky glass in his hands again.

"What about Tonks, your wife? Come to think of it, why are we at the Edinburgh bachelor flat and not at your marital home?"

Remus stared into his drinking vessel, as if seeking inspiration, or at least some way to tell Severus something. Something important...

~*~

Luna Lovegood hummed as she made her way through the dimly lit corridors. It was just past curfew, and the evening rounds had been quiet. Her footfall was light, and she skipped every fourth or fifth step in time with the nonsense song lilting through her head.

The wizard tailing her gritted his teeth with annoyance. Everything she did was a source of irritation. The tuneless humming, the girly gait and the irregular skipping all caused his ire to rise. The fact the wall sconces turned on as she approached and off again as she passed, lighting her passage and leaving him following behind her in gloom, had not escaped his notice either. Even the castle appeared to be under her spell.

He noticed how the candlelight shimmered on her nebula of silver-blond hair. His fingers twitched with an urge to reach out and touch the bouncing, silken tresses. Squashing down the impulse, he shook his head in denial and curled his hands into tight fists, which he rammed further into his armpits, wedging them there so he could not possibly be tempted.

In the dim light he did not see the uneven flagstone which rose up from the floor, catching the toe of his shoe and sending him lurching towards a suit of armour. Striking his head with a resounding, metallic clang on the suit's breastplate, his hands shot out, clutching for purchase and snagged the back of Lovegood's robes. The skipping witch stopped in her tracks, turning lightly on her toes and peering into the gloom towards him. He righted himself and straightened his ruffled robes with an assumed dignity he did not feel.

"Oh, Draco, are you all right?" Luna's smile was winsome and bright. "You know, you don't have to escort me back to my room if you're having trouble with the Dotted Bigging. I can manage quite fine alone."

"The dotted... whatever... isn't a problem. And I wasn't escorting you, I was..."

"I didn't mean to suggest you were stalking me, Draco."

"Don't flatter yourself, Lovegood. I was just going to head down this corridor to... to..."

"Isn't that funny? It only leads to the Ravenclaw Tower." Luna's head tilted inquisitively, and her clear, grey eyes watched Draco's embarrassed shuffling. "Why don't you walk with me to the door, then you can head off wherever you were going."

She grabbed his unwilling hand and dragged him along the hallway with her, chattering pleasantly as she walked. "Tomorrow we'll have to sit down together and work out those rosters, but not until after I've had a word with the Dotted Bigging. Really, it shouldn't be playing tricks on you like that."

Draco's mouth opened and closed ineffectually.

"Well, thank you for seeing me home to my door. I must dash; I've got to go and see Uncle Phin in a mo..." Luna clamped her free hand across her mouth. "Oops! There's me, talking a load of old nonsense again."

Stretching up on her tiptoes, she gave Draco a soft peck on his cheek. Then, with a faint blush and a final squeeze of his hand, she released her grip and stepped through the doorway.

The corridor lights extinguished themselves as she disappeared, plunging the bemused wizard into darkness. He stood for a while, mouth slightly open, fingers flexing in irregular jerks, before shaking the confusion from his head.

"What the...?"

In a characteristic swirl of expensive robes, he turned on his heel and strode back down the corridor, muttering and rubbing the kissed sensation from his slightly flushed cheek.

~*~

With a frown creasing his forehead, Ron ran a hand through his unkempt hair. Wincing when his fingers caught on a knot, he gave his unwashed scalp a rough scratch. His mum would be horrified to see him like this, so dirty and thin and bloody useless.

He knew he should get out of bed and wash, but knowing was one thing and doing was another. He felt so woolly-headed all the time. No matter how much he thought about getting up, there was no motivation. Ron just couldn't see the point.

There was nothing to look forward to, no food, no family and no friends. At the back of his mind he realised Hermione and Harry weren't far away, but they weren't really his friends anymore. They kept to themselves, talking about him behind his back, planning things and not letting him in on their secrets.

Miss Hoity-Toity only ever spoke to him with arms crossed or hands on hips, her voice an irritating, nagging whine that rubbed him up the wrong way and forced him to ignore her or answer with reciprocal belligerence. Bloody hell, why had he ever wanted to go out with the harpy?

His stomach growled with nauseating hunger. The bushy-haired harridan wouldn't even feed him properly. He had tried to explain, politely, his mum could cook up a better meal, but Hermione had lost the rag completely. Maybe, it was her time of the month. He rubbed a roughened palm over his face. Who knows?

And Harry was no help. They used to be best mates until Hermione came along, sticking her snobby, upturned nose into their business. Now Harry was all quiet and moping and wouldn't speak with his old pal much. He wasn't interested in talking Quidditch anymore, only secret-squirrel whispering with Hermione by the fire or going outside with Hermione, leaving Ron alone in the tent.

Cold and tired, he pulled his grubby, damp blanket tight round his skinny shoulders, but couldn't sleep. Life was so uncomfortable, and those two didn't give a toss. The pair of them just buggered off out the door with a carefree, "Later, Ron." They didn't even say where they were going, probably planning to have a great time without him.

His thoughts followed slow, circular patterns for a while, mulling over the injustices wrought on him by his fellow campers. Neither of them was concerned about him or how he felt. In fact, nobody took any interest in him at all. Not one person would notice if he disappeared off the face of the earth.

A solo tear slid down his dirt-streaked cheek. He dashed it away.

Look at me, crying like a baby. What kind of a wizard cries in his bed alone like this? Ron raged internally.

A useless, ugly, friendless, stupid fuckwit, a small, niggling voice at the back of his head replied.

He had never felt so bloody miserable in all his life, and nobody bloody cared. They'd all be better off without him.

~*~

Hermione glanced back over her shoulder to where the tent stood hidden amongst the trees. She could hear the constant drip-drip of water dropping from the rain-sodden leaves and bouncing off the canvas. Turning back towards Harry, she pushed through the wet bracken and clambered up onto the uneven stone wall where he sat hunched over in the drizzle.

He shuffled his bottom along a little, giving Hermione space to sit beside him on the moss covered capstones. Rainwater trickled off his hood as he moved and ran in a chilly rivulet down his neck. Tucking a finger inside his collar, he pulled clammy clothing away from his skin.

"If you're going to sit out here in the rain, Harry, you ought to cast an Impervius Charm."

"Don't nag me, Hermione."

She wrapped an arm around his shivering, wet shoulders. "I'm not nagging. I'm just concerned about you. If you don't keep warm and dry, you're going to get ill and be more miserable."

"I know, but I can't be bothered. I feel so lethargic, even when I haven't got the Horcrux hanging from my neck."

"You're not as bad as Ron. I'm really worried about him."

"Typical. Ron gets all the sympathy," Harry grouched.

"Harry, listen to yourself. You know that's not true."

His grunted reply was noncommittal.

Hermione pulled him in closer to her and kissed his forehead. "Come on. Let's get you into the warmth. You can have some hot soup and a sleep, and I'll take over the watch out here."

Gently guiding the numbed boy back to the tent, Hermione helped him strip his sodden clothes off and wrapped him in the driest blanket she could find. Nothing was truly dry anymore.

"Sit here by the fire and I'll get you something to eat," she told him before heading over to the cooking stove. As she passed Ron's recumbent form, he huffed and turned his back on her.

Laying a hand on his bony shoulder, Hermione knelt down beside his bed. "Hey, Ron, do you want something to eat, too?"

"As if you care," he grumbled.

"Tell you what. I'll bring a cup of soup over, and you can have it here in bed. How does that sound?"

"I'm not hungry."

"You need to eat, Ron."

"Bossy cow," he muttered, shrugging his shoulder out from under her hand and moving further away.

Hermione sighed and rubbed her forehead, wondering why he was being so difficult. As she pushed herself up to standing, she realised Ron was right; when he behaved like this she really didn't care. An uncomfortable wave of guilt surged through her, and she ducked her head as she shuffled away, hoping no-one would see her lack of compassion.

She heated the cauldron's contents, stirring absent-mindedly, her thoughts drifting as her hands worked on automatic. The soup roiled, its surface scum breaking and reforming at the edges of the pot as small pieces of unidentifiable vegetables rose to the surface before disappearing again in the unappetising broth.

Hermione's eyes followed the fluid motion with hypnotic fascination. She no longer knew what was in the brew, having added ingredients and reheated the same pot again and again. She knew only it always smelled of boiled cabbage and musty fungi, making her stomach lurch in rebellion.

Ladling soup into cracked, grimy mugs, she set the cooking pot aside before taking a serving to each of the boys. Harry accepted his between cold, wrinkle-fingered hands, wrapping himself around the steaming warmth rising in small wisps from the cup.

Ron's, on the other hand, was ignored completely. He drew his cover round him like a cocoon, shutting his eyes and clamping his lips tight.

"For goodness sake, Ron, stop being such a prat." Hermione slammed the mug down on the floor next to his bed, slopping some goop over the side. "Here it is; take it or leave it."

She scowled hard at the unresponsive curve of his back.

"Fine! I agree with you, boys. This is shit, but at least I'm still trying to work things out, unlike you two miserable bastards."

Grabbing hold of her own soup, she stomped out of the tent, heading back out to the old stone dyke.

"Dicks! I don't know why I bother. Do I get a word of thanks for all the cooking I do?" she muttered to herself. Angrily, she kicked at a loose piece of moss, spilling hot soup over the back of her hand. "Ow! Shit!"

Imminent tears pricked at her eyes as she tried to lick the scalding liquid off her skin, spilling more as her hand tilted. She swore and dropped the cup, bursting into sobs as it struck a rock and shattered into jagged white shards.

Hermione scarcely flinched as a confident, reassuring arm circled her heaving shoulders. Burying her face into the solid warmth of the man's dark-clad chest, she wept in his comforting embrace.

"I'm s... so glad you're here. I didn't... didn't think you'd be coming tonight. I ca... can't do... do this anymore." She hiccupped, wiping sticky, burned fingers under her running nose. "Look at me. I'm a mess, and my hand hurts."

Pulling a clean, monogrammed handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket, he wrapped it round her scalded hand, whispering gentle, healing spells as he did. "Hush, lass, it's going to be alright," he murmured into her wild tangle of hair, holding the trembling witch close and kissing her forehead tenderly.

Her hands snuck under his heavy, woollen cloak, seeking his body heat and clutching his lean body tight. Finding the sense of security she sought, she inhaled his familiar male scent overlaid with the smoky tang of Firewhisky and damp wool. As she spoke into his chest, she felt her words vibrate through his torso.

"Take me home with you, Remus."

A/N: Thank again to sunny33 for doing all the beta chores.

Translation:

Fadge New Zealand noun: wool pack; English - verb: to agree

Skelp Scots to hit/smack.

Dottled Scots witless, daft

Bigging Scots building

Furtive

Chapter 5 of 17

Furtive - a. stealthy, sly. There are people sneaking about where they ought not to be.

Disclaimer: Dinna ca' th' polis. Ah huv'nae done nuhin' wrang.

Translation: Scots vernacular Don't call the police; I've done nothing wrong.

Dark hair flopped forward as the professor shook his head over the dismal inanities he was reading in the homework essays submitted by the Slytherin and Gryffindor combined class. He was certain they weren't all complete idiots. Malfoy was reasonably bright, with some potential, and a couple of the Gryffindors could do better if they stopped chattering en masse and concentrated.

Youngsters nowadays! They really didn't understand, did they? They could not conceive of the complexities of life before the war, how a person might have to collaborate with more than one faction in order to achieve a goal. It wasn't as simple as goodies against baddies or fighting for the light against the Death Eaters as their pathetic treatises implied.

Pushing the parchments aside for a while, he stretched out his long legs, tucked his hands behind his head and tried to recall exactly what it had been like.

~*~

Snape stared gloomily out of the window. The castle turrets were illuminated against the dark, cloud-laden sky, and sheeting rain was briefly highlighted in the spotlights' bright beams. His mind searched for the word Lupin always used to describe this particularly unpleasant Scottish weather.

"Dreich!"

It was a good word, especially when pronounced with Scottish grimness. It conveyed the misery and dislike of the persistent, bleak weather, all in a single syllable ending in that wonderful spitting diphthong, typical of the frugal Scots.

On a good day, Edinburgh was stunning, but on nights like this, even the castle, perched on its impregnable fortress of rock, looked as if it had hunkered down with its collar turned up against the wind slicing in off the North Sea.

Turning his back on the view, Severus let his gaze travel over the room. It hadn't changed much since he and Lupin had shared the flat in their student days at university. The cage to contain the werewolf during his full moon transformations still stood solidly in the corner. Snape rubbed his scalp where it still smarted from hitting his head on the sturdy bars.

The floor was strewn with Lupin's discarded clothing. Somehow, he had never learned the art of tidying up, driving his more fastidious flatmate to distraction. Remembering their many house-keeping discussions, which frequently ended with hexing and huffiness, brought a small smile to Snape's thin lips.

The large couch, where he had spent many a pleasant evening talking and drinking with his mate, still took up a significant space. Severus had been glad of its size on the frequent occasions he had spent the night watching over Lupin in his enclosure, napping in between bouts of stirring the next batch of Wolfsbane and checking on wolf-man. Memories of those painful transformations sent shivers down his spine. At least, with the improvements they had made to the potion, things had become easier.

Since the beginning of this school year, it had become harder for Severus to keep up with the manufacture of Lupin's Wolfsbane, what with his heavy work load at Hogwarts and the increasingly bizarre and dangerous calls made on him by the Dark Lord. He had become concerned as the boy-wonder and megalomaniac's standoff came to an end and the inevitable skirmishes started he may not have time to do it at all. Snape shuddered at the thought of the werewolf going through the gut-wrenching changes without his potion.

Very few people knew they had been friends since their late teens, even fewer realised he and Lupin had gone to university and flatted together just after they left school. So much had changed since then, and with the return of Voldemort, they had less time together nowadays. Snape was busy at Hogwarts, and Lupin was running himself ragged doing whatever it was mad dogs do. He always seemed to be flitting from here to there, never giving Severus a straight answer about his whereabouts.

Tonight, however, they had spent some time talking before Lupin had to leave. Kicking at a pile of long-abandoned clothing lying tangled on the floor, Severus cast his mind back over their recent conversation.

The werewolf had been trying to persuade him to get in contact with the golden trio. What intrigued Severus was Lupin's insistence. He had briefly tried to interest Severus with helping Harry because he was Lily's son, but had very quickly abandoned that line of attack when he saw Snape's antipathy. Weasley scarcely rated a mention. When he had begun talking about Granger, however, the placid wizard's whole demeanour had changed.

The man's expression had softened, and he had talked animatedly about the young witch's intelligent, inquiring mind, her need for support and her soft, brown eyes. It sounded almost as if Lupin had tender feelings for the chit.

Severus swirled the dregs of Firewhisky in his tumbler, watching the warm, tawny-gold liquid whorls. It reminded him of Lupin's eye colour, and after their chat, it also brought to mind Hermione's attentive gaze. Hermione? Listen to him. Merlin, he was being influenced by wolf-boy. He shook his head, dislodging the unwanted thought.

Finishing his drink in a single gulp, Severus picked up his cloak and mask and headed out of the flat. As he clattered down the stone stairs to the communal front door, he cursed Lupin for planting unwelcome ideas in his already overloaded life. He couldn't quite figure out what was going on between the werewolf and the Gryffindor know-it-all, and now that question would niggle away in his subconscious until he solved the puzzle.

He planned to cut down over Waverley Bridge, past Princes Street Gardens and head up to the castle, returning to Hogwarts from the regulated Apparition point under the garrison's ramparts. Starting back uphill, the footfall of Snape's dragonhide boots on the rain-damp cobbles echoed off the old buildings as he strode along the narrow street.

Without warning, a searing sensation in his left forearm stopped him in his tracks; the Dark Lord obviously had different plans for the end of the evening. Casting around for a suitable location, his eye caught on the darkened entrance to a small vennel. Ducking into Fleshmarket Close, Snape checked he was unobserved before Disapparating.

~*~

Icy puddle-water seeped in through the stitching of Draco's pricey shoes, making his toes cold and uncomfortably damp. As he rubbed chilled fingers together, he stamped his feet to keep them warm, instantly regretting the movement when mud slopped over the top of his brogues. Glancing out from his sheltered position close to the school gates, he watched as the falling rain turned to sleet, melting into the saturated ground as soon as it landed.

It was way past curfew, and he really should not have been standing outside in the freezing cold at this time of night. In normal circumstances, he would have sent one of his minions to do this job, but that was no longer possible since Crabbe and Goyle had become a constant, bullying torment with their less than subtle threats and boorish comments. He almost felt some sympathy for the Potter-Weasley duo for their years of persecution at the thugs' hands, but the feeling passed rapidly.

The thin blond blew onto his hands, the warm breath permeating his quality wool gloves and relieving the penetrating chill from his slim fingers for a brief moment. He disliked the wet-sheep odour starting to rise from his previously pristine gloves. Sniffing with disdain, he ran a damp, cashmere-clad finger under his dripping nose.

It had been Looney Lovegood's suggestion he should look out for his ex-head of house, and he wondered for the hundredth time why he had listened to her madcap ramblings. Why wasn't she out here in the sleety rain herself, if she was so worried about Snape? Oh, that's right, she had a cosy bed to go to. Draco's teeth chattered as he ground them together in anger. Well, he had a warm bed to retire to as well, just as soon as he'd made sure Severus was home safely.

Malfoy didn't like admitting he was becoming increasingly concerned the longer he waited, convinced the later it got, the more likely the man returning to the Apparition point would need his help. Maybe, he should go back to the castle and rouse one of the staff to take over his vigil. No, it was bad enough Draco waiting for him. The

thought of what Snape might do if he found McGonagall or Filch hanging around in the dark made the young wizard snigger at the possibility of a colourful hexing.

His laugh was cut short by a loud crack, followed by muffled swearing, an irregular, dragging sound and a squelching slap of something heavy falling in the mud.

Then, silence.

Draco's heart plummeted.

Taking a deep breath, he crept from his hiding place to find out what had happened.

~*~

Two Gryffindors were waiting at the bottom of the stairs, Longbottom with a hand resting gently on the gargoyle and Ginny pacing impatiently to and fro, when Luna waltzed up.

Neville watched her and tried to suppress a smile as Luna tripped over her own feet in her twirling dance. Stumbling into a suit of armour, she was caught in its burnished, metal arms before being stood back on her feet. A steel gauntlet patted her bottom, sending her on her way. Neville could have sworn the armour-faced guard smiled at her indulgently.

"Does she have to act like a complete ninny all the time?" Ginny muttered in irritation.

"How much is an act?" Neville countered.

"Thanks for waiting for me, you two. I had to have a word with the Dotted Bigging before I came along. Now, what were we supposed to be doing? Oh, yes! Uncle Pin! We'll have to be quick because I think the ophidians are coming."

"We couldn't get in without you." Ginny rolled her eyes and made a pinch-mouthed face as she followed the blonde witch up the curving staircase to the headmaster's office. "And what do we care about obsidian?"

"You're being funny, Gin," Luna replied, giggling as she led the way into the room. Stopping, she turned to the redhead with the most serious expression Ginny had ever seen on her normally calm features. "They're ophidians, not obsidian! Even the blackest snakes deserve respect. You really should care about them, Ginevra. I do." Then, ducking her head, as if she had exposed too much, Luna turned away.

"Snakes?" Ginny mouthed to Neville, whose dark hair flopped over his eyes as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you mean Nagini, Luna?" he asked.

"That, too," she answered cryptically, shifting her gaze to the hanging portraits and seeking out the austere figure of Phineas Nigellus Black. "Uncle Pin! How are things?" Her face broke into a cheery smile again.

"Dismal and damp, I regret to say."

Neville looked perplexed as he returned his attention to searching the office for their objective. Trying to think clearly with Luna around was not always easy, he decided, brushing his hair back with his hand, as if removing the obstruction to his vision would help.

"Can we concentrate on what we're doing now, Ginny?"

Touching the sleeve of the girl at his side, he drew her mind back to the task at hand. The confusion on her face melted away as she focused on scouring the room, looking under chairs, desk and coffee table, running her hand along the underside of shelves in the bookcase.

"For goodness sake, Gryffindors," Phineas Nigellus grumbled. "You would be pathetic at 'Hunt the Grindylow'. Do you really believe what you seek is concealed? It's hidden in plain sight."

"Of course," Neville nodded. His eyes ran over the room again, looking at the obvious, before settling back on the coffee table set in front of the fire and flanked by comfortable couches. "There!"

Eagerly, he swept a scattering of coffee mugs and scrolls from the table top. Below the layer of everyday detritus, he exposed an elaborately engraved sword, visible through a glazed panel, nestling on plush, crimson cushion.

"This is my job," Ginny murmured, running slim fingers carefully around the edges of the wood, following the grain and touching every knot and whorl. There were no locks, hinges or obvious means for opening the sealed depository. She cursed under her breath.

Longbottom shuffled nervously, a small bead of sweat appearing on his forehead. "Everything all right, Gin?"

"Bill assured me this would be obvious," she muttered to herself, "but I can't find a way to get in."

"How long have we got before the headmaster returns, Luna?"

"Hmm?"

Lovegood's vacuous look did not inspire confidence in Neville. Why did she always appear so vague when he knew it was not the case? "When will Snape be back?"

"I'm not sure, Neville," Luna replied with an apologetic smile. "Do you know, Uncle Pin?"

"Soon."

The answer was curt and unhelpful, sending Neville's anxiety levels soaring. Moist patches appeared in his armpits, and he wiped sweating hands down the front of his robe.

"Can I help in any way, Ginny?"

His inquiry was met by a frown and a subtle body shift as Ginny positioned herself between him and the sword's resting place.

"I'll take that as a no," Neville murmured, trying to glance around Weasley to assess her progress.

~*~

"Hermione, love, wake up."

A gentle shake stirred her from her nap. Mumbling a negative response, she burrowed in closer to the warmth, savouring his pleasant, masculine smell.

"Come on, Hermione. I have to go home now."

"Why?"

"Because, much as I'd love to, I can't stay here all night with you. My buttocks will freeze to the ground if I sit here any longer. In fact," he said, poking at a numb butt-cheek, "I think they already have."

"Don't go, professor; you're so warm and toasty." She wrapped her arms around his waist, attempting to delay his departure. Feeling a low chuckle reverberating through his chest to her ear, she smiled drowsily.

"I'm not your professor any more, young lady," he growled, "but I'll still punish you if you don't get moving." He gave her a quick one-armed hug before unwrapping his dry cloak from round her shoulders and peeling her clinging arms from his torso. "Come on, lass. You have some boys to look after, and I have a wife to go home to."

His sigh was very small, but easily audible to Hermione at such close range.

"Why did you marry her, Remus?"

As he stared into the distance without answering, Hermione thought she had pushed him too far. She watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. She patted his knee and moved away from him.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

A large, warm hand caught hers, preventing her from moving further.

"Understand this, Hermione, I am married to Tonks, and we'll be a family soon, but my life is complicated. She and I..." He paused, looking down at the lichen-encrusted rocks beneath his feet. His eyes held unfathomable sorrow when he returned his tawny gaze to the young witch's face. "We both know our time is limited. You are so young and vivacious, and I know you will survive this war, but Tonks and I... We..."

A soft touch on his lips stilled his words. "No. You don't know what will happen."

An exhalation of breath flowed lightly over her palm as he wrapped her small hand in his, kissing the fingertip before drawing it away from his mouth.

"I do know, Hermione. That's the problem. I know what's going to happen to me, and I know what's going to happen to Severus, and to you, and to Harry, and... and..." He let her hand drop as he waved his arms in ever expanding circles in the air. "And it's all too bloody much at times. That's why I come to see you, for a bit of peace, to ease my heartache, because I know you're going to be all right in the end." His voice quivered, and a slow tear slid down his gaunt cheek.

She hugged him to her, wiping away the damp saltiness from his face with the hanky he had given her earlier, and he could not resist pulling her in to a crushing hug.

"I need you to be strong, Hermione, and I need your help."

"I'll do anything for you, Remus."

Releasing her from his embrace and tucking her hand into the crook of his elbow, he escorted her back closer to the tent as he told her what he wanted her to do.

A/N: Thanks go to sunny33, without whose aid this would be a morass of ridiculous punctuation.

Translation:

Dreich Scots dreary, bleak.

Vennel Scots narrow lane, alley.

Filch

Chapter 6 of 17

Filch - v.t. - steal, pilfer. Who's nicking what?

Filch

Disclaimer: Ca' canny, quines an' loons!

Translation: Scots / Doric Be careful, girls and boys!

"Weasley, can you tell me which factions were involved in the build up to the battle we have been studying?"

The redhead was pinned by the teacher's sharp gaze. Blushing to the hair roots, the student's eyes flitted around the others in the room, seeking assistance. Last night had been spent talking Quidditch, not with the study books.

"Hmm?" The looming professor filled the youngster's vision. "Come on, Weasley, we have covered this in previous lessons."

"Umm..."

A hand slammed down onto the wooden desk. "Pay attention!" He glared at the shrinking witch sharing the desk, who was surreptitiously trying to aid the carrot-top. "Are you ever going to take some initiative? Or, are you going to rely on your little friends to drag you through life? Your classroom achievements are pitiful, but with your family pedigree, what can I expect? Pull your socks up. It's time you learned to do things for yourself, Weasley."

"Yes, Professor." The reply, an embarrassed mutter as the intimidating wizard turned his questioning to the rest of the class, was followed by a swift release of breath and a soft, "Bloody hell," as the pupil's shoulders sagged after the onslaught.

~*~

"Get up!"

"Gerroff!" Severus mumbled, wincing as pain sparked through his left arm.

"Here, let me help you."

"Leave me." Snape's head drooped, and he laid his cheek on the cool, damp earth. "Just let me die here."

"No. Up you get." Pale hands hauled at the prostrated man in an attempt to lift him from the mire.

"Let go!" Severus shook his arm free irritably. "Can't you see I'm fine, you blithering idiot?"

Malfoy's lips pinched together in an attempt to bite back an angry retort.

"I'd rather die than be dragged up there by one of my students," Severus murmured, indicating the mist-shrouded buildings with a lift of his chin.

"I didn't realise you were such a drama queen."

Severus sniffed huffily as he pushed himself up to sitting then gradually worked his way to a standing position, walking his hands up his thighs. "I am not. I'm just a little tired and... emotional."

"Emotional!" Draco snorted. "Father says you don't do emotional."

Snape's dark eyes fixed on the young man at his side. "Don't I?"

His voice was a strange mix of question and threat, and Draco found he could not maintain eye contact. Letting his eyes drift down, Malfoy noted the man's torn sleeve and shredded, mud-splattered trouser leg.

"Don't try to pretend you're drunk when you're actually injured. Tough day at the office?" he asked.

"It's been a bugger of a night," agreed Snape with a weary nod of his head. "You wouldn't believe what..."

Draco quieted him with a raised hand. "No, I don't want to know. I saw enough during the school holidays to know I don't want to see any more."

"Very wise, young man," Severus concurred. "Now, why were you standing out here, after curfew, in such inclement weather?"

"Waiting for you, sir." Draco held his breath and closed his eyes in expectation of the inevitable explosion of vitriol. He could hear Snape's inhalation, ragged in the cold air, but there was no immediate reaction. Cracking open an eye, he peeked at the professor and was surprised by the perplexed look on the normally taciturn features.

"Waiting for me? Why?"

"It was Luna's..."

"Lovegood? Yes, she would be the type."

"She's a real..."

"...enigma. I agree."

"Actually, I was going to say, a pain in the backside."

"That, too." Snape's mouth nearly curved into a wry smile. "Now I've returned, there's no need for you to continue loitering, Malfoy. Away you go!"

"Can you walk?"

"Of course I can. What do you take me for? A cripple?" Snape's sneer disappeared in a grimace when he stepped forward, his injured leg threatening to buckle under his weight.

Taking no notice of the hiss of pain as he pulled the dark wizard's arm over his shoulder, Draco steadied the slightly taller man in his initial, lurching attempt to walk.

"Come on, Uncle Severus, we both need to get indoors and out of the rain." He tried to ignore the slimy sensation of blood and muck seeping into his tailor-made robes, knowing it was going to be well nigh impossible to remove without special laundering.

"Indeed," Snape murmured.

~*~

She had said she would do anything for him, but really, he was asking too much of her. Professor Snape was the last person Hermione wanted to deal with, so why had Remus been so insistent?

Pulling her sleeping bag up to her nose, she curled into a ball in an attempt to retain some of the warmth she had filched from Lupin. If she closed her eyes, the faint remnants of his comforting male aroma soothed her wakeful brain.

As she lay pretending to sleep so the boys would not disturb her, Hermione allowed her thoughts to wend back over their meetings.

One morning, not long after they had gone on the run, she had detected someone snooping around the boundaries of her protective spells. He had been startled when she had managed to approach him unheeded and bail him up with her wand-tip pressed hard into the base of his skull and a firm hand over his mouth. When she had confirmed his identity and he had turned around to face her, his expression was tinged with a smidgeon of guilt, reminding Hermione of a schoolboy caught with his hand in the biscuit barrel.

The easy smile and the exuberance with which Remus had hugged her, when he had realised she wasn't going to hex him to hell, had soon had Hermione giggling for the first time since she and the boys had started the camping fiasco.

Grabbing her hand, Remus had dragged her away from the tent, to a distance where they could not be overheard by Ron and Harry.

Seated on warm, springy heather, with their backs resting against a gnarled rowan and obscured from view of the tent by tall bracken, Lupin had cast a quick Muffliato and started talking.

After a brief enquiry into Harry and Ron's wellbeing, he had brought her up to date with the most recent news from the Order of the Phoenix, finishing with a round-up of the latest gossip from Hogwarts. When Hermione had asked how he knew what was going on at the school, he had just tapped the side of his nose and winked.

Over the following weeks he had visited frequently, somehow able to find them, no matter how many times the trio had moved camp in the interim. Each time, he had asked after Harry and Ron, checking how their mission was progressing before quickly moving on to what he had termed more interesting topics. Some days they had discussed plans for finding the Horcruxes, and at other times the pair had spent time practising defence and spellwork, invariably ending up hot, sweaty and giggling like school kids when Remus ended the session with an inventive hex.

Always at some stage during his visit, Lupin had talked about Severus Snape. Initially, he had spent time explaining Snape's dual roles; he had assured Hermione of the man's loyalty to the light and had built up a picture of a tormented, loyal, and ultimately redeemable man. Following his line of reasoning, she had eventually been convinced Dumbledore's death had been a soul-destroying act carried out under duress by a man under pressure from both sides of the conflict.

Despite Lupin's persistence, he hadn't been able to dispel all her concerns about the dark wizard's role as a Death Eater.

As time wore on, Lupin had talked more and more of Snape's need for someone to support and trust him. When Hermione had asked why Remus himself could not be that person, the werewolf had looked downcast. He had told her how much of his own time was now taken up as an intermediary between various factions – the werewolves, the Order, and he had hinted at spying on the enemy. The reason for his weary and often bedraggled appearance had become clearer.

He had explained to Hermione it was becoming harder to gain access to Hogwarts with the Carrows' constant, suspicious surveillance. Assuring her Severus was the best Potions master he had ever encountered, and the Wolfsbane he manufactured was second to none, Remus had explained how he would find life nearly intolerable if he could no longer access Snape's expertise. His eyes had filled with tears as he had spoken of being certain he would not survive the war himself and wanting to make life in the run up to the inevitable battle as stress free as possible. Finally, he had asked if she would be interested in learning how to make his Wolfsbane so he wouldn't have to go to the school for his supplies.

Hermione's heart had constricted with sadness as she had hugged the man whom she had come to count as a close friend. In her concern, she had agreed to do anything for him, and he had answered her with a rib-cracking hug, thanking her effusively and kissing her grubby temple.

Lupin had assured her she would not regret her decision, but now she lay shivering in her cooling bed asking herself *Why Professor Snape? Why me? I'm not one of his favourite students; I scarcely know the man, and I know he won't want to work with me, let alone teach me how to make Wolfsbane.*

~*~

"Might I suggest you remove yourselves from this room? Someone is approaching." The ex-headmaster's nose wrinkled in mild distaste.

"Who, Uncle Phin?"

"Undesirables." His reply was smothered by his hand holding a lace-edged pocket handkerchief to his prominent nose.

Luna turned to the Gryffindors to relay the message, but Neville was already muttering, "I heard. I heard. Come on, Ginny. Hurry up."

"Don't hassle me, Nev," Ginny replied, frowning at him before continuing in a petulant tone, "I'm trying my best. You couldn't do any better."

"I must insist you leave." Black's eyes flicked to the office door.

"We can't go yet; we haven't got the sword."

"Don't blame me for that, Neville. You haven't exactly been helpful."

"Now!" The portrait yelled.

"For goodness' sake! Let me do it, Ginny."

Elbowing her out of his way, Neville swung a heavy candlestick over his head, shattering the glazed panel with an almighty crash. Hastily, he stuck his hand through the jagged hole, withdrew the sword and started running for the door with Ginny and Luna hard on his heels.

Woken from her slumber by the racket, an elderly portrait shrieked with alarm. Her screams were added to by another ex-headmaster yelling, "What? What is it?"

A third shouting voice added to the cacophony. "Intruders! Thieves! They've taken the sword. Thieves! Stop them!"

Phineas Black lifted his handkerchief daintily to his mouth, covering the underlying smirk.

~*~

Not far away, in the night-darkened hallway, an oddly matched pair moved as quietly as possible, trying to evade detection. The corridors, lit only by their faint wand-light, were devoid of errant students, and the portraits on the wall watched them closely with suspicion written large in the shadows playing across their painted faces. Approaching the gargoyle at the foot of the headmaster's staircase, the couple conversed in whispers, their intuition telling them something untoward was afoot.

"I can't see a thing. The lanterns have gone out."

"I'm sure this beastly castle conspires against us."

"How could that be?"

"Just because you can't see it, doesn't mean it isn't happening."

"Shhh! What's that?"

Huddling closer together with trepidation, a low, grinding of stone-on-stone became audible as they listened in the quiet darkness, wands held aloft in trembling hands. A rasping snigger had them turning from side-to-side, seeking the culprit.

The taller figure leaned close to the gargoyle, whispering a password into the creature's sculpted ear. Nothing happened. Laying a cautious hand on the statue, the wizard repeated the words. Under his hand, the carving shivered and rippled. In expectation of the gargoyle moving aside, the man stepped forward only to have his way barred by a very solid, sniggering statue.

"What on earth do you think you're doing? Move!"

Slapping the gargoyle in his frustration, the wizard hissed with pain as his hand struck stone.

As he stood in the dark, cursing and shaking the stinging sensation from his palm, the corridor lights suddenly blazed on, and the statue sprang to rigid attention when another unlikely couple appeared around the corner and approached the foot of the headmaster's staircase.

"Professor." The wizard bent his head in greeting.

"Amycus. Alecto." Snape's acknowledgment was terse. "What..."

"We were just..."

"We knew you weren't here..."

"And we thought..."

"Something was up..."

"Those horrible children..."

"So, we..."

Severus waited impassively as the Carrows' words tripped over each other in their pathetic explanations, watching as Amycus wrung his hands and Alecto's head bobbed nervously. Eventually the pair ran out of steam, coming to a stuttering halt.

"Your enthusiasm for school security is admirable, colleagues. I assure you, no-one unexpected can access my office without my presence."

Alecto simpered.

Folding his arms across his chest and looking down the length of his nose, Snape continued, watching the siblings squirm under his dark gaze as he spoke. "Following my recent audience with the Dark Lord, which I believe you were both unfortunate to miss, I have some important issues to address with Mr Malfoy, our Slytherin representative. Would you care to join us now, to discuss night patrols and therapeutic management?"

"Ah! We have..." Amycus glanced at his sister, his eyes pleading.

"We have... a... um... rather pressing... thing... to do..."

"Urgently." Amycus finished emphatically.

Alecto nodded vigorously in agreement as she backed away from Snape's imposing presence, grabbing her brother's pudgy hand before turning and scurrying away down the corridor with the overweight wizard puffing in her wake.

When they disappeared from sight, Severus sagged against the gargoyle, scrubbing a hand over his wearied features.

"Merlin preserve us, can't I just get home in peace? What next?" he muttered.

With obvious effort he straightened himself, the statue slid quietly aside and Severus started to limp upstairs. Keeping his eyes down in an attempt to avoid catching his dragging feet on the steps, he missed seeing the gargoyle's grimace and hunching shoulders as it again barred access to the staircase.

Snape's mind was drifting towards the simple luxuries of a hot bath, followed by relaxing under the soft covers of his comfortable bed, when the sound of running feet roused him from his torpor. Suddenly, around the curve of the spiral staircase a sword-point appeared close to his eye level, followed rapidly by the form of a plummeting body.

Instantly, his reflexes brought his wand-hand up in defence, but the goblin-honed blade tore through the tough fabric of his robes, slicing hot pain into Snape's upper arm. As he grabbed the wound with his other hand, he was pushed off balance, tumbling backwards onto the soft-solid combination of Malfoy and the gargoyle.

Draco lost his footing under the onslaught, crashing to the floor and striking the back of his blond head on the stone with a brain-jolting crack. Nausea washed over him, and his vision dimmed as the older wizard's falling weight squashed the breath from his lungs.

Snape's hands scrabbled for his wand where it had dropped with a clatter from his pain-numbed fingers. In the ill-lit stairwell he could only see the splotches of his blood dripping darkly onto the stone steps. His wand had disappeared. Hope leached from him, and anxiety roiled in his gut.

Pushing himself unsteadily to his feet he looked up the stairs to face his assailants.

~*~

Draco's eyelids fluttered open as he dragged a long breath into his aching chest. His vision was filled with prominent, clear eyes in pale features, surrounded by a nimbus of light.

Squinting, he tried to focus on the face, but his sight swam disturbingly, and he shut his eyes against the vertiginous feeling, drawing a slow breath in through his aquiline nose. *Moonlight and apples*. "Luna," he murmured.

The only response was a low hum and a gentle squeeze of his hand.

"Explain yourself." Snape's voice was low and angry and sounded as if it came from far away.

Draco swallowed drily and started to talk, his voice little more than a hoarse whisper. "I was just trying to help..."

Other voices ran over the top of his.

"He made me..."

"I... um..."

"Headmaster, I can..."

"Silence!"

Draco could hear the exasperation in Snape's tone and imagined the harried man pinching the bridge of his nose as he sought a shred of patience.

"Longbottom, as you are the one brandishing the sword, perhaps you should be the one to explain... after you've put it down. Carefully! And you." Draco cracked open an eye to see Severus jabbing an accusatory finger in the direction of Phineas Black's picture. "You, I shall talk to later in private."

The ex-headmaster shrugged an elegant shoulder and sauntered to a high-backed wooden chair. Sweeping his robes under him, he sat gracefully, crossing his long legs at the ankles and resting lean hands on his knees. Snape glared at him. The older wizard merely raised an aristocratic eyebrow in reply.

Gritting his teeth, Severus turned back to the motley group of pupils ranged in front of his desk. With some discomfort, he eased himself into his chair and leaned his elbows on the desk top. Resting his forehead on his interlocked hands, he gazed down at the worn patina of the wood in an attempt to gather his thoughts.

"Sir?" A concerned voice interrupted his contemplation.

"I did not ask you to speak, Miss Lovegood," Snape growled with annoyance.

Undeterred, Luna continued in a pleasant, conversational tone. "I thought a nice cup of tea and a piece of toast would help the cogitative process. I find they're a perfect remedy, especially when you're a little bit peelie-wally, as my Scottish granny would say."

Severus inhaled deeply as a full cup and saucer were pushed into his line of vision. The warm, steamy smell wafting up from the tea made him feel better, soothing his irritation, and he was soon tucking into hot, buttered toast, served with a thin scrape of mouth-wateringly salty marmite. Revived, he wiped the corners of his mouth with a napkin and levelled his sights on the errant students once more.

Neville, who had been contemplating the tips of his toes, nearly leaped out of his skin when Snape barked his name.

"S-sir?" he stammered.

"An explanation, if you please, Mr Longbottom."

"Er..."

Severus maintained a steady gaze on the blushing youth. "In your own time, Longbottom, but preferably before all of us expire from boredom."

"Oh, this is going to be priceless." Black leaned forward in his chair for a better view of the proceedings.

"Uncle Phin!" protested Luna.

"What? He's a Gryffindor whippersnapper against our fine, upstanding headmaster." Painted hands rubbed together with glee.

Gingerly, Malfoy raised himself up on an elbow to see what was happening.

"Lie back down on the couch, Draco. You've taken a nasty knock to the head, and I'll see to you soon." Luna's accompanying smile was angelic.

Turning to Neville, she patted his shoulder as he stepped forward to speak. "On you go, Nev. Don't let these big meanies put you off."

Draco snorted a laugh at Black's scandalised expression but covered his smiling mouth in haste when Snape glowered darkly in his direction. He lay back against the plush cushions with grey eyes slitted as he contemplated Lovegood from behind, running his discerning gaze over her as if assessing a young filly.

Her hair was a mess, a hideous tangle of silver-moonlight curls and waves, which shimmered alluringly when she shook her head. The shoulders were narrow and, no doubt, bony. Draco was sure they would dig in horribly if one were to hug her. He shuddered at the thought and allowed his eyes to drift lower over a skinny, no, slim back, held proudly straight and leading to an unexpectedly pert bottom. His roving eyes stopped their downward sweep abruptly as panic seized him. The daft witch wasn't wearing school robes!

Draco ran his fingers through his hair and exhaled slowly as warmth stirred in his groin. Shifting uncomfortably, he tried to concentrate on Longbottom's long-winded spiel but was distracted by Luna's legs. Her lean thighs, descended to soft indentations at the back of her knees before gently swelling to beautifully curved calves, and all were encased in skin-tight leggings, which stopped at ankle level where a hint of bare skin peaked out above her neatly shod feet. Draco's tongue ran over his lower lip as his brain envisaged what it would be like to lick along the inside of that sinfully exposed ankle.

Closing his eyes, he bit his lip and stifled a groan. "No..."

Cool fingers touched his sweating brow. "Hush! It'll be all right, love," Luna assured him.

"No," he repeated, shrinking from her touch and turning his flushed face away from her obvious concern.

A/N: Thanks, sunny33, for doing the beta work.

Translation:

peelie-wally Scots pale, sickly, ill-looking.

Furze

Chapter 7 of 17

Furze - *n.* thorny bush. Things get a bit prickly.

Furze

Disclaimer: It's a sair fecht fir a hauf loaf an' a sairer fecht fir a hale een.

Translation: Scots / Doric Life's tough. (literally: It's a hard fight for half a loaf of bread and a harder fight for a whole one.)

"Please, sir, could you clarify exactly what happened with the Sword of Gryffindor?"

"I could, but I am not one of your classmates who will do your work for you. I think it would be preferable if you were to do the research yourself, don't you, Weasley?"

The redhead's skin flushed pink around a multitude of freckles. "Yes, sir."

The dark-haired wizard smirked to himself as he heard the subsequent muttering.

"Bloody Nora! He's a tough bastard, isn't he?"

Which was followed by a soft "Oof!" as the grumbling pupil received an elbow in the ribs from a neighbour.

~*~

Neville was nervous, but Luna's gentle presence and his own confidence he was doing the right thing settled his anxiety somewhat. A niggle in the back of his mind questioned how breaking and entering, theft and assault could be construed as 'doing the right thing'. He steadfastly ignored the concern, concentrating on taking a few deep breaths and preparing his reasoning before launching into an explanation to Professor Snape.

To give him his due, the dour man, despite his brusqueness, listened attentively, asked relevant questions and refrained from hexing him, though Neville observed a slight twitch in the fingers of Snape's wand hand on occasion, especially when he mentioned certain names.

Brushing sweat-flopping hair from his eyes, Neville looked up at the portrait of Phineas Black as he finished his speech. To the youth's surprise, the old man tapped the side of his nose and gave him a quick wink. Neville blinked, lost his train of thought and stumbled over his last few words. His eyes swung anxiously back to Snape, who appeared unaware of the incident, though Neville could not be sure with that dark, all-seeing gaze.

Ending with a small nervous giggle followed by a clearing of his throat, the young man took a step back from the headmaster's desk, his shoulders slumped a little and his cheeks pinked. He glanced behind him to see Luna kneeling beside Draco, holding his hand and touching the boy's pale skin with tenderness. Neville allowed himself a small smile at the sight. He could see the simmering magic between the pair, even if Malfoy appeared to be shunning Luna's ministrations.

His attention was jerked back to the headmaster by Ginny tugging firmly on his sleeve. His mouth fell open in question. "Uh?"

"Delighted as I am to observe you have returned to your normal intellectual level, Mr Longbottom, I must be seen to dispense a punishment commensurate with your infractions. What would be appropriate? Hmm. Cleaning the silverware? No, you've done enough damage to our treasures. Something with Mr Filch? Perhaps..." As Snape rubbed his pursed lips with the tips of steepled fingers, a sly glint sparked in his eye. "The Forbidden Forest!"

Neville paled, sensing Ginny's hand clamp harder to his arm. Her whimpered negative response was barely audible.

"Yes," continued Snape. "The Forbidden Forest will be perfect. You will report to Hagrid tomorrow after your evening meal, and he will apprise you of the details of your detention."

Neville shrank back as the headmaster stood abruptly, looming over them. "What are you brave, little Gryffindors waiting for? Get back to your dormitories now. You can hold each other's hands all the way back to your common room, if the dark corridors frighten you." A sneer twisted the tall man's gaunt features.

Luna rose from her spot next to the couch as the Gryffindors headed for the door.

"Not you, Miss Lovegood. You have some explaining to do yourself."

Luna continued to drift towards the door, gently pulling Draco up off the couch to follow after her. "I do believe, Professor Snape, the hour is late, and Madam Pomfrey would prefer not to be roused from her bed. I'll take this poor, injured boy to the hospital wing for assessment before she retires, shall I? And, when Madam Pomfrey's finished with Draco, I can send her on to tend to you. Be a sweetheart, Uncle Phin, and let her in when she arrives, won't you?"

Snape's mouth gaped in amazement as the young witch smiled mildly and disappeared down the stairs with Draco in tow. Closing his mouth with a snap, he rounded his pent-up frustration on Black's portrait.

"Phineas Nigellus!"

But his expostulation went unheeded. The picture frame was empty.

He gave the trashed coffee table a sharp kick before he banished it with a slashing action of his wand. Muttering a string of profanities and something rude about how his life was tormented by Slytherin traitors, idiotic Gryffindors and nutcases, Snape limped over to the couch. The plump cushions cradled his aching body as he sank into them, and with a murmured spell he stirred the fire into life before fixing himself a stiff drink without leaving his comfortable position.

As his limbs relaxed, his mind ran through the events of the evening, coming to a sticky spot when he tried to figure out why the idiotic trio were trying to steal the Gryffindor Sword. He hoped Longbottom hadn't wrecked the priceless artefact when the clumsy oaf had tripped down the stairs, careening into him and Malfoy and impaling Snape's arm. As Severus prodded his wound with a tentative finger, he thought he ought to check the Sword for damage.

"*Accio* Sword." Lazily, he held out an expectant hand, but nothing happened. Confused, Severus sat up, looking around the office and again called, *Accio* Sword."

Nothing stirred and, more importantly, no sword arrived in his waiting palm.

"They've stolen it. The cheeky, little bastards!"

The crash and flame of his whisky glass smashing against the hearth had the occupants of several pictures scampering for cover. Many of them were still cowering when Poppy Pomfrey arrived to tend to Snape's wounds.

~*~

"Lovegood, what do you think you're doing? You're going to get us into trouble."

"Don't worry."

"I'm not. What you've just done is dangerous and foolhardy."

"You're just annoyed I hid it in your robes."

"Not in my robes, Looney. You shoved a huge, sharp, pointy sword down the front of my trousers. You could have done me a serious injury." Draco huffed.

Luna gazed at the front of the aforementioned trousers with a speculative gleam in her eye. "Are you certain, Malfoy? I'm sure there's plenty of space in there for a house treasure next to your family jewels."

"Are you questioning my manhood, Looney?"

"Not at all. Just making an observation."

"Well, you can just stop observing." Feeling a little off kilter with the conversation, Draco tried to gather his robes around him with some dignity.

"Is that a sword in your trousers, or are you just pleased to see me, Malfoy?" Luna quipped, patting his groin rather firmly.

Draco yipped and backed away. "Careful! You'll cut me."

Grabbing the waistband of his trousers, Luna shoved a hand in and slowly withdrew the sword which had, until recently, been in the headmaster's office.

"Mmm... It's nice and warm," Luna murmured, running a finger along the flat of the blade as she extracted it. "You must be really hot down there, Malfoy."

Draco's normally pale features became ashen, and he groaned with suppressed fear as the sharp blade ran close to his genitals for a second time in one evening.

"Lovegood! Take care! I'll kill you if anything gets damaged."

"I agree, Draco. We couldn't allow that to happen to such a fine specimen."

"Well, I'm glad we both agree on the preservation of the Malfoy lineage."

"I was talking about the Sword."

"As was I, Lovegood." Draco raised his eyebrows with a hint of haughty suggestion, and Luna broke into peals of laughter. Her unrestrained mirth sent pulsing waves of warmth through the habitually cool wizard, and he was pleasantly surprised by the sensation, but responded by drawing his pale eyebrows together in a disapproving frown. "And what do you plan to do with it, now you have it?"

"I think, we should..."

Suddenly, with one swift motion he pulled her to the side of the corridor and into a dark alcove, wrapping his cloak around her and hugging her hard against him. Her hands pinned by his cloak and encircling arms, held Gryffindor's Sword tight between them.

"Draco?"

"Shh!" he whispered against her cheek before dipping his head and covering her lips with his, a hand sneaking into her curls and drawing her closer.

Luna's eyes widened with surprise, and her lips moved in a questioning response, but stilled when she heard approaching feet.

"Malfoy?" A rough whisper came from close by as a large, shadowy figure turned a corner and crept towards them, followed by an even bulkier person tiptoeing behind. The enquirer stopped, holding up a hand to silence his partner. "I'm sure I heard his voice."

"You're hearing things."

"Malfoy?" The deep voice rumbled in inquiry.

Lifting his lips from Luna's, Draco straightened up, but kept a hand on the back of her head, pressing her face against his chest. His grey eyes hardened as he confirmed who was creeping down the corridor.

"Crabbe and Goyle," he snarled. "What are you doing out after curfew?"

A wand-tip brightened into light, shedding a pale glow over him.

"We was just checking you was all right, Malfoy. Not that we care what happens to you anymore, but the Carrows sent us to make sure you got your girly arse back to the dorm."

"I'm fine and shall return when I am ready," replied Draco.

"Come back now, otherwise you'll get a detention."

"Can't you see I'm a little... occupied?" Draco indicated the witch in his arms with his chin.

"Who's that?" asked Goyle.

It was bad enough to be found in the company of Lovegood, but to have to confess to it was beyond him. Draco's features blanched as he scrambled for a lie.

"No-one." He felt Luna's slender body tense against him.

"Who is it?"

"Have some dignity, please, gentlemen." With a regal twitch of his wrist and a slight sneer, Draco flicked the edge of his cloak around Luna, accidentally loosening her tumble of hair. His heart lurched, and he sensed the witch's pulse speed up in an anxious response. "It's..."

"It's a girl!" Crabbe exclaimed. "But, I thought you were..."

Goyle guffawed with raucous laughter, slapping Crabbe heavily on the back.

"Are you sure you know what to do with her, Malfoy? Let me show you how it's done with a witch." Goyle's face broke into a nasty leer, and a meaty paw reached for the corner of Draco's covering cloak to expose the hidden person who was now breathing heavily against the blond wizard's chest.

"I'm quite capable of that myself," growled Draco, pulling the girl still closer. "Kindly leave us to it, gentlemen."

Draco kept his hard, grey stare fixed on the two thugs as he dropped his head and again took possession of Luna's lips. His lip curled in contempt against hers as Goyle dragged a gape-mouthed Crabbe back round the corner. As soon as they disappeared, his body relaxed, his eyes drifted closed and his lips sought the inviting softness of the witch in his arms. Fingers tangling instinctively in her tresses and angling her head to suit him, he plundered her lush mouth.

Drawing a shocked breath in through her nose, Luna wriggled in an attempt to loosen his embrace and distance herself from his marauding mouth, but Draco's arms wound tighter around her, drawing her into him. Luna braced against his chest, pulling her head back, only for his body to follow the movement without breaking contact.

With a sharp snort, Luna jabbed downwards with her clenched fists and bit down hard.

"Fuck!" Draco's eyes flew open, and he hopped back with one hand wiping his bleeding lip and the other clutching for his stabbed foot. "You crazy nutter! What was that for?"

"No-one, am I?" She shook a sword-bearing fist at him.

"What the...? Careful with the sword, Looney." Draco pushed the blade away from the proximity of his nose.

"Don't do that again, unless I ask you to."

"What did I do?"

"You..."

"I just saved you from being mauled by those Neanderthals, didn't I?" Draco snarled in her face.

"You kissed me without asking... and called me a no-one." Sparks snapped in Luna's large eyes as she hissed at him.

Draco reeled back as if struck. "I did." He pulled himself up to his full height and fixed Luna with an icy stare. "You were asking for it, Lovegood."

"I don't want..."

"I understand that now, but I didn't think being an oddball meant you would be completely lacking interpersonal skills or gratitude. Obviously, I was wrong." With a final swipe of his hand across his bloodied mouth, Draco turned on his heel and limped away. "I'll make my way to the hospital wing on my own, thank you, but I'm not sure how I'm going to explain the puncture wound in my foot, you flaky fruitcake."

Luna's shoulders drooped, and the Gryffindor treasure clanked against the stone floor. Slowly, she lifted it back to eye level, her gaze flicking from the Sword to the still muttering, departing figure of Malfoy.

"This needs a little care and attention, I think." Luna's eyes glinted as she tucked the sword into the gauntleted hand of a nearby suit of armour. "Hidden in plain sight," she murmured, patting the bejewelled pommel before making her way back to Ravenclaw Tower.

~*~

Hermione perched on a rickety of stones, which at some time must have been a shepherd's cottage.

Below her in the pale morning light, she watched low-lying fog drift along the line of an invisible watercourse. Fluffy, white heads of bog cotton nodded and swayed as a light breeze dispersed the damp mist, pushing it up the glen and over a low col. With eyes closed, Hermione lifted her chin into the wind, enjoying the freshness of the morning air on her camping-grimed face.

She had spent the night tossing and turning in her damp, uncomfortable bed, listening to raindrops thrumming on the canvas roof and trying to decide what to do about Lupin's request. By the time the rain had stopped and dawn started to lighten the sleeping shadows inside the tent, she had realised she had little choice. If Remus needed her to brew Wolfsbane for him, she would just have to grit her teeth and suffer Professor Snape's vitriolic teaching. The thought of working with the hard disciplinarian brought a chill to her bones, and she rubbed her arms vigorously to dispel the shivers.

Taking an invigorating breath of rain-fresh, pine-scented air, she opened her eyes and started planning.

Firstly, she would have to reset her protective charms to allow Professor Snape into their camp. It wasn't too difficult for her; she had done the same for Remus, but the thought of allowing a Death Eater into her secure area made her skin crawl. Even though she was well aware Lupin believed in him, Hermione's primal instincts screamed distrust.

Secondly, she would have to allow him access without the boys' knowledge. That wouldn't be hard either. They were so lethargic and miserable in the presence of the Horcrux neither of them noticed when she left to hunt for provisions now, so she doubted they would even register her disappearing for a while to do a bit of brewing.

And there was the rub. It wasn't going to be just a 'bit' of brewing. To make a complex potion like Wolfsbane, she would need a fully stocked store of ingredients, a decent cauldron and a space with a consistent environment. An extension of the tent was not going to be an option, but nowhere else came to mind immediately. The only place she could think of was the dungeon classroom at Hogwarts, which wasn't a viable choice, though the thought sent a pang of homesickness through her chest. Grimmauld Place? No, the reason they were on the move was to avoid detection and not to draw attention to the Order's headquarters.

Running fingers through her tangled mane of hair, she tried to figure out how she would manage.

Caught off-guard, tugging with frustration at a recalcitrant knot close to her scalp, when her security wards were breached by an unexpected arrival, she was unable to free her hand quickly enough to brandish her wand. A firm hand covered her mouth, stopping her alarmed cry, and a warm breath at her temple whispered a warning to keep quiet as the sudden vertigo of Disapparition swept her away. An address was murmured into her ear just as the campsite disappeared from her vision.

~*~

Ron stared ahead of him with lethargic disinterest. His sleep had been poor since they had started camping, and he had been woken from fitful dreams by Hermione unzipping the tent flap and sneaking outside. Turning over and trying to nod off again had been unsuccessful now the soothing patter of rain had stopped. So, he hauled himself out of bed and trailed out into the cool morning, feeling the light mist enshrouding him in a comforting fog. Rubbing his temples with a smoothing, circular motion, he tried to summon up some enthusiasm. No matter what he did nowadays, he could not muster up any energy.

Harry had the locket, leaving Ron free to accompany Hermione on her watch if he wanted to, but this morning he had no desire to do so. Hands in pockets and feet scuffing through the dead leaves, he shuffled over to a nearby birch. Leaning his bony back against the silver bark, he sank down onto his haunches.

From this position, he could see Hermione sitting on the tumbledown wall of a ruin. Not once did she turn and look in his direction. It became clear to him the girl he loved no longer cared for him. If she did, she would know he was over here watching over her. Instead, she sat with eyes closed and face tilted up, ignoring him. Ron's heart withered in his emaciated chest, and leaning his head back against the tree, he allowed tears to flow silently down his cheeks.

When a tall, caped figure appeared suddenly behind Hermione, Ron's strangled cry was muted by his overwhelming sorrow. As she vanished from sight, his leaden emotions shifted slowly from distress at her abrupt disappearance, through annoyance at her lack of forethought about her own safety, stopping finally at a low, smouldering anger at her absence of consideration. Imagine leaving with another man when she must have known Ron was sitting waiting for her.

"Bloody hell," he wailed, "I've lost her." Ron's long fingers covered his face, and his shoulders shook with sobs of despair.

~*~

"Look what I've got."

Hermione squinted into the darkness, trying to discern her surroundings. A large hand pulled her to standing from the heap she had tumbled in on landing.

"Up you get. Come over here."

She stumbled slightly as she was tugged to her feet.

"This is perfect."

Hermione swore when her toe struck something solid on the cluttered floor.

"Oops! Sorry!" A sweeping wand-stroke cleared the floor and lit the lights, revealing a grinning werewolf standing in the middle of a small, windowless room.

"Just right, isn't it?" Lupin's smile faded a little as Hermione looked around with obvious bemusement at the cramped, untidy space. "Don't you like it?"

"Um, yeah. It's..."

"I know it's a bit of a guddle at the moment. But, once we've tidied up a bit, cleaned the work bench and bought a cauldron, it'll be a perfect place to brew, won't it?" His faltering smile sought approval.

"Actually, I think you're right. This could work well." Hermione's quick mind set to work immediately, planning shelving for ingredients arranged in alphabetical order, storage for vials and bench space for chopping. "What is this place?"

"It's our box room, which isn't used much at the moment as we're both so busy. The whole flat is Secret-Kept, and I've secured this area against any unauthorised entry.

What do you think?"

Looking up, her eyes took in the high, dimly lit ceiling. "What about ventilation?"

"Don't worry. I'll sort something out."

"Okay."

"So, you'll do it?"

"Of course I will."

"You will? Oh, my giddy aunt, that's fantastic. Hermione, you're the best." The breath whooshed out of her as Remus hugged her enthusiastically. "Just wait till I tell Sev."

"Yes, well..."

"He'll be delighted."

"I don't think so."

"Seriously, he's got so much on his plate at the moment. If you can take over the brewing he'll be over the moon."

"Don't be daft."

"You're not worried about working with him, are you?"

"Well..."

"Just remember his bark's worse than his bite, and if you feed him chocolate, he'll soon be eating out of your hand."

Hermione snorted at the idea of the dour professor eating from her hand; it was so completely out of character. Her overactive mind conjured up a picture of Professor Snape bending respectfully over her outstretched palm, inhaling the rich scent of the chocolate she cradled there. She imagined his nose nudging her curled fingers open and those thin lips nipping the fleshy pad at the base of her thumb, or that wicked, acid tongue licking luscious, melting streaks from the sensitive dip at the centre of her palm. Her breath caught in her chest.

Blushing, Hermione turned away, clearing her throat and fanning her face with her hand.

Bloody hell, I must be going mad. That's what happens if you live in close proximity to teenage boys for too long she thought.

"Are you okay, Hermione?"

"Yes, just a little... overwhelmed."

"If you think this is overwhelming, come through here." Grabbing her hand, Lupin ushered her through a concealed doorway to another even tinier room. "Voilà!" he proclaimed, turning on the lights.

"Oh!"

"You don't like it?"

"It's..."

"It's practical. You know how hazardous some potions ingredients can be, and if you spill anything, you'll need somewhere to wash..."

"It's perfect." Hermione's hands were already bringing fresh, laundry-scented towels to her nose and tracing fingers over clean tiles before turning on the tap in the sink. "Hot, running water. Thank you, Remus." Hugging him tight to her, she whispered into his neck, "Thank you."

Lupin kissed her temple then sniffed at her hair. "Actually, I think you'd benefit from using the facilities before you leave. You smell worse than a wet werewolf after a full moon. Here, use this shampoo, and here's your conditioner. I'll leave you to it. Just give me a shout when you're finished."

Having closed the door behind Lupin, Hermione turned the shower on full, luxuriating in the warm steam as it filled the room. She had dreamt of this luxury many times as she had quickly 'topped and tailed' herself with cold water without ever getting fully undressed in the tent. Peeling off her grubby clothes, she cast a thorough cleansing charm over them before dropping them onto the bathroom stool.

Hermione believed nothing could be as heavenly as stepping into a hot shower and washing all the grime from her itching skin until she opened the shampoo. Absolute perfection, she mused, lathering the rich preparation into her hair and massaging her gritty scalp. Inhaling deeply, Hermione was transported to a warm, sunny place by the scents of honey, lemon and a hint of ginger.

Languorously sponging the etched-in dirt from her legs, her brain stirred back into gear, and her head jerked up *Hold on a minute*, she thought. *Lupin said 'our flat'. He and Tonks live in a cottage, and not at the address he whispered in my ear as he abducted me. What's going on?*

As she rinsed the last of the suds off her skin, she peered through the steam at the shampoo's label, wondering whose hygiene products Remus had lent her. Shocked, she dropped the bottle, glass shattering on the tiled floor, as she saw only a single phrase, neatly printed in the very recognisable, precise handwriting of Severus Snape. *For my Charming Beloved.*

"Sweet Merlin! Remus Lupin and Severus Snape?"

Surely not! But, try as she might, she could not clear the memories from her head of Lupin talking about Professor Snape in glowing terms.

Pressing a hand to her chest, she took a few deep breaths and stepped out of the shower on shaking legs. As she rubbed her body dry with unnecessary roughness, anger built within her when her thoughts turned to poor Tonks. No wonder Lupin had said his life was complicated, she thought as she shoved her limbs back into her clothes. The man was a... was a...

"Lupin!" she shouted as she barged back into the other room. Finding the space empty and with no obvious doors, she banged hard on a wall. "Lupin, you're a manipulative, lying... shit."

Gaining no response, she shouted one more time. "Lupin, I'm leaving and don't expect me back anytime soon!" With an angry spin on her heel, she Disapparated.

"Sorry, Hermione, I forgot this room's soundproofed. I..."

Remus appeared through a concealed doorway just as the crack of her furious departure echoed around the room. Checking the bathroom to assure himself he was not mistaken about her leaving, he spotted the broken shampoo bottle on the tiles.

"Bugger," he muttered, running fingers through his shaggy locks. "How did I screw this one up?"

~*~

Ron whimpered and covered his ears as an explosive bang heralded Hermione's return. Magic sparked around her, following her angry stride in shimmering waves as she headed for the tent.

Scrambling to his feet, Ron caught up with the livid witch and, ignoring her ferocious scowl, flung long, clinging arms around her rigid shoulders.

"Mione, you came back to me. Don't leave me again, babe. How could you leave me?"

Tension stiffened her body as he snuffled loudly in her ear. "Not now, Ron."

"Here, you smell different. Where've you been, Hermione?"

"Sod off!" Hermione swatted his pawing hands off her hair.

"As your boyfriend, I have a right to know..."

"You have no right, Ron. Take your hands off me, and give me some space."

"Like that, is it? So, I'm not your boyfriend anymore. Is that the deal? What about the man who escorted you away this morning? Is he your new boyfriend?"

Hermione looked daggers at him before turning her back and walking away.

"Don't think I don't know you've been going with someone else behind my back, 'Mione. Can't wait to let another wizard into your knickers when I'm not up for it, can you?"

"Grow up," muttered Hermione as she unzipped the tent's canvas door.

"I'm bigger and more grown up than you, Miss High-and-Mighty." His peeved voice followed her.

Hermione rounded on him, a finger pointing very close to his face as he ducked into the tent behind her. "Back off. I know you don't mean half the things you're saying, Ron."

"What do you expect, 'Mione? You're not exactly the doting girlfriend, are you? You just left this morning, not giving a stuff about me."

"Will you two please stop bickering?" Harry's request sounded mildly vexed, as if he lacked the energy for any stronger emotion.

"I don't suppose you thought to get any provisions whilst you were away gallivanting, did you?" Ron asked almost hopefully.

Dropping her hand, Hermione's shoulders sagged as she sighed. "No. Sorry." She laid a gentle hand on Ron's arm, but could not look him in the eye. "I'm sorry, Ron. Truly, I am."

"Wait. You're not serious, are you, Hermione?" Ron's eyes were wide, and his throat worked in long, dry swallows. "This isn't about the food, is it? You're not chucking me, are you? I didn't mean all those things I said. Honest. It's the... the Horcrux."

"We can't blame everything on the Horcrux, Ron, when things just aren't working out between us."

"But, I love you."

"It's a shame you've lost your trust in me and lost my respect," replied Hermione, turning away and wiping a hand under her nose. With an effort, she straightened her shoulders before continuing. "So, we'll just have to make the best of what we have, won't we?"

Shrugging Ron's restraining hand from her shoulder, Hermione busied herself gathering ingredients to prepare a meal, clattering plates and pots with fury. The crashing of utensils mirrored the discordance within, which overwhelmed her every time she returned to the camp.

"'Mione," he whined.

"Leave it, Ron," advised Harry.

"But..."

Harry glowered in response.

A/N: Sunny33 has taken time out of her busy life to sort out my appalling punctuation. Thanks, chook!

Translation:

Furze thorny bush, in Scotland usually gorse.

Rickle a heap or an unsteady structure (especially a dilapidated building).

Guddle Scots a muddle, mess.

Fossick

Chapter 8 of 17

Fossick – Australian/New Zealand English – to rummage/search, typically for gold or gemstones in abandoned workings. Severus seeks some answers.

Fossick

Disclaimer: Jo'd be fair stamagastered gin she kent fit I wis deein wi' her chieils.

Translation: Scots / Doric Ms Rowling would be a little bemused if she knew what I was doing with her boys.

"I'm sorry, sir, it still isn't clear to me who took the Sword of Gryffindor and why."

"You're absolutely correct, young man. Clarity is one of the first things to disappear in times of adversity," agreed the professor. "Perhaps you could confer with your classmates on this point."

He glanced around the room, trying to think who would be the best help for the boy. Sliding over Potter, his eye was drawn to Malfoy and the redheaded Weasley scowling at each other with, he suspected, wands drawn and pointed at each other out of sight below the desk.

"Five points from Gryffindor for drawing a wand in class." The redhead blushed as the wand was dropped surreptitiously into a school bag, confirming the teacher's suspicions. "And two points from Slytherin for retaliating." The smug look on Malfoy's pale features faded quickly.

The dark-haired wizard allowed himself a small smile. Sometimes he enjoyed this job.

~*~

The persistent pressure in his bladder increased, and his brain crept out of sleep and into wakefulness. Aware he would have to get up and make himself presentable before breakfast, Severus suppressed a groan and rolled out of bed. Stretching and rubbing his arm and bruised head did nothing to relieve the nagging aches.

The reflection frowning back at him from the bathroom mirror looked raddled. Dark smudges under his eyes were testament to a poor night's sleep when his overwrought brain had refused to switch off. He had lain in bed, arms behind his head, staring at the darkened ceiling for hours before falling into a fitful doze. He could never understand why it was the nights when his body was physically spent and dog-tired his mind always decided to go into overdrive.

Leaning heavily on the sink's porcelain, he rested his forehead against the mirror's coolness, noting another purple bruise near his hairline as he did so. With the Dark Lord becoming so much more vicious, it took more energy to continually heal all the smaller wounds. Poppy treated the major stuff, and his robes would cover most minor injuries, but he'd have to remember to spell the visible ones away before taking his place at the staff dining table.

His arm still ached where the infernal Longbottom boy had stabbed him with the Gryffindor Sword.

And there lay another conundrum, which he had yet to unravel. Why were such an unlikely trio stealing the sword, and where was it now? Perhaps he should call them in to his office for interrogation after they served their detentions.

Inhaling the sandalwood-scented steam rising from the filling basin, Severus tried approaching the problem from a different angle. As he leant over and splashed water on his pillow-creased face, he pondered who could have ordered the theft.

Certainly not one of the Death Eaters, given the three students involved, and he doubted if many of the Dark Lord's minions would be aware of the sword's existence, let alone its inherent powers. Whoever wanted it wasn't looking for any old weapon, nor, he suspected, were they seeking the Gryffindor treasure for its school house connection. They had a specific requirement, for which only Godric's goblin-honed blade would be suitable.

He scrubbed the back of his neck roughly as he scrolled through a list of potential suspects in his head. Starting with people inside the castle, working through the teachers and their known associates, moving on to students' families, contacts outside the castle, mentally he crossed off names as he thought of them until he got to members of the Order of the Phoenix.

"That's it," he said to his dripping reflection as he reached for a towel. "Lupin, you great wassock."

~*~

Snape cast a discreet cleaning charm on the stained leatherette before sliding onto the bench seat opposite the shabby looking wizard. Keeping his sleeves clear of the drink-sticky table top, he accepted the pint Lupin handed him.

"Top class establishment," he commented, scanning the room.

"It's handy, and being down by the docks, it's open all day for the passing trade."

"At least with that metal band playing I don't need to cast a Muffliato," Snape said, raising his voice and leaning across the table to make himself heard.

Lupin grinned in response. "It has its bonuses. There's no snobbery or prejudice in this pub. Plus, nobody will look twice at us in here." He nodded towards the bar's eclectic clientele of leather-clad heavy metal fans, sartorially elegant city gentlemen, safety-boot shod dockworkers and student layabouts.

"They must get a few dodgy characters coming in. Did you see the sign in the gents' toilet asking patrons to not eat the urinal cakes?" Snape took a cautious sip of his beer then held the glass at arm's length to examine it. "And, what's this you've given me?"

"Skull Splitter. They're threatening to sell it only in half pints from now on because sooks like you can't handle it." With a feral grin, Remus took a long draught from his pint then wiped the froth from his lips with the back of his sleeve. "Ah, that's just the berries. If you don't like it, I could always get you a Snakebite."

Severus muttered something about daft mongrels into his beer.

"All right, Snape, what did you want me for?" asked Lupin. "I'm sure it wasn't just for sociable chit-chat, a couple of drinks and a gubbing on the arcade racing game."

~*~

Another bloody hangover, Severus thought, gently massaging his temples without opening his eyes. It felt like Thorfinn Skullsplitter was inside his head, hacking his way out with a vicious, Viking axe. Vowing he would never go drinking with Lupin again, the rumpled wizard crawled out of bed and dressed carefully with the minimum of rapid movement.

What made things worse was the fact he had gained no further knowledge about the theft of the Gryffindor Sword and had somehow agreed to teach the Granger girl how to brew Wolfsbane. How did Lupin do that? The werewolf had managed to turn an inquisition into an acquisition. Severus shook his head in admiration, but immediately regretted it and clasped his skull with a groan.

His hands sifted through the potions cabinet, automatically picking out headache and hangover cures. As he tipped them into his mouth, he mulled over his schedule for the day. A quick staff meeting before classes started, where he'd have to remember to thank Minerva for looking after the school whilst he was out last night. He could already envisage her tight-lipped nod of acknowledgement liberally laced with disapproval.

To be followed by a morning of book balancing, which Filius Flitwick would end up looking over for him, 'not that I don't trust you, Severus, but a double-check is always wise'.

Then, after lunch, he had a meeting with the Board of Governors seeking extra funding for replacing study books. Severus knew it was an exercise in futility. As headmaster, he would put forward his case, the board would nod sagely and say they understood, but in these hard times their hands were bound. He would thank them for their time.

But, as they were leaving, one of the arrogant gits would offer him, as head of house rather than as headmaster, some new brooms for the Slytherin Quidditch team, which had been using the same brooms since last term, the poor lambs. He would smile thinly and accept with an inward smirk because he knew he could flog the old brooms and buy the much-needed reference books. Deal done.

After that fiasco, he would be ready for dinner. Some clottie-dumpling with custard tonight to line the stomach before he had to chair another student representatives' gathering would be nice. On second thoughts, Severus realised a heavy, steamed pudding sitting in his belly might send him to sleep when he really needed to be on the case. Tonight there were at least two of his four house reps he wanted to have a bit of a chat with.

Pushing lank hair back from his face then pulling his robes around him, Professor Snape prepared himself mentally for the day ahead before striding out into the school corridors.

~*~

Ten minutes of peace and quiet before the student reps arrived. Ten minutes of feet up, chilling out on the couch with a cup of tea and no demands. It wasn't much to ask for, but as he pushed open the door at the top of the stairs and found a blonde-haired student lying sprawled on his office floor, Snape was reminded his life rarely ran as he expected.

Severus closed his eyes briefly, hoping this was not really happening, but when he opened them again Lovegood was still there, and he felt his pleasant dream melt away and the unusual Ravenclaw's reality intrude.

Snape was at her side in a couple of strides, looking down his long nose into her gently smiling face. He pinched the bridge of his nose and inhaled deeply before asking, "Miss Lovegood, what are you doing?"

"Observing your oculus." Without looking at him, she patted the floor next to her. "This really is the best position; come and have a look."

Against his better judgement, Severus gazed up at the ceiling.

"You'll only get a crick in your neck if you do that, Professor." She patted the floor again. "Down here and look up."

"Whatever she asks, I'd do as she says if I were you, young man."

"On the floor, Headmaster Black?"

"Please, humour her."

"This is most..." Words failed him. Snape realised there was probably more to this than met the eye, knowing the ex-headmaster and the eccentric Ravenclaw. Feeling manipulated into their lunacy, he supposed there was only one way to find out.

"Resistance is futile, Severus, young man."

With a resigned sigh, Snape lowered himself to the floor. He lay down on his back with his head near Lovegood's and his body stretched away in the other direction. Lacing his long-fingered hands across the flat of his belly, he looked up through the circular hole in the domed roof and out at the starry night sky. The air around his face seemed cooler and clearer than the normal atmosphere of his office.

"See that."

"It's Orion, Miss Lovegood."

"It's a bit early in the year for him. Do you think it's a sign?"

"No, it's a constellation."

"I don't think it's a sign either, which means we're on the same wavelength, Professor. I find omens and portents and such like so confusing, don't you? Give me clear facts any day."

"Indeed." Snape's tone was only slightly sceptical.

"See how his belt and sword are right in the middle? Did you know, in the southern hemisphere, his sword doesn't hang down from his belt, it... um... goes, you know..." Luna pointed upwards with a pale finger.

Snape snorted a small laugh.

"But I'm not here to talk about Orion's sword, Headmaster. We need to talk about the other one."

Immediately, the blonde witch had Snape's full attention, but this was probably not information which should be shared. He rose onto an elbow, his eyes skimming the walls in a rapid check of which portraits might be listening. Luna's light touch on his shoulder urged him to lie back down again.

"Uncle Phin advised me of this 'loophole'. If you keep low, with your head directly below the oculus, none of the portraits can see you, nor can they hear. For some reason, the sound travels directly up and out of the hole in the roof. It's like... magic." Luna's voice sounded dreamy.

"Miss Lovegood..."

"Please, don't interrupt. We don't have much time before everyone arrives."

Severus pressed his lips together to prevent a cutting riposte from escaping.

"You understand I can't mention any names because I wouldn't want to get into any trouble."

"Any more trouble, you mean, young lady."

Luna ignored his comment. "Nor would I wish to cause you any problems. Uncle Phin has explained to me what is happening outside the castle with You-Know-Who. I'm not sure if he overheard something or is just being his usual clever self. Apparently, the sword may be useful to some friends of ours who are off campus at the moment for their part in the campaign. I am led to believe, because they've never been removed from the school roll, they can still access our facilities. Wouldn't it be nice if that could continue?"

Luna didn't wait for a reply before carrying on. "The sword is safe, and clever old Uncle Phin knows where there is a replica, which could be stowed away in a more public manner as a decoy. He said if we fossicked about in the Room of Requirement, we'd find one."

"Why..."

"No time for interruptions, Professor." Luna continued, "I've persuaded my uncle to act as go-between for you so you can make contact and sort things out. I know you and my friends are much better at planning and strategy than I am, though I have offered to help if the Horny Gollochs are causing too much trouble."

Snape's mouth gaped a little as he tried to formulate a reply.

"Oh! And they need food."

Severus frowned as Luna got to her feet and extended a hand to him.

"I do believe our time is up. Up you come, Professor. Enough lying around relaxing."

Draco was the first of the student representatives through the office door, and he scowled at the sight of the headmaster being helped to his feet by the petite blonde. More confusing was the slightly bemused look on Snape's face. He wasn't sure what had been going on, but Malfoy decided he'd have to keep a closer eye on both of them.

~*~

Severus sat at his desk, scarcely paying attention to the meeting. First it was Lupin, and now the Black/Lovegood folie-à-deux coercing him into aiding them. He hated having decisions foisted on him, but it looked as if he had little choice but to get in contact with the annoying, but mercifully absent, Gryffindor trio. He shuddered at the thought.

Thankfully, Malfoy and Lovegood had managed to work together long enough to provide a workable roster for the Quidditch pitches. As he perused it, his mind drifted off even further. The idea of jumping on a broom and playing a fast, competitive game of Quidditch on a clear night like this was enticing. He glanced up at the ceiling and, seeing the stars through the oculus, remembered how much he used to enjoy a quick night-time run out with the other staff members.

They hadn't had a game for a long time, with the recent troubles.

Snape wondered if any of the other teachers would still be interested. Hooch and Sinistra? Probably. Minerva? Maybe. He knew how competitive the tough Scot could be. It was a shame Lupin wasn't a staff member any longer; he was always good for a bit of rough-and-tumble. Snape flushed, embarrassed by how that thought would have sounded out loud.

Who was on duty tonight? The Carrows. Dare he leave the school corridors to their ministrations? No, definitely not, he thought. In fact, the children under his care needed extra protection from those two. Issues of student safety had been discussed at this morning's staff meeting. McGonagall and her cronies had suggested a more rigid curfew, for older students to escort youngsters to prevent them getting lost and curtailment of all unnecessary outdoor activities, 'to relieve the poor, overworked Carrows of some stress'. Alecto and Amycus had clearly been unhappy at the idea of losing some of their pupil-tormenting entertainment, but that strict old witch, Minerva, had got her way eventually.

Sighing and shifting in his chair, he pulled his gaze away from the starry night sky and tried to drag his mind back to the reps meeting in progress. A prolonged silence caught his attention, and when he looked around the room, everyone was watching him expectantly. The students seemed most eager for his reply.

"Ye-e-es," he drawled tentatively, not completely certain what was being discussed.

Longbottom's shoulders dipped with relief, and Lovegood beamed at him whereas the Carrows looked furious. Bigger! He'd obviously agreed to something, but couldn't be sure what. Glancing at the chronometer on the wall, he decided he'd had enough for the evening.

"Now we've agreed on that, how about we adjourn for the night?"

As he rose from his desk, the Hufflepuff boy piped up. "What about my topic on the agenda, sir?"

"How about we deal with it first at the next meeting when we are all fresh and eager?" Snape fixed his gaze on the now squirming, flustered boy.

"Until next time my colleagues here will continue with the detention arrangements as before." The Carrows glared at him. Aah! So that was the discussion.

"Mr Malfoy, a word, if you please. Longbottom and Lovegood, Flich-Fetchers." Severus nodded in the direction of the others, dismissing them.

"It's Finch-Fletchley, sir."

"Of course it is. You'll see to Flich-Fetching, won't you, Miss Lovegood?"

The Hufflepuff looked confused as Luna smiled dreamily and drifted towards the door. Longbottom was already gone, almost sprinting to get out of the headmaster's office.

~*~

Snape drew Draco closer to the portrait of Phineas Nigellus, keeping his voice low as he spoke. "Headmaster Black and I have a small task for you, Malfoy, if you think you are capable."

The young wizard drew his shoulders back with pride. "It would be an honour to assist two great Slytherin headmasters, sir."

"No need to be so smarmy, young man," sneered Black. "You weren't so great at the last task you were given, were you?"

Draco's cheeks flamed pink. "No, sir," he whispered, his head dropping so neither man could see his eyes.

"We need to be certain which side you are on." Black's voice was also pitched low, not quite a whisper which would have sparked interest in any one of the rooms portraits, but low enough to prevent eavesdropping.

"As I've said, I stand beside Headmaster Snape and align myself with him." Draco raised his head and squared his shoulders, looking both men in the eyes.

Severus squeezed the young man's shoulder. "You're sure?"

Malfoy nodded his confirmation, wondering what interesting, and possibly secretive, task they had in mind.

"Grand! I'm glad we've come to an understanding," said Black. "All I need you to do, young Malfoy, is take care of my dear Luna."

"Lovegood?" Draco's insides slumped. He had envisioned something worthwhile, to atone for his poor showing with the Dumbledore mission, not a babysitting job. His aristocratic upbringing would not let him back down now after he had already agreed. When was he going to learn to find out what the assignment was first before he consented?

"Yes, she's such a delicate child."

Malfoy rubbed his still tender lip. "Luna? Delicate?" He sounded a little disbelieving.

"Indeed, she has a certain ethereal quality." Severus smirked then added, "And Headmaster Black has certain... constraints on how much he can do himself."

"Just so, Snape."

"Luna Lovegood?" Draco repeated, shaking his head. "All I have to do is keep an eye on her, is that right? I don't actually have to... to interact with her, do I?"

"You will keep any interactions absolutely appropriate, young man." Black pinned the young man with a sharp-eyed look. "You'll be very careful with her, won't you, boy?"

When he left the room, Draco's face was the picture of misery. Had he really agreed to act as personal bodyguard for Looney Lovegood? Could life get any worse?

A/N: You all know sunny33 makes this readable. Thanks, clairvoyant, for the admin work.

The pub Severus and Remus visited is based on The Moorings Bar, Aberdeen, Scotland. It used to be one of my favourite last-stop watering holes when in the Silver City. Situated down by the docks, it had a special licence for longer opening hours than most pubs for the passing trade from the sailors. As a result, it also had a passing trade with the ladies who worked the dockside, and it was not unusual to see them coming into the ladies' to freshen up between jobs. The sign about not eating the urinal cakes exists, as does another which says, 'Please note only cubicle number 4 may be used for (quiet) sexual liaisons. The other cubicles are strictly reserved for lavatory function.'

Skull Splitter ale is a double strength beer from Orkney, named after Thorfinn 'Skullsplitter', who was an Earl of Orkney.

Snakebite a half and half mix of lager and cider. An English publican refused to sell a Snakebite to President Clinton, telling him it was illegal. It isn't illegal; it just can't be sold in half pints because pubs have to give a full measure. A full measure of lager or cider is a half-pint or a pint, so Snakebite can only be sold as a full pint (half a pint of lager and half a pint of cider).

Translations:

Fossick Australian/New Zealand English to rummage/search, typically for gold or gemstones in abandoned workings.

Sook a coward, wimp.

Just the berries Scottish vernacular very good.

Gubbing Scottish vernacular a beating, defeat, thrashing.

Clottie-dumpling Scottish dried fruit-filled, steamed pudding cooked in a cloth (clood).

Flitch a side of pork.

Feart

Chapter 9 of 17

Feart - Scots - a. frightened, afraid. Ron finds life too scary.

Feart

Disclaimer: Fit a stramash!

Translation: Scots Doric What a disturbance/state of confusion/mess.

A/N: This chapter covers issues of depression/self harm/attempted suicide/suicide. If you, or anyone you know, suffer from depression, please seek support from friends, family or appropriate health professionals.

As the discussion about what had happened to the real Sword of Gryffindor surged back and forth, Ron stared at the underside of the top bunk, listening to the increasing whine of the wind outside. It was clear they didn't care what had happened to his little sister and didn't need his input. What could a half-starved, maimed Weasley add to the conversation between the illustrious Harry Potter and his beloved, bushy-haired...?

And where had she been the other day when she came back smelling so good? She never did tell him who the other man was. He was pretty sure she'd told Harry... Special, wonderful, our chosen saviour, Harry bloody...

"What d'you reckon, Ron?"

"Ron?"

Oh, now they remembered him. Well, it was too bloody late. He'd tell them just what he thought of them, the two-faced, conniving, uncaring bastards. Ron let his misery and spite pour forth in malicious waves, his shouting nearly drowned out by the rising storm outside.

And Hermione? He crumpled inside when she took Harry's side, protecting the specky geek from Ron's angry advance. Bugger them! He was leaving, going home. After wrenching the tormenting Horcrux from his neck and throwing it onto a chair, he tried one last time to persuade Hermione to come with him, but she chose Harry fucking Potter.

Hugging his arms tight around his breaking heart, Ron shoved his way out of the tent. The rain battered down on his uncovered skull, drumming in the message of his despair. With head down and hands tucked firmly into his armpits, holding his swirling emotions in to his sob-wracked chest, Ron rushed out into the darkness of the storm.

He thought he heard Hermione's plaintive voice calling him back, but deep in his heart he knew she was only playing with him, making fun of the blubbing wreck he had become. With arms still crossed protectively across his chest, he broke into a stumbling run, lengthening his stride to distance himself from the pursuing persecution.

Branches slapped Ron's face, and brambles tore his jeans as he hurtled through the forest. The faster he ran, the harder he wept. Tears ran unhindered down his face, mingling in salty streams with the pouring rain.

Suddenly, his foot slipped on a wet tree root, and he fell headlong unable to protect his fall with his arms still folded across his chest.

Twisting and striking his head hard on the ground, his last thoughts were of home *Mum, help.*

~*~

Hermione's breath dragged in and out of burning lungs in irregular, ragged gasps. Resting one hand on her ribs and the other on her knee, she leaned forwards trying to still the hammering of her heart and heaving chest. Her vision shimmered and danced as her eyes scanned the forest floor for any sign of Ron. His long legs had carried him faster than she had been able to run in her attempt to keep up with him, and now, energy depleted, she could only see the final skid marks his trainers had scored into the damp earth and a small patch of blood on an exposed tree root. The boy himself was nowhere to be seen.

Calling his name, her voice was weak and rough from running. She shouted for him again, louder, her pleas ending in a strained cough. As she had expected, there was no reply, only the constant patter of rain on leaves and the fluff and twitter of small birds above her head. It was clear Ron was gone, and Hermione's heart lurched with a spike of anxiety for her missing friend. She couldn't think where to start looking for him and had no energy left to begin the search.

Slumping against a tree, she lifted a hand with the intention of soothing the exercise induced light-headedness from her temples. The sight of her trembling, bramble-bloodied hand brought tears to her eyes, and she pressed dirt-encrusted fingers to her lids to stem the flow of unhappiness. With her other hand, she rummaged in her pocket for a hanky, finally pulling out the one Lupin had lent her and dabbing the dampness from her eyes before blowing her nose hard and taking a deep, steadying breath.

Hermione tried to formulate a plan of action as she pushed off from the tree, running shaky fingers through snarled-up, sweaty hair. Her feet dragged with reluctance as she trudged back towards the tent. She knew she had accompanied the boys to help with the search for Horcruxes, but her intellect told her there was little point when they had made no progress. Not only that, they had become seriously malnourished and not fit enough to fight a cold, let alone Voldemort.

And now her conscience was screaming at her, tearing her apart. How could she have neglected Ron's welfare so badly he chose to leave? What had she been thinking when she sided with Harry?

But at the back of her mind was a small, thankful thought; now she only had to divide their meagre rations two ways instead of three.

Hermione's face was grim and tear streaked by the time she eased through the tent flap and told Harry the news of Ron's disappearance.

~*~

"Mum! Mum!"

Ron's head ached as he tried to open his eyes. "Mum?" he murmured.

Rough hands lifted him into strong arms. "Mum!" the voice shouted again, rumbling through Ron's head clasped against a broad, familiar-smelling chest.

He sensed jostling bodies, running feet and more raised voices.

"Vite, vite! Molly! Viens ici."

Soft, baking-scented hands on his cheeks smoothed his tears away.

"Where have you been? You scared the living daylight out of your Dad and me, disappearing like that. Look at the state you're in, Ronald Bilius." Anxious hands plucked at Ron's filthy clothes. "If you carry him upstairs, Bill, I'll get him something to eat, then Fleur and I can get him cleaned up."

"Sorry," Ron whispered.

"You'll be fine, sweetheart," Molly Weasley replied, patting his cheek. "We'll take care of you."

~*~

Ron lay on the bed curled in a foetal position, staring with unseeing eyes out of the window. As Molly Weasley watched him through the part-open bedroom door, she felt concern for her youngest son. It had been several days since his sudden return, and she had lavished him with love and food since he had appeared, wounded and unkempt, in the garden. She had cooked nourishing meals, only for them to be returned to the kitchen untouched or merely toyed with.

Casting a mother's appraising eye over the boy, she could see how skinny he had become. His pyjamas hung off his almost skeletal limbs, and his hip bones jutted. Ron's hair remained dull and lank, despite Fleur's ministrations. His whole being lay inactive, apart from one foot which jiggled up and down in a never-ending, anxious dance.

He had been lying in bed day after day since his arrival, but she knew he wasn't sleeping well. At night she could hear him shuffling to and fro in his room, sometimes talking to himself under his breath.

The family tried keeping him company during the daytime, but he rarely talked to any of them, and his brothers got fed up with his lack of responsiveness. When spoken to, Ron's replies were flat and monosyllabic or an irritable, "I'm fine. Leave me alone." The vacant dullness of his eyes betrayed the fact all was not well with him.

What concerned Molly most was the loss of his normal spark. Her children were invariably so full of energy, even when times were tough, and she had always managed to pull the family through with plenty of hugs and good home cooking, but she could feel her touch slipping with her little boy.

Just as she was about to turn away from the door and head back to the kitchen, she noticed Ron rise from the bed and take a seat at a small table in front of the window. Pulling some parchment towards himself, he started to write.

Molly poked her head around the door. "It's nice to see you up out of bed, Ron."

The young man looked a little startled and half covered the parchment with a hand.

"What are you up to?" she asked.

"Nothing, Mum. I think I'll come down for dinner tonight after I've finished this. Is that okay?"

Molly's smile was infused with relief. "Absolutely. I'll cook your favourite."

"You're the best, Mum. Love you."

~*~

Molly was relieved. The previous evening Ron had sat at the dinner table with the family; he had eaten well and had even smiled and cracked a few feeble jokes with his brothers. He was still pale and skinny, but she was sure he would start to perk up now he was up and about and eating. When he'd left the house earlier, he'd looked almost happy.

Gathering ingredients from the kitchen cupboard, Molly hummed as she planned an enticing meal.

Cooking for the family eased her anxieties about what was happening outside her home; it cleared her head of clutter and allowed her to enjoy the simple things in life. She sniffed each of the spices before she added them to her mixture, savouring their individual aromas before they merged with the others. Cinnamon and nutmeg, just perfect for this cold weather, she thought.

When the Floo flared green in the corner of the room, Molly called out, "Can someone else get that, please? I'm busy cooking."

No-one answered, and when the fire flared again, she growled with annoyance. "Am I the only one in this house who can answer the Floo?"

Wiping her hands on her apron, she grumbled as she knelt by the fireplace. "Hold your horses, I'm coming..."

"Molly!" Minerva McGonagall's worried features glowed green in the flames. "You've got to go now. It's Ron! He sent a message to one of the girls at school. He said he's so depressed, he's going to kill himself. Go now!"

"Sorry? Ron?" Molly's brain could not catch up with the information, but her instincts were telling her to get moving. "Where?"

"Arthur's Muggle shed. Quick, Molly. Go now! I've called St Mungo's. Please hurry."

The plump woman was on her feet and running for the door before the Floo connection had closed. Almost knocking a bemused Fleur off her feet as she hurried out of the house, all she could say was, "Tell Arthur. It's Ron."

~*~

Molly's apron flapped, and her slipper-clad feet slapped the ground as she ran as fast as her short legs could carry her.

"Oh, my god, oh, my god, no, no, no," she whimpered as she flew along the rough path leading to Arthur's shed. She hesitated for a moment at the large double doors, not wanting to open them, scared of what she might see inside. Instead, she ran round the side of the building, kicking her slippers off as she went, allowing her to move unimpeded. Pushing open the small side door, she rushed in to the quiet, gloomy interior.

"Ron?"

Her eyes strained to adjust to the dim light, unable to see her son.

"Ron?"

A slight swaying movement caught her eye. Rope wrapped over and over a high beam dropped downwards, and at the end of it...

"Ron! Oh my god! No!"

Wearing only his underwear, lank hair flopping over half-closed eyes and head drooping forward, there was Ron with his hands tied in front of him and the noose tight around his thin neck. Long, pale toes twitched in the low light where they grasped the rungs of the stepladder.

"I'm coming, Ron. Stay there!"

He didn't even look at her as he moved to step back off the ladder.

"Don't you dare, Ronald Bilius!"

Molly flung herself over the clutter-strewn floor, hastily climbing onto the bottom rung of the ladder and circling her son's thin body with her arms. A sharp elbow in her face nearly knocked her backwards.

"Don't touch me!" he screamed. "Let go! Don't stop me! Let me go!" Ron struggled fiercely, trying to dislodge his mother's grip from the edges of the ladder.

"No, Ron. Don't do this. You don't have to do this. Come down, and I can help you."

"Let me die! You can't help me. I'm not worth it." Ron's foot slipped off the step, tightening the rope in a livid line around his neck.

His mother's arms tensed automatically, and she stepped up closer behind him, holding him firmly against the ladder.

Ron struggled again, but with less vigour. "Muum!" he wailed.

"Hush. I'm here, love. I'm here, right behind you. Let me help you."

Molly stretched an arm up in an attempt to loosen the rope, but could not reach beyond her tall son. It was clear she was too short to untie him and couldn't let go long enough to send her Patronus for help. Ron pushed back once more, nearly unbalancing her, and the ladder rocked a little with the movement. Realising if the stepladder tipped, they would both fall, and Ron could die, Mrs Weasley grabbed the rungs on either side of her boy and held on for dear life.

"Ron," she whispered, resting her cheek against the bony ribs and soft skin of her son's back. "I love you. Just hang in there, sweetheart." She felt the tension in his body diminish slightly.

"Lame, Mum."

She felt the rumble of his speech against her tear-streaked cheek. "Hmm?"

"Telling me to 'hang in there' when I've got a rope around my neck. It's just lame."

A hysterical giggle erupted from Molly's anxiety-tightened chest. "Why don't you undo the rope and come down for me, Ron?"

"I can't, Mum. Look at me. I can't live like this. I disgust myself." Leaning his elbows on the upper rungs and sagging forwards, he cradled his head in his tied hands. "Leave me. Let me do this alone. I don't want to live."

"I'm not leaving you," Molly replied firmly, kissing the cool skin of her son's back and giving him a reassuring squeeze. She looked at the rope stretching pink and blue up into the rafters and blinked back her tears. "Bloody Muggle climbing rope," she muttered, "I never did understand why Arthur wanted to keep it."

The sudden crack of multiple Apparitions outside the shed caused reflexive stiffening in Ron's limbs.

"No," he whispered. "Ward the door, don't let them in."

"Hello?" a voice called from outside, and the large shed door rattled as unseen hands tried to open it. "Anyone there?"

"They're coming for me. Don't let them take me away, Mum." Agitated, Ron tried to step off the ladder, but was held firm by Molly's embrace.

"Hush, sweetheart. It's okay. I've got you."

Turning in her arms, Ron glared down at his mother. "They can't see me like this. Look at me. I'm disgusting. I'm nothing. Let me go!" He pushed hard with his bound hands, dislodging his mother's grip and lunged forwards.

At that moment, firm hands clasped his shoulders, pulling him upright, and another hand appeared above his head wielding a sharp knife.

"Nooo!" Ron roared his despair.

"Healers here," a soothing voice said as the blade sliced through the rope. "Come on down."

Molly stepped back and let the Healers lead a trembling Ron to a seat on an old tool chest. She watched as he crumpled in on himself. Legs curling up, head falling forwards and arms hugging his chest, her little boy started to cry. Huge, heaving sobs wracked his whole body, sucking in between his prominent ribs with each indrawn breath.

While the Healers eased the ropes from around his neck and wrists, Molly laid a motherly hand on her son's knobbly, freckled shoulder.

Violently, his body twisted away from her. "Fuck off! Don't touch me."

"Ron?"

"It's all right, Mrs Weasley; we'll take it from here. He'll need a physical check at St Mungo's and proper assessment."

As the Healers gently guided him towards the door, Ron lifted a desolate face towards his mother and asked, "Why did you stop me?"

A/N: My thanks to my Moravian friend for her witty insights and frank discussion of depression. I will always take her advice and never run in the woods with my arms crossed.

Thanks, sunny33, for being there when you were needed.

Translation:

Fear Scots scared

Firgun

Chapter 10 of 17

Firgun – Hebrew – An act of saying nice things or doing nice things to another person. You'll be surprised who is being nice to whom.

Firgun

Disclaimer: Me, makin' dosh fae this keech? Awa' bile yer heid, ye windae-licker.

Translation: Scottish Me, making money from this rubbish? Don't be silly, you idiot. (literally: Go away and boil your head, you window licker.)

Dark hair flopped in his eyes as he tamped compost down around plant roots, and Neville brushed it away with the back of an earthy hand, wiping the sweat from his brow at the same time. Working in the greenhouse was dirty, sweaty work, but it gave him a chance to think. As his shoulders and arms started to ache from heavy lifting and digging, the young man was able to let his mind wander away from the task in front of him.

The start of the school year had been difficult for him. Returning to Hogwarts to find his best friends hadn't arrived back at school and seeing their names on the Ministry's list for interrogation, Neville had found his anxiety levels rising. Without his close friends, he had felt his confidence, which had built gradually since he had joined Dumbledore's Army during fifth year, slowly erode away. And being chosen as Gryffindor house representative had been the last straw. Neville had dropped Potions as a subject as soon as he could, and the thought of having to face his Boggart, Severus Snape, on a regular basis again had made his stomach churn. He had developed a stammer, raging acne and a slight tic, which flickered irritatingly at the corner of his eye. Just what a teenager needs to completely destroy his self-confidence.

In the first week of term, Luna Lovegood had found him sitting on the front steps of the school, staring morosely out at the falling rain. She had sat beside him, laying a hand on his constantly wand-twirling fingers in a gentle, stilling gesture.

"I worry about them, too," Luna had said, gazing out at the drifting rain, and Neville had known exactly who she meant. "They'll need someone strong to watch their backs for them, someone who's good at defence to provide a protective shield or a diversion when the time comes. Who do you think would be the best person for that, Neville?"

Unable to answer her, the young man had shaken his head dumbly and shrugged.

Leaning against his shoulder, Luna had squeezed his work-toned biceps with her small hand and had murmured, "Such hidden strength." She had hummed quietly to herself before asking, "Do you still have that interesting coin you got in fifth year?"

Neville had answered with a simple nod.

"Well, there we are then," she had said, getting up and leaving him sitting alone in the cold on the stone steps.

It had taken a fair bit of thought for Neville to eventually come to the conclusion Luna had been suggesting re-forming Dumbledore's Army. The corollary had been she believed he was strong enough to lead them.

Now, as he worked in the warm and pleasant environment of the greenhouse, watching the rain bouncing off the roof and streaming down the glass walls, he realised what a clever witch she was. The two of them worked well together with Luna's intelligence and tangential thought patterns and Neville's practical skills. Few of the staff believed the bumbling Gryffindor or the Ravenclaw daydreamer capable of organising a piss up in a brewery. Others, like McGonagall and Snape, seemed to view them with some interest, but, more importantly, the Carrows overlooked them completely.

He had been surprised by how many people Lovegood recruited. Obviously, Neville had spoken to students in Gryffindor, but Luna had managed to enlist the intelligentsia

of Ravenclaw and a crowd of 'head down, bum up,' hard-working Hufflepuffs, as well as a couple of surprises from Slytherin, including the weedy nerd, Theodore Nott.

Initially, Neville was sceptical of Nott's authenticity, but having worked together for long hours he had changed his opinion of the quiet loner. Nott, who rarely spoke unless asked a direct question, had opened up in the non-confrontational situation of working at the potting tables, talking to Longbottom about his fear of his Death Eater father and his concerns for the rest of his family in the current volatile climate. Repeatedly, he amazed Neville with his vast knowledge of plants used in dark potions and ingredients required for use in antidotes. When the question arose of why he had ended up in Slytherin rather than Ravenclaw, the skinny boy shrugged diffidently, pushing his specs up his nose, and asked where else a Death Eater's heir could be placed.

It was Nott who currently worked alongside Neville in the nursery, his muscles growing with the physical work as they tended Professor Sprout's magical plants.

Pomona was aging, and painful, arthritic hands meant digging and planting were no longer a pleasure for her. The Herbology professor had been most grateful when Longbottom had asked shyly if he might be of some assistance to her and even more appreciative when he and Nott had taken over full control of the greenhouses, preparing and setting out specimens for her classes in one of the smaller glasshouses closer to the school's door. It meant she could just turn up for a teaching session, knowing all she needed would be there, and her arthritic knees, which ached in the persistent damp weather, didn't have so far to walk.

This left the other glasshouses unsupervised, and Longbottom and Nott were making the best use of space, interplanting the school's curriculum plants with as many medicinal and useful potions ingredients as they could. Indeed, it had been Theodore who had suggested contacting Hannah Abbott, via the DA coin, for advice about companion cropping, saying she understood all about creature interdependence. Neville remembered her vividly for multiplying a ferret into a flock of flamingos in Transfiguration and breaking down crying during her Herbology O.W.L., saying she was too stupid to take her exams.

With this in mind, he had wondered how much help Hannah could be and was pleasantly surprised to find, when not under exam pressures, her advice was well considered and useful. Hannah Abbott definitely wasn't too stupid to pass exams, just very nervous when sitting them, which struck a chord with Longbottom. A gentle smile lit Neville's face as he ran a thumb over his DA coin, glad that with long-distance communications Hannah didn't have to see his blushing, spotty face or listen to his stumbling speech.

Their 'conversations' had developed from exchanges of Herbology facts and school news to more personal messages. His smile broadened with the memory.

A nudge in the ribs from Theo brought Neville back to earth, and he sighed, looking out through the rain-splashed windows to where the other boy was pointing.

Halfway across the grounds between the castle and the greenhouse, Luna Lovegood was skipping towards them, her hands above her head. Any normal person would have their hands up shielding themselves from the rain, but Luna's hands were twisting and turning in dancing patterns as if playing with the raindrops as they fell. A small smile flitted across her lips, and her large eyes danced with sparkles of joy.

Behind her, standing at the top of the steps in the lee of the large doorway, stood Draco Malfoy, arms crossed, blond hair falling across steely, grey eyes and scowl firmly in place. His stance suggested immense irritation as he glared at the joyful, dancing witch.

"What's Malfoy standing there for?"

"We're not allowed gatherings of more than three students outside classes, remember, Neville." Indicating the fuming Malfoy with his chin, Theo continued. "He seems to be tailing Luna at the moment, and with both of us here, he can't follow her down to the greenhouse."

"We'll have to be careful if he's lurking about."

Theo frowned with thought. "He isn't hanging about in the common room with his old gang of cronies any more. Blaise Zabini has taken over as ringleader, so I'm not sure where Malfoy's allegiances lie nowadays. In the meantime, it might be a bit of a lark to wind him up a bit, the arrogant, Death Eater tosser."

"Look who's talking with the Death Eater jibes," Neville commented.

"Yeah, well, we can't all follow in our fathers' footsteps, can we?" Nott hung his head and looked away, swallowing hard.

Feet shuffling a little with embarrassment, Neville cleared his throat. "I'll... um... go and wash my hands... and..."

Theodore's voice was very quiet as he spoke again without lifting his head, lank hair obscuring his eyes. "You know it wasn't just the Lestranges who tortured your parents, don't you?"

With a sharp intake of breath, the young man at his side rubbed the back of his dirty hand across his forehead. "As you said, we don't all follow in our fathers' footsteps, Nott. I'm just trusting you know where your own footsteps are falling." Without looking at his companion, Longbottom turned and walked away.

"I'm sorry, Neville."

"As am I, Theo, but it wasn't you who did it, so there's no need for you to apologise," Neville replied, pausing part-way down the glasshouse's damp path. "You're a great guy to work with. I hope you'll do the honourable thing and won't let us down."

The other wizard's head hung down as he exhaled a long, slow breath, shaking with emotion. "No-one's been so accepting of me before, not even my fellow Slytherins, which gives you some idea of my family's pedigree. Thank you, Neville."

"Don't thank me; thank Luna. She's the nutter who trusted you in the first place. Speaking of whom..."

The greenhouse door slid open as the blonde came giggling in out of the rain, shaking droplets from her hair as she entered.

"Hi, boys!"

"Luna!" Theo smiled and hugged her enthusiastically, ensuring as he did so he was in full view of Malfoy, who glowered back at him.

As soon as she was released, Luna peered at the plants they had been potting up. "Oh, look, you clever things, Nimbus Nibble..."

"*Mimulus mimbletonia*," the pair said in unison, breaking into laughter as their voices clashed in the air.

"I'm just leaving, Luna. Any news for me?"

"Our go-between tells me the redhead is no longer camping, and the remaining two are overrun with Horny Gollochs, but has no other information."

"That's a worry, isn't it?" asked Longbottom as he washed soil from his hands.

"Mhmm," Luna agreed.

"Wait a minute; you're talking about Har..."

Luna laid a finger tip on Theo's lips and frowned very slightly, shaking her head. Leaning in close, she whispered, "Trust no-one. Plants have ears."

Nodding conspiratorially as she pulled back, her large eyes stared around the greenery in the enclosed space. Nott glanced over her shoulder to Longbottom, who smiled and shrugged, making a twirling motion with an index finger next to his temple.

"Anything else, Luna?"

"He says the peripatetic witch is missing our flame-haired friend, so he's spending more and more time with her. Says he's trying to keep her spirits up, but I think the old duffer has a bit of a crush on her."

"Who's your amazing go-between who can find Ha... the trio... duo, when You-Know-Who's whole army can't find the runaway teenagers?" inquired Nott.

Luna replied with a dreamy smile and a small tap of the finger on the side of her nose.

"Must dash." Drying his wet hands on a clean portion of his robes, Neville leant in to give the witch a quick kiss on the cheek. "Catch you later," he called from the doorway before running out into the rain and heading for the castle.

"Can you help me finish this potting?" Theo asked.

Prodding a finger into the dirt at the base of the nearest plant, Luna's nose wrinkled delicately. "I'm not too good with green things."

"Here, let me show you. Give me your hand, Luna. All you need to do is push down a little more firmly. If I come behind you, I can show you more easily."

By the time Malfoy arrived in the greenhouse, slamming the door open with barely concealed fury, Nott's arms were both around the girl with his hands gently manipulating hers in the loamy soil. A firm grasp on his shoulder wrenched him backwards.

"Malfoy, how may I be of assistance?" Theo kept his tone quiet and light. His words implied deference, but his eyes sparked with defiance.

"Let her go!" The blond wizard's voice was low with a threatening edge.

"I'm not detaining Miss Lovegood. We were merely..." Theo lifted a shoulder ambiguously.

The tall blond had him grasped by the lapels in an instant, almost dragging him off his feet. "Do not touch her!" Malfoy hissed through clenched teeth.

"Draco, don't be silly."

Malfoy's eyes snapped to Lovegood as she spoke, then back to the boy held in his clenched fists. Slowly, he uncurled his fingers and with the flats of his hands patted Nott's lapels, giving him a slight push backwards. His lip curled in a disdainful sneer. Turning away in a swirl of robes, he strode to the door. Without looking back, he snarled before stepping out into the rain, "Hurry up, Lovegood. Must I remind you we have a meeting to attend?"

Following Draco with her eyes as he stalked away across the grass, Luna brushed dirt from her hands and patted Nott's arm. "Trust issues," she muttered. Turning her sharp-eyed gaze on Nott, she continued. "Stop being naughty, Theo; I know witches aren't your thing. If you wind him up, he may snap and hurt all of us."

She was soon running after Malfoy, pulling at his sleeve as she caught up with him. Nott watched as the two blonds interacted. The tall boy loomed over the witch, hands gesticulating wildly, eyes ablaze and obviously shouting. The girl, on the other hand, smiled benignly. Finger pointing and angry arm movements from the boy were answered by gentle nodding and smiling from the witch. Luna's hand went to her mouth as if to stifle a laugh, and Draco's aristocratic shoulders drooped in defeat. She then grabbed his hand and dragged him back up to the castle, talking all the way.

Interesting, thought Theo, turning his focus back to finishing his job. He pushed his glasses up his nose with the back of a hand and frowned as he remembered Lovegood's perceptiveness then, recalling Draco's ire, he smirked. Nott concluded, after years of being the Slytherin whipping boy, a little payback was well overdue, and he hummed as he completed the last of the potting.

~*~

"Miss Granger."

Hermione jerked awake from her fitful sleep. Pushing tangled hair off her face, she rolled over on her camp bed to face the picture frame sitting propped up on a nearby chair, the heavy locket sliding across her chest as she moved.

Since Ron had left, she had sought solace in conversations with Phineas Nigellus. With just two of them sharing the Horcrux, life was miserable. When Hermione had it hanging round her neck, she fell into a deep hole of depression, and when Harry had custody he lay unmoving on his bed, virtually mute. There was no-one else to talk to, so the sharp-tongued ex-headmaster had become her only company.

"Miss Granger, where are you?"

"Right here on my bed."

Hermione heard him tut and imagined him rolling his eyes behind his blindfold. She knew he was angling for information on their location, but she was determined to keep that secret. In fact, some days she wasn't even sure herself. They had moved down south for warmer weather, but found there were more people, increasing their risk of capture.

Currently, they were somewhere in the wilds of North Wales, but even here they could hardly escape human contact. She smiled at the memory of Harry moving them to the top of Snowdon, Wales's highest mountain, thinking it would be deserted only to find a railway station and restaurant on the summit. At least they hadn't had to forage for food that day and had cautiously enjoyed a pie and a pint amongst the hikers and day-trippers on top of Britain's busiest mountain.

Tonight they planned to pack up and move north again to Scotland. She was already preparing for the return to cooler climes, looking out extra jumpers, hot water bottles and scarves. With both of them so debilitated by the constant proximity of the Horcrux, they had been too dejected to renew heating and cooking charms, focussing only on their immediate security and little else. The interior of the tent was becoming colder and damper as time wore on. Hermione's mind added gloves, long johns and thermal vests to the list of necessities.

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione sat bolt upright, smacking her head on the underside of the bunk above. Her wand was drawn, and she scanned the dim interior of the tent, looking for the source of the well-recognised voice.

Phineas Nigellus sniggered when he heard the thudding contact of head against furniture followed by swearing.

"This is ridiculous." That voice again.

Hermione leapt from her bed, eyes scouring the room and wand raised for action. She could see no-one, only the blindfolded portrait of Phineas, whose shoulders were shaking with ill-suppressed mirth.

"Headmaster Black, what's so funny? Can't you hear him?" She hissed tetchily, her mood irritable with the Horcrux's proximity.

"Miss Granger, pay attention."

"Professor Snape?"

"Indeed."

"I can't see you." Hermione knelt in front of the portrait, leaning her forehead against the glass and trying to look around the inner edge of the frame.

"Of course you can't, you silly chit, he's back at Hogwarts talking through my other portrait."

"He sounds so close, so real and... and crushed velvety."

"Headmaster Snape can hear you, Miss Granger," Black reminded her.

"Oh!" She squeaked.

"Miss Granger, you will report for your first lesson on Saturday morning at ten o'clock."

"Lesson?" Her brain felt leaden.

A heavy sigh from the depths of the portrait reminded her of Snape's classroom demeanour. "Potions lesson."

"Oh, yes, my lesson."

"Saturday, in the box room."

"The box?"

"Our time together will be most tedious if you're always this repetitive and slow on the uptake." Snape's voice conveyed a sneer.

"You may have to go easy on the young lady, Headmaster Snape. Something affects her from time to time, but she won't tell me what it is."

The current headmaster took a deep steadying breath, and Hermione was sure she could hear him pinch the bridge of his nose. "Very well. Are my instructions clear enough, Miss Granger?"

"Lupin's place?"

"Yes, Miss Granger. I thought you were supposed to be intelligent. Ten o'clock in our box room."

"Yours?"

"For goodness sake! Black, you speak to the dunderhead and make sure she gets the message."

Hermione heard his receding footsteps. *Dragonhide boots*, her brain whispered.

She heard his final words as if he was speaking from the far end of a large room. "I can't believe I agreed to work with someone so obtuse."

Phineas Nigellus winced at the sound of a heavy door slamming. "Well, that went very much as expected."

Hermione slumped back onto her bed. "Can you remind me on Friday, Professor Black? I'd hate to get on the wrong side of Professor Snape."

Black's painted eyebrows arched with surprise. "Fawning lickspittle!"

His comment lacked his usual venom, and the tired witch exhaled a soft snort.

Phineas waited for her breathing to even out into the deep regularity indicative of sleep before he slipped the blindfold from his eyes. Taking time to have a good look about his surroundings as much as he could, he was unable to find any indication of where they were camping. Finally, he brought his gaze to the young woman sprawled haphazardly on the bed in front of him. He looked her over in appraisal before stepping to the edge of his painting and disappearing.

"I can't believe so much depends on such inexperienced youngsters. Let's hope you're smarter than you look, because currently you look like something the kneazle coughed up," he muttered as he left.

A/N: If you don't know by now who does my beta duties, you haven't been paying attention

Translation:

Firgun Hebrew An act of saying nice things or doing nice things to another person without any other purpose, but to make the other feel good about what he is or what he does.

Feisty

Chapter 11 of 17

Feisty - a. spirited. The Slytherins have to deal with some feisty girls.

Feisty

Disclaimer: Ah dipone, ah'm a leal quine.

Translation: Scots Doric I declare on oath, I am a law abiding girl.

The longer Professor Binns' spectral leave continued, the more irritable the dark-haired wizard became. It was all very well having History of Magic on the curriculum, but he was getting heartily sick of rehashing relatively recent events and trying to explain the actions of himself and others to a bunch of whinging brats.

The combined Gryffindor and Slytherin class was the worst, with all their ingrained rivalries. Plus, the students all assumed he would be lenient with his own house and dock points willy-nilly from the opposition. No matter whom he penalised, there was always someone who would grizzle about his house loyalties. You'd think after all that had happened they would have learned there was more to life than house points.

At the moment, he would far rather be up to his elbows in his herbs.

~*~

Draco sat leaning back with his long legs crossed elegantly at the ankles and propped up on the library table. His body stretched as he put his hands behind his head, spearing slender fingers into his sleek locks. If it hadn't been for the faint scowl on his face, he would have looked quite relaxed and at home. Below his cool façade, emotions swirled as his grey eyes followed the movements of the exasperating witch he had been assigned to look after.

He couldn't decide what was more irksome, the fact he had agreed to babysit Luna Lovegood or the fact she didn't seem to mind his continued presence. More baffling was the way she chatted happily to him, ignored his foul moods and even sought out his company after classes, and in return she asked for nothing. It wasn't what he was used to, and he couldn't figure it out. He was sure she must have some ulterior motive and kept waiting for it to be revealed.

He and Luna were the last ones in the library tonight, and Madam Pince trusted them to turn out the lights and lock up when they left.

The lounging wizard's eyes followed Luna's every action as she drifted up and down the bookcases, trailing her fingertips over the books and humming. Occasionally, she stopped and lifted a book from the shelf, inhaling as she lifted it to her nose, then returning it to its place or adding it to the small pile held in the crook of her elbow. Draco watched the subtle dance of her fingers as they bumped over the spines and frowned at her ridiculous book sniffing.

She was such a tactile person. Lovegood's hands seemed to have a mind of their own, and her constant touching drove Draco to distraction. He had been brought up in a loving but not very demonstrative household. Having his robes tugged, his hand grabbed, his back or knee patted, his hair smoothed back or his trembling stilled by her gentle hands was unfamiliar and confusing for him. He responded by lifting her hands disdainfully from his garments, pulling his hand from her grasp and pushing her away, but the irritating girl appeared unfazed by his repeated rebuffs.

Daft bint, he thought, scowling harder in her direction.

Diffuse moonlight shining through the library's leaded windows highlighted her silvery hair and gave her face a soft glow. Her eyes, which he had previously thought overly large, were animated and expressive. Draco's gaze drifted to her agile mouth and was immediately reminded of its sweet taste when he had kissed her. He hadn't kissed her again, once had been a mistake, and she obviously didn't want the contact. His tongue ran along his lip, now well healed, but still a little sensitive where the feisty girl had bitten him. The memory stirred a swooping sensation in his belly, and his groin reacted.

Luna turned to look at him as if drawn by his discomposure.

"Are you watching me and licking your lips, Draco Malfoy?"

"You wish, Looney," he countered, moving his feet from the table and pulling his robes around him to conceal his state of discomfort.

She smiled but said nothing.

"What are you doing, Lovegood?"

Luna bestowed him with that look which meant 'why are you asking such a silly question; isn't it obvious?' He knew if he kept quiet she would elucidate in her own time in her own way.

"I'm sniffing out a good story for my friend."

"Lovegood, that's a figure of speech, not something you have to do physically."

"If you say so," she replied. Placing her pile of books on the table, she held two books out to him. "Close your eyes and smell them, then tell me which one I should choose."

His grey eyes met hers, questioning.

She moved round behind his chair and leaned forward, whispering in his ear, "Close your eyes."

"We're leaving after this, right?"

"Mhmm." Her response vibrated close to his temple, and Draco's eyes drifted shut.

"Sniff."

The wizard breathed in deeply.

"Again."

Inhaling, Draco caught the scent of her.

"Well, what do you think?"

"Moonlight and apples," he murmured.

"Don't be daft, Malfoy."

His eyes flicked open, and he caught her hand, bringing the soft skin of the inside of her wrist to his nose. Breathing in again slow and steady, his eyes closed. "No, I'm right. Moonlight..." his tongue flicked out, tasting that sensitive spot, "... and apples," he added, releasing his grip.

Luna stood up abruptly, placing the books on the table and rubbing the sensitised skin of her wrist on her robes. "Well, uh..."

Draco opened his eyes languidly and smirked. "So, which book are you taking for your friend?"

"My, uh..."

"Eloquent, Lovegood," Draco drawled.

"You just licked me."

"So I did."

Luna's mouth opened and shut silently, and her clear, grey eyes searched his for some sort of explanation. Draco's eyebrows arched in reply.

"Did you mean to... to lick me?"

"Yes."

"But you don't..." She paused.

"I don't what?"

"You don't... you don't like me. I don't understand. You can't. I'm Looney Lovegood, the daftie you have to accompany because of some Slytherin obligation. And don't deny it," she said, wagging a finger at him. "I know Uncle Phin's been worried about me, and I wouldn't put it past him to organise some silly, Slytherin scheme. But, you don't like me, so why touch me?"

Draco rose to his feet in one graceful move and seized her by the shoulders, glaring down at her from his height advantage. "You're always touching me, Looney. So what's the difference? I can't go five minutes without you poking me in the ribs or laying a hand on my shoulder or grabbing my hand. What's your problem? Am I not good enough for you? Do you have an issue with Death Eaters in general, or is it just me? Am I too Slytherin to touch a pure, little Ravenclaw? Is that it?" His voice rose in pitch and intensity as he shook her with each demand.

"No... but, you don't..." Luna's hand drifted up to his cheek, gentle and soft.

Leaning into her touch, the young man squeezed his eyes shut, turning into her palm and breathing her in.

"Draco," she whispered. "Kiss me."

Gently his tongue ran over the delicate dip of her palm, then he placed a soft kiss on the centre. Laying his hand over hers he pressed it to his lips. Draco took a long, deep breath, then exhaled slowly, drawing her hand away and kissing the tips of her fingers.

Her other thumb caressed his cheek and brushed tears from his long eyelashes.

Pulling away, he dropped her hand and cleared his throat. "Let's go, Lovegood." He turned away from her and picked up the two books off the table. "Take them both. My decision making was a little... clouded."

As Draco walked towards the exit without looking at her again, Luna called after him, "Don't worry, Malfoy, I won't tell a soul."

He stopped and answered without turning round, "Neither will I."

~*~

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione rolled over in her bed with a groan. She hated it when he did this. Shouting at a sleeping woman in the wee small hours was not the way to impress.

"Miss Granger, get up."

She grumbled at him with a diatribe including a repetitive refrain of 'Fuck off, Phineas.'

"Are you using bad language, young lady?"

"What're you doing waking me up in the middle of the night?"

"You have a lesson at ten, and Professor Snape will not tolerate tardiness."

"And?"

"It is quarter to the hour, Miss Granger."

"Fuck!"

"Tsk!"

Hermione shot out of bed, wrenching the locket from round her neck, cursing as the chain caught in her tangled hair and eventually hauling it off with a snarl. At least sleeping in her clothes meant she didn't have to waste time getting dressed.

Harry was lying curled up in a meagre blanket, and as Hermione approached with the Horcrux, he shivered. She stood at his bedside observing him for a moment, noting his sallow appearance, the dark smudges under his eyes and drawn features.

His damp hair suggested he had been outside recently to check the security charms. Indeed, his wand was still clutched tightly in a pallid hand.

Hermione hated to see him so miserable, and her gut clenched at the thought of leaving him alone, but she knew he wouldn't move from his bed once the locket was in his possession. A small whimper escaped chapped lips as Hermione slipped the Horcrux over his head without disturbing him. She took the blanket from her own bed, still retaining her body heat, and tucked it around Harry, smiling a little as he sighed and snuggled into the warmth.

A hastily written note to let him know when to expect her back and a rapidly packed beaded bag were her last tasks before disappearing out the door. Hating to leave without saying goodbye, she was soon at Harry's bedside again.

"I'll be back soon," she said, even though she was sure he was asleep, placing a soft kiss on his temple as she spoke. He looked so vulnerable she couldn't help adding a whispered, "Love you."

In her hurry to leave, she missed his murmured reply. "Love you too, 'Mione."

~*~

The man standing on the opposite side of the small room with arms crossed and sneer fixed firmly in place looked so solidly familiar and reminded her so much of happier times, Hermione could scarcely resist the urge to hug him. Her hands twitched involuntarily, but only moved a fraction. Unfortunately, it was enough to loosen her grip on her wand and bag, which fell to the floor with a clatter and thud.

"Ever the attention-seeking entrance, Miss Granger," he commented, regarding her with ill-concealed contempt.

"Professor Snape, you're really here."

"Observant as ever, I see. Did you expect otherwise?"

"It's just... yes... no... I wasn't sure... I'm... but it's... you..." Her voice trailed off as his dark eyes bored into her.

"If you have finished your stream of semi-consciousness, I suggest we begin." Turning to the makeshift workbench as he spoke, he started setting out equipment. "Time is limited, and I must return to the school for lunch."

"School lunch?"

"Yes, Miss Granger, the meal we eat at midday."

"I know what you mean," she snapped. "I just can't imagine the routine of school lunches anymore, but I suppose life goes on as normal."

"Surprisingly, Hogwarts did not grind to a halt when Gryffindor's Golden Trio failed to appear at the start of term."

"That's not what I meant." She glowered at the black expanse of his back and was sorely tempted to poke out her tongue.

"Come along, Miss Granger. We have work to do."

Snatching her dropped belongings up from the floor, she dumped them on the end of the bench, her mood still affected by post-Horcrux irritability. "Fine! Teach me."

Dark eyebrows rose slightly, but he continued to sort equipment and arrange ingredient jars. "Perhaps you should leave your churlish attitude at home, young lady." Sniffing, he added, "And a shower before you attend my lessons would be appreciated. You smell like a vagrant hag."

"A shower?"

"I would have thought a bright witch such as you would understand the concept of soap, water and basic cleanliness." His eyes rolled at her petulance as her grimy hands slapped down on the bench top.

"I apologise, Professor," she said through gritted teeth. "Not all of us have access to Hogwarts' magical baths at present. You will forgive me if my cold water wipe downs are not up to your exacting standards."

"Cold?"

"Yes, sir. I would have thought a man of your intelligence would understand the concept of temperature."

"Are you telling me you have no hot water where you are living, Miss Granger?"

Her responding laugh was mirthless. "No hot water, no heating, no proper food." Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Nothing."

His hands hesitated in their movements. "Where on earth are you staying?"

Hermione's lips pinched together as she turned away from him, the tears now starting to trickle from the corners of her eyes, tracking a clean line down her cheeks. Taking a deep breath, she wiped them away with a grubby sleeve. "... I can't tell you."

His tone was more conciliatory when he spoke again. "May I suggest you use the wash basin, through that door, to improve your basic hygiene before we start work this morning? Next time, arrive earlier, and you can take a shower before your lesson."

Hermione realised slamming the bathroom door behind her was childish, but it helped relieve some more of her irritation. The fragrant, handmade soap and warm water helped soothe away the last shreds of anger as she washed the grime from her hands and the tear streaks from her face. By the time she returned to the box room, she was feeling more congenial.

Holding her hands out for inspection, she asked Snape if they were clean enough for his standards.

"A vast improvement, Miss Granger."

Hermione was surprised to see a small quirk of amusement at the corner of his mouth and dumbfounded when he caught her hands in his and lifted them to his nose.

"Do I detect lemon and honey?" He inhaled again before letting her hands go. "And a hint of ginger."

"You should know, sir. It's the same fragrance as the shampoo Remus lent me, so I presume you made it."

"Did I?"

"It had your writing on the label."

"I can't deny it then, can I?"

If Hermione expected further elucidation, it was not forthcoming, and the dark wizard indicated for her to start her task. "Today we'll prepare the dry ingredients, then tomorrow evening we'll start brewing," he said, adding as an apparent afterthought, "If that suits your schedule."

The witch wanted to pretend to get out an appointment diary to check, but resisted and simply nodded agreement.

They worked steadily together, with Snape occasionally demonstrating a specific preparation technique or indicating her mistakes with a tap of his knife tip on the back of her hand. A set of handwritten instructions on a stained, dog-eared piece of parchment lay between them on the bench; the script was recognisable as Snape's own, but some of the annotations were in another's hand.

Hermione followed the ingredients list with a finger while her teacher appeared to work from memory. She was pleasantly surprised by the lack of snide comments or derogatory remarks, and the time passed quickly.

As time went on, Hermione gradually became aware of having missed breakfast. Her belly rumbled quietly, and she felt increasingly lethargic and a little light headed. Checking the list, she saw they had only one more item to prepare and was sure if she concentrated, she would manage to complete the job.

"Destroying expensive ingredients with shoddy workmanship is unacceptable, Miss Granger."

His deep, disapproving tones startled her. A hand laid on top of hers stilling her chopping blade surprised her more, and it wasn't until she put her knife down that she noticed the tremor in her fingers.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I'm just a bit tired and hungry."

Her head hung with fatigue, and her fingers curled slowly into loose fists on the bench in expectation of a sharp tongue-lashing.

"Indeed. It is nearly lunchtime."

"Lunch, huh?"

"Yes, Miss Granger, I think we already deduced it's the meal we eat at midday."

"I can't remember the last time I ate lunch." Her voice was weak and tinged with weariness, and to her humiliation, she found herself on the verge of tears again. She bit her trembling bottom lip in an attempt to stop the embarrassing quiver.

A knuckle under her chin lifted her head, and she faced the dour wizard's scrutiny without flinching. His finger traced across her sunken cheek to her hairline where he rubbed a stray lock of matted hair between his fingers, feeling the texture before bringing the tress to his nose to sniff. As a brief look of distaste flitted across his face, the corner of his mouth lifted in the start of a sneer.

Before he could pass comment, the room's concealed door swung open, and a man's hand clamped down firmly on Snape's shoulder.

A fleeting look of surprise crossed the dark-eyed man's face before he dropped the tress of hair as if scalded and took a step back. The wizard now at his side did not relinquish his grip, giving him a friendly shake and smiling first at Hermione then at Severus.

"Good to see you two getting on so well together. No wands drawn yet, I see. How are you, Hermione? Come here and let me give you a hug." Lupin scarcely drew breath as he chatted amiably and stretched out his free hand towards her, but Hermione noticed as she was drawn into a one-armed hug his other hand remained resting on Snape's shoulder blade. "I bet you've been having a great chinwag. How's the box room working out?"

Drawing himself up to his full height and crossing his arms across his chest, Severus looked down his prodigious nose at the werewolf beside him. "May I remind you, Lupin, Miss Granger is my student, and we are not here for friendly chitchat. We're here at your behest to brew your Wolfsbane."

"C'mon, Sev, chill out." Lupin shook Snape's shoulder again and patted his arm. "Hey, it's nearly lunchtime. Have you two eaten yet?"

"No," they replied in unison.

"Well, let's get lunch."

"I haven't brought anything to eat," Hermione admitted.

"And you haven't fed her, have you, you berk?" Remus slapped Snape's arm.

Severus hesitated briefly. "We were busy."

"Too busy to notice she's starving?"

Snape's lips pressed together into a thin line, and he glared at Remus. "I noticed. How could I not when she looks and smells like one of the Inferi?"

Hermione's spirits flagged under his derisive comments, but she lifted her head and squared her shoulders in response. "Don't worry about me, sir. I'll be fine. I can scrape something together at home, and I promise I'll shower before we start tomorrow."

"Rubbish, lass. Sit down, and I'll go and get you some food." Just before he disappeared through the door again, Remus added, "Fancy anything, Severus?"

"No, I must get back to Hogwarts. Some of us have jobs to go to." With a curt nod in Hermione's direction, he brushed past Lupin and strode out.

Remus frowned after him with mild irritation. "I'll be back in a mo'," he called as he stepped out of the room.

The small room went very quiet, and Hermione leant back against the wall, listening for Lupin's return. She was startled when he reappeared suddenly. He struggled in carrying a large tray laden with food and a pot of tea in his hands and a bulky package tucked under one arm.

"Oh! I didn't hear you coming."

"Sorry for making you jump, Hermione. Soundproofed room, remember." Clearing a space on a large packing chest with his free elbow, he set the tray down and presented the parcel to her with a flourish. "Voilà. This is for you. I think Severus was supposed to give it to you, but you know him and social graces..." He shrugged an apology.

"What's in it?"

"No idea, love. Sev said it's an aid parcel. Open it and see."

"I think I'll take it home unopened and share it with Harry, if you think that'll be okay."

"I'm sure it will be. It's not as if Snape's going to be giving you embarrassing gifts of frilly knickers, or something, is it?"

Hermione giggled and turned her attention to her lunch, eating with gusto until she couldn't pack another morsel into her full stomach.

"Jeepers, you were really starving, weren't you?"

Nodding lethargically in agreement, Hermione leaned back, rubbing her belly. Eventually, she got to her feet with a groan. "I've got to go. Harry will need some respite and some food." She indicated the remaining sandwiches and biscuits she had been unable to cram in. "Can I take a doggy bag?"

"You go for it. Take what's left. I won't be back here for a day or so."

"Won't you be here tomorrow when we're brewing?"

"Ugh! No. The smell of it turns my stomach. It's bad enough having to drink it each month."

"It didn't smell that bad when we made it at school."

"That's because you made the official, Ministry approved version. The Snupin variation stinks, but works heaps better."

"Do you mean to say, Professor Snape has improved on Wolfsbane?"

"Of course. He's a talented man, but he had some help." Lupin grinned impishly.

"You? Really?"

"Who else?" His smile broadened with pride.

Hermione didn't look at him directly, peeking sideways through her mane of hair and trying to judge his reaction as she asked, "You and he work well together, don't you?"

He replied with an enigmatic, lopsided smile. "We have been known to co-operate in times of necessity."

Lupin's tone and expression gave her no clues as to their exact relationship, but Hermione was pretty certain she knew.

"Professor Snape wants me to wash before I start brewing tomorrow. Can I please borrow some more of your heavenly shampoo?"

"Mine?"

"Yes, you know, the one I dropped and broke. Do you have any more of that?"

Remus rubbed his jaw as he thought. "I'm not sure. I'll have a look."

"It was absolutely divine. Perhaps I can persuade the Professor Snape to pass on the recipe. He made it, didn't he?"

"He did, but I'm not sure if he'd remember. It was made a long time ago."

"Doesn't he make it for you anymore?"

Lupin looked a little confused and rubbed along his jaw line again. "No. It wasn't made for me."

"Oh! So, who...?"

"I... I can't tell you." His gaze was downcast, and when he looked back to her, he appeared troubled and his eyes were pleading. "Don't pry into our lives, please, Hermione."

Flinging her arms around him, she hugged her friend tightly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so insensitive and rude."

Gently, he returned her embrace before setting her away from him. "C'mon, love. It's time to go. Harry'll be wondering what's happened to you."

"Merlin's underpants! I forgot about Harry."

"Merlin's undies?" Remus chuckled. "I'm glad I don't associate with you very often. You'll contaminate my sensitive lugholes with hideous language like that!"

With a quick peck on the cheek, he handed her the parcel and pushed her into the centre of the room to Disapparate. "I'll see what I can do about your shampoo," he called just as she disappeared.

~*~

Snape felt ill at ease as he strode down the street, heading downhill before crossing through Princes Street Gardens and heading up the Mound to the castle, getting a bit of fresh air before his return to Hogwarts. He turned his collar up against the sneaky Edinburgh wind and as he did so caught the spicy, honeyed scent again from his hands. It had smelled very pleasant on Miss Granger, but the unexpected familiarity of the fragrance had disconcerted him.

She had assured him he had prepared the concoction, but he couldn't remember having done so. If he had, who would he have made it for? He tried to rack his brains for a memory, but couldn't focus on anyone who would suit that particular combination. Severus decided he would have to ask Lupin next time he saw him.

As he walked, Severus spooled through his mental check list for the rest of the weekend. Lunch was top of the list, followed by a school inter-house Quidditch match. The day would be rounded off by a visit to Malfoy Manor. An entertaining little soiree, the Dark Lord had intimated on his invitation and Snape's stomach turned over slowly with uncertainty at the thought. At least he was escorting young Malfoy, so would have an excuse for leaving early to get the young man back to Hogwarts.

Tomorrow he planned to collect the final ingredients for the Wolfsbane before dinner, then back to Edinburgh for a brewing session with the feisty Miss Granger. He smirked as he recalled her holding her hands out for a check, just like a diligent preschooler. Hopefully, she wouldn't smell so bad tomorrow if she showered beforehand.

Severus had been horrified to see her so unkempt and obviously malnourished when she had arrived. He reminded himself to ensure the girl ate something before starting work. It would be most undesirable for the witch to pass out from hunger whilst brewing.

Suddenly, he realised why he felt ill at ease. He had, unintentionally, taken on another lost cause at a time when he really couldn't afford to. Not only did he have a school full of idiotic children to protect but he now had his own flock of misfits and waifs. Counting them off Draco Malfoy, Luna Lovegood, Remus Lupin Snape added Hermione Granger to the growing list.

A/N: My apologies for the delay in posting this chapter. First, sunny33 had a holiday, then I did. We're all refreshed now and ready to get on with the story. Thanks for continuing to read, especially if you've left a review. Your reviews help me judge if I'm getting my writing right and make the hours of slogging over a hot keyboard worthwhile. They also stroke my ego and make me feel loved and appreciated. Cheers, quaffswinegaily.

Translation:

Daftie Scottish vernacular idiot, fool, imbecile

Lugholes Scots ears

Fruitcake

Chapter 12 of 17

Fruitcake - *n.* 1. heavy cake containing dried fruit. 2. *slang* an eccentric or insane person. Who's mad?

Fruitcake

Disclaimer: Dinnae clype on me, or ah'll hae ma heid in ma hauns an' ma lugs tae plae wi'.

Translation: Scots Don't tell on me, otherwise I'll be in trouble. (literally: I'll have my head in my hands and my ears to play with.)

Sitting on the edge of the camp bed, Hermione turned the parcel over in her hands, her fingers fumbling with the string and Spellotape as she unwrapped the brown paper package. Loosening the last piece of tape allowed the contents to enlarge, and she was overwhelmed by the expanding items.

"Look at this, Harry. Oh, my goodness. Look!"

Despite the locket around his neck, Harry managed to show some enthusiasm. "Food."

"And books!"

"Are those blankets?"

"Yes, and warm winter cloaks."

"Who's it from?"

"Luna." Hermione showed him the handwritten note she had found tucked inside one of the books. "She says she wants us to keep warm to protect us from Nargle infestation. There's comfort food to ward off the Horny Gollochs and fresh fruit for our health. The books were sniffed out of the library by Malfoy. Wait... that can't be right."

"Who cares, 'Mione? There's a Hogwarts fruitcake."

"She says that's to remind us of her."

"D'you think she meant to say that?"

"Luna? 'Course she did. She's not daft."

Tickled by Luna's self-deprecating humour, they both keeled over in fits of giggles.

~*~

Arthur Weasley sat on the edge of his bed, one thumb absent-mindedly running up and down the rippled edge of the photograph in his hand while he traced a finger over the image of the smiling family. They were all there. Molly was wiping her hands on her apron before pushing her hair out of her eyes. Percy stood a little awkwardly between Bill and Charlie, who each had a hand on a twin's shoulder, holding the troublemakers apart. Fred and George were facing away from each other, but he could see their hands sneaking behind them to pinch unwary legs. And at the front were his babies. Ginny sat cross-legged on the floor, back straight, red-gold locks glistening until Ron's hand reached up and tugged hard. Charlie's free hand snuck out and hugged his little brother back tight against his broad chest.

The happy-go-lucky, cheeky grin on Ron's face made Arthur's heart contract, and a tear slipped down his cheek. Arthur wondered where he had gone wrong. He felt like he had failed his youngest son and lost him forever under the black fog of depression. How could things have become so bad this cheerful youngster from the photo had turned his face to the wall and tried to take his own life?

The mental health team at St Mungo's had been helpful, but limited, and after a brief stabilisation period, Ron had returned home, not deemed damaged enough for admission to the Janus Thickey Ward. The Weasleys had been provided with his anti-depressant potions and had been advised to try to re-engage Ron with things he would enjoy. But the spark had gone from the young man, and Arthur struggled to know how to help him. Molly coped in her usual practical way, by cooking and mothering Ron; however, Arthur felt useless.

He looked at the photograph again, pondering how much his family had changed since it was taken.

It wasn't just Ron. Percy was as good as lost to them with his rigid adherence to the Ministry of Magic. The twins were always involved in some convoluted scheme. Bill was off and married now, living with his beautiful wife in their seaside cottage, which Arthur had a good feeling would in due course become a cosy, family home. Their other dependable son, Charlie, was away in Romania dragon-taming.

Arthur worried about Charlie working with such dangerous creatures every day, but the young man seemed to have developed a quiet confidence and inner strength which his dad envied. It was just what he wanted to give Ron, and as he thought some more about it, he wondered if Charlie could help. With that in mind, he moved to the table to write a letter to his dragon-wrangling son.

~*~

As Draco sat on a chair with one foot propped on his bed, tying the laces of his dress shoe, he glared at his distorted reflection in the highly polished, black leather. Snape was taking him to Malfoy Manor soon for a Death Eaters' soiree, and the young man was not looking forward to the evening. His anxiety made his hands tremble and his fingers less dextrous, and he swore quietly as his fine laces failed to retain an acceptably symmetrical bow.

"This is ridiculous," he muttered to himself, leaning back, running fingers through his hair and taking a deep breath. "What am I worrying about? It's only an evening at home."

Letting out a long, calming breath, he bent forward again to complete his task, knowing he couldn't go anywhere with untied laces and changing into slip-on shoes would send his mother into apoplexy. A quick smile flitted across his lips at the thought of seeing his family again.

He had only had a couple of very brief owl messages from home since the start of term, and he was looking forward to spending time with his parents. If only the evening didn't have to involve Voldemort and his followers as well.

Draco swallowed hard to stave off the burn of rising bile as he remembered the events of the summer holidays. The images of Burbage's torture still woke him from his sleep, on occasion drenched in cold sweat.

Tonight he and his parents would have to put on their perfect Malfoy façades and entertain the madmen and murderers in their own home as if nothing had happened. He didn't know how his mother and father coped with their presence every day. At least, he thought, they had each other for support. He wished he could take someone with him tonight who he could be sure was on his side. Snape would be there, but he really wasn't the type to hold your hand in times of stress.

As he wiped a small smudge off a nearly immaculate shoe, Draco tried to think who else he could count on for support nowadays. It depressed him to realise the list was so short as to be virtually empty. Previously, he relied on Crabbe and Goyle, but now he got the impression they would not watch his back unless they were all facing a threat to Slytherin house. He wondered if he could trust them at all.

The only name which kept sneaking to the front of his brain was Lovegood. Reaching for a silk tie, Malfoy snorted in disbelief. Looney? For goodness sake, was there no one else? His hands stilled for a moment as he tried to conjure up another name, but he could not ignore her persistent, irritating presence in his mind.

Well, he was going to be out of Hogwarts tonight, and the daft witch would have to take care of herself. To his dismay, a curl of anxiety coiled in his gut at the thought of leaving Luna behind, alone. The wizard shook his head, trying to dispel the idea. She was not alone; she was with her Ravenclaw house mates. But, Draco's conscience reminded him, Phineas Black had asked him specifically to look out for her.

With a sigh, he closed his wardrobe door and looked in the mirror as he knotted his tie.

Perhaps he should ask someone else to keep an eye on her whilst he was out. The next problem was who to ask. Draco knew he couldn't approach anyone from another house. Imagine a Malfoy seeking help from someone outside Slytherin; it was unthinkable. The only person who came to mind, who Luna would also trust, was Theodore Nott.

The now composed, handsome blond reflected in the mirror straightened his tie, smoothed his hair and robes and left the room to look for Nott the nerd.

~*~

Pushing his spectacles up his nose, Theo lounged back against the cushions of the common room sofa with a textbook in one hand. As he reached for his drink without lifting his gaze from the page, his hand was intercepted by a booted foot on the coffee table.

"Oops!"

A malicious laugh from behind him alerted Nott to another presence.

"Those weren't important notes I spilled coffee on, were they?" Goyle sneered as he leaned in toward Theo, his bulk obscuring the light.

"Well..."

"Good, 'cause I'd hate for you to go crying to your daddy over a spilled drink."

"You know I don't..."

"See, it's like this," Crabbe interrupted, grabbing Nott's hair from behind and jerking his head back against the sofa. "With Malfoy going out tonight, me and Greg want the senior common room for ourselves..."

"...and our ladies," Goyle added with a low chuckle.

"And we don't want any lady-boys interfering. See?" Crabbe tugged Theo's hair again for emphasis, and Nott's breath hissed in through gritted teeth.

"Oho! Do you like it rough, you naughty boy?"

Goyle's large fingers pinched the flesh of Theo's cheek.

"Ow! No. Fine..."

"Look at the blush on him. He liked that, didn't he, Greg? He's been hanging about with that Gryffindor pussy too much, I think. Maybe we should show him a proper bit of rough." Crabbe snickered, reaching for the front of his trousers.

"He's cringing, the big girl's blouse. His dad might be a Death Eater, but this Nott's not."

Grabbing a fistful of robes, Goyle chuckled as he hauled the smaller wizard to his feet, then onto his tiptoes, bringing him in line with his eyes. The thug pretended to examine Nott before asking, "What'll we do with you?"

"Put him down."

"Eh?"

"I said put him down." Draco Malfoy stood in the doorway, emanating a cold fury.

"We was just havin' a lark together. Weren't we, Notty?" Goyle released his grip, and Theo stumbled as his feet landed back on the ground.

"It didn't look much fun to me," replied Malfoy. "Is this how we treat our Slytherin housemates nowadays?"

Crabbe squared his broad shoulders and pushed his cuffs back from meaty hands as if preparing for a fight.

"Are you challenging me, Vincent?" Mirroring his movements, Draco pushed his sleeves up to his elbows, exposing the Dark Mark on his left forearm and drawing his wand. Crabbe hesitated at the sight of the dark tattoo. Then, with a small smirk and an elegant gesture, Malfoy pulled his cuffs back down again and straightened his cufflinks. "I don't have time for this right now. I have an engagement to attend. Perhaps I should just have a word with your fathers whilst I'm there."

"Ah, now..."

"You don't need to..."

"Save it for another time, boys." The suave blond held up a quieting hand and quelled any further speech with an icy stare. "Nott, I have something I wish to discuss with you before I leave. Come."

Malfoy extended an arm, grabbing Theo's sleeve and dragging him from the room.

"Don't they make a lovely couple, Greg?"

"I always thought Malfoy was a queer fruit."

Crabbe sniggered and made an effeminate, limp-wristed gesture with his hand while Goyle pouted his lips and minced around the room. The two louts could hardly stay upright as they dissolved into guffaws of laughter.

~*~

Meanwhile, at Malfoy Manor, Lucius Malfoy sat on the edge of a straight-backed chair in his opulent bedroom. His eyes were closed and his hands rested on his knees, but one knee danced up and down as his foot jiggled with ill-suppressed anxiety.

As his wife reappeared from her dressing room in a waft of expensive perfume, Lucius inhaled deeply and let the familiar fragrance soothe his tattered nerves. Opening his eyes, he looked at Narcissa. He marvelled at her cool demeanour and gazed in awe at her classical, blonde beauty. It was beyond his comprehension why this goddess remained by his side despite everything.

Smoothing her evening gown with beautifully manicured hands, Narcissa sat on a chair in front of her husband, facing the mirror. Gazing at their combined reflection, she caught his eye and handed a hairbrush and comb back over her shoulder to him. As the elegant woman lifted her abundant tresses from the back of her neck, she asked Lucius to do up the back of her dress for her and then finish her hairdo.

The man's fingers trembled as he fastened her gown and, taking the heavy, silver-backed brush, tended to her hair. This had always been part of their routine in preparation for a formal function, and the familiarity of the task calmed him. Normally he would have finished styling her hair into an elegant design with a skilful flick of his wand, but tonight had to manage with brush, comb and his own manual dexterity. Unable to complete some of the simple tasks without magic, the powerful wizard felt emasculated by the loss of his wand.

When he finished, he could not resist placing a soft kiss on the perfect, alabaster skin of his wife's neck. Narcissa's hand reached back, slipping her fingers into his long hair, and she turned towards him, gifting him with a tender kiss on his temple. Lucius felt discomfited, knowing his silken locks had never regained their previous glory since his imprisonment. He closed his eyes again and swallowed hard, only lifting his head and opening his eyes when Narcissa gently squeezed his knee.

"Are we ready to face the world?" Lucius asked as he rose, taking Narcissa's hand and turning her to face him.

"Together, my darling, forever," replied his wife, smiling as she gazed lovingly into his deep, grey eyes. His question had remained the same since the early days of their marriage as had her response. Nowadays the affirmation of her ongoing support shored up his flagging spirits, and he acknowledged the fact with a small nod.

"Who is gracing us with their presence tonight, my dear?"

"The Dark Lord and his followers who have made our house their own will obviously be here." Narcissa's fussing fingers paused briefly as she adjusted her husband's tie. "Also, our dear friend Severus is coming, and he'll be bringing Draco."

Her tone was light, but Lucius noticed the faint tremor when she spoke their son's name, and he squeezed her hand comfortingly. The Malfoys believed no-one spied on them physically in their own chambers, but never knew who might be listening in to their conversations. Though he wanted to say more, Lucius dared not, letting his small gestures say all he needed to his long-suffering spouse.

Tucking her hand in to the crook of his elbow, he led her to the door. "Shall we?" he asked as he laid a hand on the doorknob.

With a last pat to her curls and a quick lick of her painted lips, she gave him a small nod, and the Malfoys opened the doors to their chambers, presenting a united front to the world.

~*~

Later that evening, after he had returned from Malfoy Manor with Draco, Snape stood outside the door to his old room in the dimly lit dungeon corridor. He watched the young man's receding shadow until Malfoy turned the corner on his way back to the Slytherin dormitory. Severus could be sure he would be safe from there on.

With a murmured password, he dropped the wards to his old quarters and pushed open the door. None of the current staff had chosen to take over these rooms, and Severus was happy to have a bolt hole away from the headmaster's office with no interfering students, judgemental staff or spying portraits.

"You're back early." An upper class, nasal voice intoned from an unlit corner of the room.

Revising his previous thought, Severus sighed as he dropped down into the comfortable fireside chair: only one interfering, judgemental, spying portrait. "Phineas Nigellus."

"As I said, you're back early, young man."

"I was babysitting and had to bring young Malfoy back, which meant I was able to leave before the unpleasant fun and games began."

"I'm worried about that young chap. What he has had to experience in his own home is not right for a well-bred young fellow."

"It's not right for anyone, Phineas. I could hear screams starting as we stepped out of the front door."

"I don't know how his parents got mixed up in such shenanigans. I remember them as such bright young things."

"Lucius hasn't always been the most upstanding member of our society, but he was never involved in such evil. His skills lie more in manipulating people and funds, and he has been sucked in by the fool's gold of perceived power. Narcissa, on the other hand, is a Black."

The painted man bristled visibly. "Do not tar all Blacks with the same brush, Snape."

Severus smirked, enjoying scoring a point off the snobby ex-headmaster. "Are they not all the same? Mad, bad, incarcerated or disowned." He raised a questioning eyebrow at the older man, who puffed his cheeks out with the affront as he tried to prevent a smile developing in reply.

"What would you know, you wet-behind-the-ears, half-blood upstart?"

"Enough witty repartee, old codger."

The painted image folded his arms across his chest and lifted his nose in the air as if there was a bad smell in the room.

"Tell me what you're dying to tell me, Black, so I can have a quiet drink by the fire before I retire to bed."

Phineas Nigellus sniffed with disdain. "Manners maketh the man."

"Please," Snape retorted through gritted teeth, adding under his breath, "you arrogant twat."

"I heard that. And, I might add, I am not a woman's pudenda."

"Merlin, you really are behind the times, old man. Look it up in a dictionary."

"I did, last time you used the word, and it said twat comes from Old Norse meaning a slit or clearing in a forest."

"How old is your dictionary?"

"Ah..."

"In a more up to date version, you may find it also means a foolish or despicable person."

"Which is worse, you insolent knave."

"Knave?" Snape slapped his thigh as he rocked with laughter. "What century do you think we're in? Who uses such archaic language nowadays?"

"I do," Black replied a little huffily, though the edge of his mouth quirked slightly. Part of the enjoyment of baiting the current headmaster was making the normally taciturn man laugh. It didn't happen often, but it allowed the beleaguered wizard a small period of normality in his dangerous, hectic life.

"That wasn't even very funny. Things must be bad if I'm laughing at your senility," Severus said, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye and sobering up. "Tell me what's on your mind, Phineas."

"It's our Luna..."

"*Our* Luna?"

"Yes, she..."

"Fuck!" Severus grabbed his left forearm, which burned viciously.

"Language, Headmaster! You're becoming as foul-mouthed as our Mudblood wench."

"Sorry. It appears I haven't been given the night off. We'll have to finish this conversation at a later date."

As the door closed behind the departing man, Phineas Nigellus put a hand over his painted lips. "I've got to stop saying that," he told himself.

In the corridor outside, Severus Snape paused briefly. "Our Mudblood wench? The old beggar's losing his marbles."

~*~

Around the corner of the dungeon corridor, Draco sat with his back against the cool stonework. He had not gone straight to his bed as he had assured Snape he would. Instead, he was taking some time alone to think. Being a privileged only child, the young man was accustomed to the tranquility of a near empty house, and he found the constant bustle of people and magical beings at Hogwarts got on his nerves at times.

In previous years, Crabbe or Goyle would stand outside the bathroom, deflecting intruders whilst Malfoy lounged in a decadent bath, mulling over whichever Potter-induced problem he had to deal with. Since the beginning of this school year, things had been different. His nemesis was gone from the castle, but Draco felt harassed, exposed to danger and constantly on edge and longed to return home to some peace and quiet.

Despite knowing Death Eaters were staying at Malfoy Manor, he had been looking forward to seeing his parents again, but what he had found worried him. Narcissa appeared strong as she held herself with poise and elegance, but Draco had seen the brittle edge to her smile and had heard the faint tremor in her voice when she had spoken. His father, on the other hand, had looked a beaten man. To a stranger's eye Lucius may have seemed calm and debonair, but his son had seen a huge difference in him since his release from Azkaban. It was the small things Draco had noticed; the lack of shine in his eyes, the loss of lustre to his hair, the blunting of his sharp wit and the constant fine twitch of his wand fingers, which clearly missed their accustomed magical contact. All this had come from following one man and his madness.

At the start of the summer holidays, taking the Dark Mark had seemed the right thing to do. He had thought joining Voldemort was the only way to support his parents, but now Draco regretted his decision. He rubbed his left forearm distractedly as his mind was drawn back to the horror of the Death Eaters' excesses.

Hugging his knees to his chest to contain a shudder, the blond let his head droop as he recalled his most recent personal audience with the Dark Lord. Draco scrubbed a hand across his mouth to erase the memory of dry, scaling skin rasping against his lips as he kissed Voldemort's hand in obeisance. The putrid breath when the monster had whispered sibilant demands through thin lips had made his stomach lurch.

His new directive was simple enough.

Unfortunately, the final hissed demand not to discuss his task with any other Death Eaters made things trickier, as it meant Draco could not ask for help from his parents or Snape this time. All the young wizard had to do was deliver one person to Malfoy Manor before Christmas. It wasn't a difficult job, but the thought of it made his gorge rise. Draco tried to breathe evenly to dispel his nausea and was dismayed to hear a small whimper escape his lips. Clutching his head, he wondered why the person Voldemort wanted had to be Luna Lovegood.

A light touch on his shoulder startled him, and as he looked up, the back of his head hit the stone wall behind him.

"Lovegood, what are you doing here? Piss off! Leave me alone." Malfoy jerked his shoulder from under her hand.

The foolhardy witch didn't leave. Instead, she knelt on the stone-flagged floor between Draco's perfectly polished shoes and enfolded the shaking boy in her arms, whispering in his ear. "What's wrong? Maybe I can help."

Hugging his arms across his chest defensively, Malfoy muttered, "You've no idea what's going on in the real world, Looney, so why don't you just fuck off back to your la-la land of make believe."

He was surprised by her giggled response as she grabbed his hand, hauled him to his feet and started to skip down the corridor away from the Slytherin dormitory, towing him behind her. "What a good idea. You can escort me back to my dorm and the Land of Nod."

Before an involuntary smile could form on his lips, the tread of heavy feet and a gravelly voice from behind them stopped Malfoy in his tracks.

"Well, well. What have we here?"

Neither Draco nor Luna looked back.

"Leave it, Goyle, this does not concern you."

Malfoy's voice was subdued with only a hint of superiority.

"Oh, but it does. This is the best gossip we've had in ages, innit, Vincent?"

"Holding hands like a lover-boy with two people in one day, Malfoy? That's good going." His thuggish companion sneered. "How d'you tell them apart?"

Luna glanced sideways at the rigid features of the blond next to her, questioning him with her look.

"Won't your other sweetheart, *Theo*, get jealous?" The emphasis on Nott's name hung jarring in the air.

Luna felt a light pressure on her hand before Malfoy dropped it and turned to face the taunting Slytherins.

"I have merely been asked to escort a fellow student representative through the school, as it is after curfew."

"Student rep, eh, Malfoy?"

"Hey! That's who we caught him with in the corridor the other night, Greg. I recognise the hair now."

"Bugger me sideways! So it is. It's Looney! Look!"

"Luna and I..."

Malfoy's explanation was drowned out as coarse laughter filled the night-darkened corridor, echoing off the stone walls as the louts elbowed each other and leered. Luna buried her face in her hands and fled down the hallway without looking back, her shoulders and chest heaving as she ran.

Draco's wand was drawn in an instant, and he backed away from his former bodyguards, keeping a wary eye open for an attack. "I would strongly suggest you both return to the common room before I call for assistance."

"What for? For ripping the piss out of you, knob-end?" Goyle advanced a couple of threatening steps.

"As I said, this does not concern either of you."

"C'mon, Vince." Goyle turned away with exaggerated nonchalance. "Malfoy's no fun since he became such a girly ponce. We've got better things to do than waste our time on him."

As the pair disappeared back down the corridor, Draco turned on his heel and ran in pursuit of the fleeing witch, against his self-imposed rules. He caught sight of her as she headed up the stairs to the first floor. Though her pace had slowed, her hands still covered her face, and her shoulders silently shook the curls which draped over

them.

"Luna," he called. "Wait for me."

To his relief, the tousle-headed blonde stopped part way up the staircase, but did not face him as he approached to within a couple of steps of her.

"Luna," he repeated, catching her wrist gently and turning her round towards him.

"I can't believe it," she said, voice muffled by her hands over her mouth.

"I'm sorry." The boy dared not look at her, knowing he couldn't continue if he saw the predicted distrust in her clear, grey eyes. "It's not what you think."

"I know."

"What they said about Nott and me, it's..."

"I understand."

"No, you don't understand, Luna."

"Yes, I do, Draco. They believe you're a homosexual. And that's okay with me."

"No. It's not... I..." He squirmed with embarrassment, flames of colour creeping up his pale skin.

A gentle hand on his cheek brought his attention back to the girl in front of him, and as he looked up into her large eyes, he realised she had not been crying as he thought, but laughing.

"They think you're gay, and I know different."

His lips curved into an incredulous smile as she placed a soft kiss on them. Slim fingers ran over his scalp, cradling his skull and drawing him to her.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"You called me Luna."

"You daft bint," he whispered against her sweet lips, and as she hummed a dreamy reply, he pulled her closer, pale hands slipping smoothly under her outer robes.

~*~

Neither of them noticed the tinkle of sapphires moving upwards in the Ravenclaw hourglass as a malevolent couple spied on them from above.

"Inappropriate behaviour. Five points, I think."

"After curfew as well. Another five?"

"Despicable," the Carrow siblings said in unison, smiling maliciously.

A/N: My beta says I'm to sort out my commas and compound predicates. I will eventually. I promise. I'm going to write in short sentences which don't need commas until I can figure it out.

Also, thanks to Clairvoyant for her wonderful admin work, picking up the wayward punctuation I have missed.

Farouche

Chapter 13 of 17

Farouche a. sullenly unsociable, shy, fierce, socially inept. Hermione and Severus meet again.

Farouche

Disclaimer: Dinnae gi'e me ony mair bevvy. Ma heid's birlin' enough.

Translation: Scots vernacular Don't give me any more to drink. My head is spinning enough.

The next morning as he awoke, Snape's muscles twinged with pain. His neck felt knotty and stiff, his arms ached and his legs hurt as he yawned and stretched, and even his toes and fingers curled in painful cramps. All thanks to the Dark Lord's abundant generosity with the Cruciatus Curse.

In a way, Severus was grateful. He had been absent for part of the evening when he had returned to Hogwarts with Draco Malfoy. The portion he had missed involved Crabbe and Goyle seniors' thuggery, followed by the Lestranges' heavy-handed torture of a Muggle-born wizard. Snape's skin crawled at the memory of the charnel house smell of charred flesh and the bloody footprints, which had tracked through Malfoy Manor's grand entrance hall. He'd wanted to tread carefully, avoiding the stained patches, but had lifted his gaze and walked resolutely straight ahead to meet the Dark Lord, portraying an air of detached indifference which belied the turmoil of disgust in the man beneath.

Dropping to one knee and kissing the megalomaniac's hand and then the hem of his cloak had not saved Severus from Voldemort's wrath. Neither had trying to explain he could not extract information from an informer, who was now dead, if he was not there at the time of the torture... interrogation. Merlin, the madman had maintained his curse for a long time after that slip of the tongue.

Before he had crawled back onto his knees, Voldemort had harangued him again for not giving the Carrows enough control of the Hogwarts students, continuing to admit filthy non-pure-bloods to the school and, worse still, making evil tasting potions.

Severus was the only wizard Voldemort trusted with making his personal potions, and one of Snape's small delights was making the regular potion with a bittering agent added, telling Voldemort it was 'new and improved'. When the Dark Lord would complain about the unpleasant taste, Snape would suck air in through his teeth and make a comment such as 'if it's doing you no harm, it must be doing you some good,' or 'bitter medicine, better cure'. Inevitably, the other wizard would swallow it with a look of distaste and a serpentine slither of a shudder.

Every minor transgression was punished with a hex or a curse until Snape learned his lesson and grovelled before the magnificence of his Dark Lord.

In previous years, Severus would also have had to endure a forceful ransacking of his mind for any evidence of Harry Potter's movements and motives. Voldemort's focus had always been fixed on the scar-headed boy, but the degree of obsession was increasing, and the mutating wizard could think of little else. Since Potter and his trained monkeys had failed to return to Hogwarts, after an initial gruelling inquisition at the beginning of term, Severus had enjoyed a reprieve from Voldemort's invasive Legilimency, as the madman now assumed Snape had little contact or information regarding the irritating trio.

The dark-haired man shifted his aching limbs and tried to imagine what kind of punishment would be his if Voldemort ever found out what he was going to do on his Sunday off. He had planned a lie in, but with the after effects of the Cruciatius making his tender muscles twitch and spasm, he had no choice but to get up and get moving.

First, he would have a slap-up breakfast, then head out to a spot he knew where he could collect the freshest ingredients before he headed to Edinburgh for a brewing and teaching session with Miss Granger. Wouldn't the bigot love that, his right-hand man spending one-on-one time with a Mudblood, making and improving potions for a werewolf?

Trying not to groan like an old man as he rose from the comfort of his bed, Severus started the day with the agreeable, though likely short-lived, feeling of getting one over on the bastard who had ruined his life from the moment he had taken the Dark Mark.

~*~

Hermione also had her day planned as much as possible, though planning and focus, with the Horcrux warping her concentration, were not easy tasks. Pushing open the flap of the tent, she squinted into the low, weak winter sun as she scoped out the campsite. They had arrived in the middle of the night and erected the tent and protective wards without taking much of a look around, and she was delighted to find they had set up camp in a small woodland clearing with sand dunes ahead of her and the sound of crashing waves not far away. The cool, clear morning and the pleasant setting brought a smile to her face.

She had slept well last night after the first decent meal they'd had in ages, and now she planned to have a big breakfast of fruitcake and leftovers, followed by a quick stroll to check out their surroundings. After that, she would have to take the locket from Harry for her allotted stint.

They shared the misery of the Horcrux evenly. Hermione had written rosters, trying twelve-hour shifts which were too long, then six-hour shifts which, whilst shorter, meant they always had the locket at the same time of day, every day, making life miserable in its predictability. Currently, they were working eight-hour shifts which seemed to work best. It was a long time to carry the Horcrux, but it also gave each of them a reasonable period of time to recuperate.

This morning, she was taking over at eight and carrying the locket until four in the afternoon when she would hand it back to Harry and head out for her session with Professor Snape.

Grabbing a slice of cake, she ate as she walked towards the splash and suck of waves rolling onto a rocky shore. Before long, she crested the dunes and gazed across the foreshore to the flat grey of the sea. Flocks of seabirds trotted light-footed along the water's edge or bobbed on the waves while, further out to sea, an intermittent ripple and spray indicated a pod of dolphins feeding offshore. Hermione paused, absorbing the scenic tranquillity.

Suddenly, the birds rose squawking from the water in a clattering flash of white wings. A whining crescendo increased to the throaty roar of jet engines as a brace of fighter jets screamed overhead. Hermione followed them with her eyes until they disappeared over the sea's far horizon.

At least she now had an idea where they were. It was a place where Muggles had run a spiritual and eco-community for decades, and ancient magic thrummed in the ground, which meant potions ingredients gathered from here were excellent quality.

Hermione had holidayed here as a child with her parents and must have had them on her mind when she Apparated last night. This area had provided their escape from the day-to-day concerns of work and city life. She loved the peace and harmony of the spiritual community of Findhorn Foundation juxtaposed with the twentieth century. Whilst her dad foraged for mushrooms in the forest, she and Mum watched the jet planes coming and going at the nearby Air Force base or paddled in the frigid waters of the Moray Firth.

With a smile and a lightness of step, she turned back towards the tent, planning to gather some potions stocks before she met with Professor Snape after dinner. However, the closer she got to returning to her responsibilities, the more her pace slowed, and her good mood slowly evaporated. By the time she reached the canvas, she was feeling morose again, and being in these familiar surroundings made her realise how much she missed her mum and dad during these stressful times.

The Grangers had been solidly behind her throughout her childhood and had bolstered her self-confidence. She had never been the most sociable of children; being bright and a bit different from other children at her primary school had made Hermione at times socially inept. Summer holidays spent in Scotland or France with her parents had been some of the happiest times of her life. Even after she had found some acceptance at Hogwarts, she had their unwavering support. They didn't always understand the wizarding world, but tried their best, and she loved them to bits. Feeling a lump rising in her throat and increasing anxiety for their safety should she and Harry fail, Hermione opened the tent flap and went to relieve her friend of the Horcrux.

As she laid her malnourished, weary body down on her camp bed, with the weight of the locket pressing over her heart, the young witch's desolation seemed fathomless.

"I want my mum," she whispered to Harry as the evil gloom descended.

"At least you have one, 'Mione," he replied. "Perhaps you should go and see her."

"Later, thanks, Harry."

~*~

Time was wearing on, and it was after noon before Severus managed to get away from all the dragging, minor tasks he would normally finish on a Sunday evening. As he put a final signature to a detention form, he pushed his chair away from the desk, stretching and looking up at the ceiling to ease the cramps which tightened the muscles at the back of his neck. His gaze caught on the patch of clear sky he could see through the oculus. He recalled the bizarre conversation with Lovegood about the ceiling's aperture, and he started to wonder what other anomalous properties the strange Ravenclaw's 'magical' window might have.

Grabbing his winter cloak and checking he had specimen collection containers, the headmaster strode to the middle of the room. Severus felt the soft whisper of fresher air against his face, and with a quick glance up to check, he was directly under the oculus, and he visualised where he wanted to be. He had barely moved into his turn for Apparition before he arrived exactly where he wanted to be, with none of the normal swirling sensation or need to correct his stance when he landed on the uneven ground.

"Interesting," he muttered to himself as he turned to survey his surroundings. "Very interesting indeed."

It appeared Lovegood had shown him the one sweet spot in Hogwarts which was indeed a magical window. More specifically, it was a clear opening in the castle's multi-layered magic, a small area unaffected by wards and anti-Apparition charms, an oasis within the school of magical calm. The clear air below the oculus had allowed him to Apparate to the exact spot he had visualised with no need to walk from an Apparition point to where he wanted to be. With a thin smile, he predicted his new-found knowledge would be very useful.

Taking a deep breath of the cool, clean air at his destination, he set to work cutting and collecting the plants, mosses and lichens he sought. As he worked, he felt the natural peace of the area seeping in, loosening his knotted muscles despite his physical work and the winter chill. This was a place he collected specimens from since he had left school, and it always relieved his burden of worry for the short time he was here. It was somewhere he felt comfortable and distanced from his normally dour, anti-social persona. The natural energies ran through him, lifting his spirits.

His pupils and colleagues would have been stunned to see the habitually grim man running long, gentle fingers over the bark of trees, weathered rocks and lush green mosses. The black-clad wizard hummed as he performed Energy Restoring Charms he had learned to use in this place many years ago.

Just as he was preparing to leave, he caught an unusual scent wafting on the forest-and-sea-tanged breeze. Not unpleasant, but clearly out of place in this part of the world. Severus lifted his nose and breathed it in, noting the sweet sharpness of lemon and the warm spice of ginger. He thought his mind must be playing tricks on him. Perhaps because he was planning to leave for his session in Edinburgh, the thoughts had stirred an olfactory memory. He sniffed again. No, it was definitely real.

"Miss Granger?"

A small squeak was followed by a clatter and low mumble, then a canvas slap and a rustle of feet through leaves.

Severus peered around the clearing with wand raised and pointed in the direction the sounds emanated from, but he could see nothing. He could detect nothing either, though there was perhaps a slight disturbance in the magical energy at the other side of the clearing.

Suddenly, a figure appeared from nowhere, and Snape had his wand charged with a spell and trained on the dishevelled, wild-eyed witch who stood facing him. A sickly bruise-green miasma of dark magic roiled around her rampant, untended hair, and Severus hesitated briefly. In that moment of hesitation, the witch leapt for him with a feral snarl, grabbing the wrist of his wand hand and propelling him backwards. Snape sidestepped, letting his assailant's momentum carry her beyond him where she fell sprawling to the forest floor as she lost her grip on his wrist.

His wand was raised and aimed at her again in an instant as she scrambled to her feet.

"Snape, what are you doing here?" she hissed in a low voice, a manic glint snapping in her eyes. "Did you follow me? No, that mad fucker sent you, didn't he?"

Stepping in towards him, her finger jabbed into his chest as she berated him. The deep evil of the aura surrounding her was palpable as she came closer, and Severus tried hard not to flinch as her touch on his sternum sent malevolent streaks of magic skittering across the front of his robes.

"I don't know what your game is, Snape, but you shouldn't be here. You should be tucked up in your nice, safe, cosy castle being served elf-cooked meals at set mealtimes and living the easy life, not out here sticking your effing great nose into my affairs." She sneered at him as he glared down the aforementioned nose at her.

"I stumbled upon you..."

"Stumbled? What kind of incompetent wanker stumbles over a witch in the middle of fucking nowhere?"

"I..."

"Stay there whilst I go and get my wand so I can hex the bollocks off you for being so stupid," she muttered.

He caught hold of her wrists, though the touch of her clammy skin sickened him, shaking her slightly as he tried to regain her full attention, which seemed to have wandered off.

"What kind of silly, little witch attacks a wizard unarmed, Miss Granger?" He snarled at her. "Where is your wand?"

Hermione's eyes faded in and out of focus, and she gave a non-committal shrug, then a small giggle. "Did I call you an incompetent wanker...?"

"Pay attention, Miss Granger." He shook her more vigorously, making her head waggle back and forth. "Hermione!"

"s your problem, Snape?"

Severus gave her a small push away from him as he let her go. "I don't know what's going on here, Miss Granger, nor do I want to. Just be in the box room at the agreed time."

"Stop hassling me. I'll be there... on time." Running dirty fingers into her wild hair, she turned and walked away from him. "Now, naff off! Harry'll be home soon, and I've got a bit of a headache."

With that, she disappeared from sight, leaving Severus staring into the empty clearing until a disembodied voice said, "I told you to fuck off, Snape. Harry'll go spare if he sees you here."

~*~

Hermione felt nauseated when she appeared in the box room an hour or so later. A combination of post-Horcrux malaise, hunger and acute embarrassment at her own idiocy in front of Professor Snape made her feel quite queasy.

When she looked up, the dour man was standing, leaning back against the bench with his arms crossed and a very sour look on his face.

"Professor." She nodded to him and went to stash her beaded bag under the bench.

"Miss Granger." He acknowledged her arrival with obvious distaste.

"Um... about earlier on, sir," she said, turning to face his disapproval. "I wasn't quite myself..."

"Indeed."

"You turned up unexpectedly."

"Yes."

"Well, you startled me."

"And?"

"I didn't mean..."

"Get on with it, Miss Granger. We can't spend all evening in a stream of your mindless drivel."

"I'm trying to apologise, sir."

"Trying to apologise or actually apologising, Miss Granger?"

"Remus is right. You can be a complete arse at times, sir." Hermione's tone was insolent as she looked him in the eye. "I was going to say sorry for being an idiot, attacking you and then telling you to go away."

"I think the exact words you used were slightly more colourful than that, Miss Granger."

She sighed, scrubbing the heel of her palm across her forehead. "Look, I'm sorry. I wasn't myself."

"I noticed."

Hermione stuck a hand out towards her professor. "Apology accepted?"

For a moment, Snape paused before he unfolded his arms from across his black-clad chest, hesitant to feel the touch of her evil magic again. Steeling himself, he extended his hand and shook hers firmly, surprised by the absence of any malevolent force. "Apology accepted."

"Shall we?" asked Hermione, indicating the workbench.

"Indeed."

"I brought something for you," Hermione said, as she picked up her bag again and started rummaging through its contents. Carefully, she pulled a box out and handed it to him, noticing Snape's eyebrows rise in question. "Open it."

Severus lifted the lid with a certain amount of suspicion.

"I wasn't sure if you'd managed to get down to the seashore, so I nipped out and got these before I left."

"Mermaid's purses with their contents that's unusual," he said, lifting them out for examination. "And what are these underneath them?"

"Tammie Norrie skulls. Please accept them in atonement for my uncouth behaviour."

"These don't come from Findhorn."

"No, I made a bit of a detour to get them."

"A bit of a detour, Miss Granger? You went all the way to the other side of the country to collect these."

"No, actually I went to my parents' house. I had these tucked away in a cupboard at home."

"You travelled to England, alone, for a couple of skulls, Miss Granger?"

"Yes."

"Have you no idea the danger of such a foolhardy action?"

"Don't give me that horrified look as if you can't believe my naivety. If you don't want them, I'll take them back." Hermione held out her hand, but Snape's fingers remained curled around the fragile skulls with the multi-coloured beaks.

"And with all your gallivanting about, have you eaten, Miss Granger?"

"Um... not exactly."

"For pity's sake," Severus snapped as he whirled around and strode from the room in a swirl of dark robes.

Silence fell and Hermione slumped down on a stool, resting her elbows on the workbench as she cradled her head in her hands. "Well done, Granger," she said to herself, "yet another overachieving fuck up. We're both as bad as each other."

"Indeed."

"Oh!" Hermione's head shot up in alarm. "I didn't hear you come back in, sir."

"Here." A huge doorstep of a sandwich was pushed in front of her, and a mug of tea slapped down beside it. "I'll start preparing the fresh ingredients while you do what you were supposed to do before you arrived."

"Thank you, Professor."

"Did I not ask you to wash before we started as well?" His gaze ran over her matted tangle of hair as he sniffed loudly.

"Sorry," Hermione mumbled around a mouthful of food as Snape picked up a knife and got under way with chopping. "Oh, look, you got some fresh..."

The flat of his blade slapped her pointing finger. "Do not contaminate my workplace, Miss Granger."

Stuffing the crust of her bread in her mouth, she glared at him, picked up her bag and stomped into the bathroom.

"And don't take forever with your ablutions. You are here to learn, not to waste time contemplating your navel in the shower."

She slammed the door in response and leant up against the back of it. "Merlin, that man gets on my tits," she growled in irritation.

"There is no Silencing Charm on the bathroom, Miss Granger."

Screwing up her face, Hermione stuck out her tongue and made two-fingered gestures at the door.

"That's enough childish behaviour, young lady. I would like you to hurry up, please."

"How did you do that? How did you know what I was doing?"

"Magic, superior intellect, or years of experience dealing with teenage tantrums."

She slapped her hand angrily on the switch for the bathroom extractor fan, which whirred into noisy motion, turned the shower on and fiddled with the taps to find an acceptable water temperature.

On the other side of the door, Snape smirked as he turned back to his final preparations. He lit the fire under the cauldron, using his wand before placing it carefully at the back of the bench away from the heat, and started adding ingredients. The base ingredients were placed into the cauldron in bulk and brought to the simmer as he moved the contents constantly with the stirring rod in his left hand. Then the more specialised ingredients were added one at a time. His fingers hovered over the brew as he sprinkled a finely crushed blue powder around the edge, working it gradually into the mix.

Severus had prepared this potion so many times he progressed through these early stages without having to pay too much attention to his work. From behind the bathroom door, he heard the sound of running water, an occasional splash and rather tuneless humming. *That man gets on my tits.* He recalled Granger's words with a snort. It was quite fun baiting the feisty lass.

As he leaned over the cauldron to smell the vapours, he wondered idly why she was taking so long, pondering how women seemed unable to take a quick five-minute shower. Probably all that unmanageable hair, he concluded, rubbing some dried ingredients through his fingers to fall in a fine dust over the surface of his concoction before it sank below the surface. Or those luscious tits Hermione had said he got on.

Luscious? Hermione? Bloody hell, he was becoming an old pervert, but he could not get his mind to move away from the rather pleasant thought of the nubile young witch soaping her breasts under the shower's spray just on the other side of that door.

Severus swore as he dropped a larger than expected clump of gelatinous flobberworm into the cauldron in his distracted state. A small splash of liquid leapt upwards, and a thick coil of green gas curled up from the cauldron. Snape stirred vigorously to dissolve the lump, reprimanding himself for losing his focus and making an elementary brewing error. Though he knew it would make no difference to the potion at the end of the process, it offended his normally high standards.

The next stage of the recipe was the part he disliked. When he added the Gondwanan Peripatus' velvet and secretions, the odour would change and become quite nauseating. This had been one of Lupin's suggestions after the werewolf had found out about the carnivorous worm's feeding technique of shooting a sticky liquid at its prey which then set and immobilised the meal. It made a perfect stabilising ingredient, but the smell was awful.

The first time they'd used it, Lupin had doubled over gagging, and Snape had dragged him out of the room with eyes watering, coughing and gasping for air himself. By trial and error, they had discovered the correct amount to use, and he was amazed they hadn't killed themselves in the process. Wiping a drop of sweat from the tip of his nose, Severus giggled as he imagined Hermione's face when she smelt this. What the hell? Giggling and Hermione?

A small wave of nausea rippled through him, and Severus took a step back from the cauldron to take a deep breath. Suddenly, he realised he really didn't feel well. His head swam, and the room seemed to tilt around him. Making a grab for the edge of the bench to steady himself, Snape's hand caught on the edge of the cauldron, tipping the scalding hot contents towards him.

"Fuck. Hermione," he muttered as he slid to the floor, his vision blurring and his skin burning where it came in contact with the caustic potion.

Hermione heard the crash and stomach-curdling yell as she turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. Throwing a towel around herself in haste, she flung open the bathroom door to be confronted by a pall of noxious gas and Professor Snape lying sprawled in a puddle of sticky goo on the floor. Without hesitating, she took a breath and leapt forward, lifting a corner of the damp towel to cover her nose and mouth. As the toxic atmosphere made her eyes sting with irritated tears and her nose stream, Hermione tried hard not to breathe in, though the urge to cough was almost overwhelming.

Grabbing Snape's arm, she attempted to drag him out of the mess, but he was heavier than he looked and didn't budge. Forgoing her hold on her towel covering, Hermione caught hold of a dragonhide- booted foot in each hand, her skin burning where it came in contact with the spilled potion, and she hauled the man's deadweight backwards into the bathroom.

Tripping over the dragging towel, the struggling witch slammed the bathroom door closed in a hurry, nearly trapping Snape's trailing hand in the process. She soon had a dampened towel wedged along the bottom of the door before checking that the extractor fan was still on and pulling the unconscious wizard into the shower cubicle.

"Shit, this looks bad," Hermione muttered as she stripped his potion-soaked outer robes off and flung them onto the floor. Fingers fumbling in her haste with the myriad of buttons down the front of his frock coat, she gagged at the putrid smell rising from the smoking holes in Snape's clothing. "Sorry, Professor, I think I just ruined your jacket," she said after the contents of her stomach emptied onto his lap.

Realising she had to work faster, Hermione reached into her bag and pulled out not her wand, but a large pair of scissors. The long blades quickly cut up the front of his clothes, down the arms and down each leg, allowing her to peel melting clothing from his damaged skin. Turning on the taps, she shoved Snape's limp body under the spray, kicking his destroyed outfit onto the floor to join his robe in a smouldering pile.

Hermione took a moment to gather her wand, the wonderful homemade soap from the sink and a tub of soothing balm she had noticed earlier perched on top of the bathroom cabinet. Then she stepped under the cascading water and pulled the injured man up against her.

The girl's wand-hand shook as she attempted to cast a Patronus to summon help, reaching deep within for a happy memory. Memories of angry shouting, Ron running from her and Harry's tormented existence crowded her vision as she stared down at the wounded wizard in her arms, and her mind was overwhelmed by the insidious melancholy of the Horcrux and the terror of her situation. A slim wisp of smoke emanated from the tip of her wand.

Hermione swore under her breath and tried again and again, but her best effort produced only a silvery shadow, which petered out in the steam rising from the shower.

"We're stuck in the bathroom with no way out. What am I supposed to do now, Professor?"

No answer was forthcoming as she rocked and hugged Severus into her misery, running water mingling with her streaming tears.

A/N: Wishing you all a Happy New Year!

Mermaid's purses are skate, shark or dogfish egg cases which wash up on the shoreline. They are nearly always empty.

Peripatus velvet worm nocturnal predators, found only in areas which used to belong to Gondwanaland, which trap their prey using a sticky substance propelled from a pair of modified limbs, located on either side of their head.

Translation:

Farouche sullenly unsociable, shy, fierce, socially inept

Tammie Norrie Scots puffin. Atlantic puffins mate in long-term, monogamous relationships.

Thanks go to Clairvoyant for her sterling admin work.

Fagged

Fagged a. tired, bothered. Remus is bothered by the results of Severus and Hermione's brewing session.

Fagged

Disclaimer: Jo'd niver thole reivin'. She'd wheech me afore th' procurator.

Translation: Scots Ms Rowling would never tolerate theft. She would very quickly haul me up in court.

Standing atop the bluff, Remus had an unimpeded view across the rooftops of the old town and up to the castle perched on its outcrop of volcanic rock. Old tales told of a lion couchant: a mythological beast which slept in the rock, and if you approached the crag from a certain angle, it did look like a lion's head. Lupin liked this spot because, from his lofty position, he could watch all access points. He maintained his vigilance, even though Wizarding folk rarely frequented the area nowadays and sought the safety of their own community as much as possible in these uncertain times. The few hardy souls who braved the climb to the exposed cliff top in the blustery winter wind were all Muggles, wrapped up in bright cagoules, hats and scarves.

Lupin smiled as he enjoyed the fresh breeze blowing off the sea and tugging his hair and flapping his cloak around his legs. From this elevated location, he could look across Edinburgh towards the tenement flat. He had no desire to be there at this stage in the proceedings, but he felt comforted by the fact his mate, Severus Snape, and the tenacious Miss Granger were down there, within range, working together, brewing Wolfsbane, and safe.

~*~

Meanwhile, in the cramped shower of the Edinburgh flat, Hermione tried not to whimper, despite her growing concerns. She pulled her scattered wits together and set about managing the practicalities of their circumstances. Since finding a thready pulse and shallow respiration, the only signs of life from Snape had been occasional moans or a quick, indrawn hiss of breath as she sluiced caustic goo from his damaged skin.

Propping her professor up against the tiled wall, she started on his torso, and working as quickly as she could, Hermione lathered, soaped and rinsed. As she scrubbed fingers through his clotted hair, she muttered under her breath about doing him a favour by washing his greasy locks, but the attempt at humour made a sob catch in her chest when there was no response from the limp man.

Moving down his arms, her ministrations became gentler where the damage was worst over the backs of his hands. Carefully, she picked lumps of stickiness from his skin, though it burned her as she did so. She swallowed the nausea which rose in her at the sight of the blistering and peeling, concentrating on removing every last bit of the dangerous substance.

As the warmth from the shower made irritant vapour rise in steamy clouds towards the extractor fan, Hermione coughed and sniffed, her nose running and the back of her throat stinging. Wiping streaming eyes with the back of a damp hand after she washed the last of the noxious potion swirling down the drain, the witch sat back on her haunches and assessed the situation.

Snape's legs were least affected; the fronts of his thighs had a few splatter burns, but his lower legs had been protected by his ever-present dragonhide boots. His arms and hands were worst with livid burns and raw skin. Running an assessing eye over his torso, she noted his old scars, down over his belly to... Shit! His undies.

She'd left his underwear on to protect his privacy and to avoid her own embarrassment, but now she could see the top elastic had absorbed some of the potion, and it was burning a line into his pale skin. Groaning at her own stupidity, Hermione pressed her fingers hard against her eyeballs as if to banish the sight, though she knew she would have to deal with it.

"I live with boys. It's no different. I can do this." She muttered under her breath as her hands prepared themselves for the job.

"But it's Professor Snape!" Her voice whined in the confines of the shower. "Who else is going to help him?" she reasoned with herself.

Taking a deep breath, with a whispered spell, the witch banished the underwear and then tended to the injury without letting her eyes drift southwards.

At last, when his skin was clean, Hermione turned off the now cooling shower, wrapped a towel around her chilled body and, with another, patted Severus dry. Then, opening the jar of balm and starting with the worst injuries, she smoothed on the soothing cream, murmuring healing incantations as she employed her gentle touch. His skin was warm and pliant beneath her hands, and her anxious, racing pulse calmed as her fingers worked the balm in. To her surprise, Hermione noticed some of Snape's older wounds also healing and his scars diminishing.

"Has no-one taken the time to heal you before, Professor? Or do you bear your wounds without telling a soul?" As she wondered aloud, her thoughts turned to how she and Harry had tended Ron's injuries with loving care, and her heart constricted with pity for the stricken professor. "Perhaps you should ask someone at Hogwarts for help. Madam Pomfrey? Professor McGonagall?"

Hermione giggled at the thought of the stern Scottish witch rubbing healing cream over the pale-skinned wizard with efficient, bony fingers and a pinched expression, and she received a soft groan in reply.

"No? How about Remus, seeing as you two are such good pals?"

The groan became louder and slightly more coherent. Hermione thought she could discern the words *fuck off*, but she wasn't sure.

"I'll call him just now, shall I?"

There were definitely words mixed with the agonised moans, which brought a smile to Hermione's lips. It was good to hear the return of her professor's biting tongue.

"Right! If you're back in the land of the living, we'd better get you dressed again. You can't lie around all day in the scud."

Snape's hands moved protectively to his exposed groin.

"Um... yes... exactly."

Stepping backwards out of the shower, Hermione looked around for the man's clothes, only to be reminded of the destructive power of the potion by an offensive, smouldering heap in the corner of the room. The only items untouched were his dragonhide boots.

"Well, we'll do what we can. Here, I'll dry your feet, and you can put your boots on, and then I'll stand you up. And... Oops! Let's get that towel secured around your waist. Gods, look at you in your wicked boots, lanky legs and skimpy loincloth. Don't snarl at me. It's not my fault you tried to kill yourself with a cauldron full of toxic chemicals."

With the tall man leaning on her shoulder and her arm round his waist, both of them clutching their towels to prevent them from slipping off, they lurched in a few unsteady footsteps to the bathroom door.

"I can help you to the box room door; then you can go through to the flat and get yourself some fresh clothes. After that, I can clean up, but I'll have to go home soon. I've got to get back to Harry." Hermione sighed with relief now she had a plan to work to, even though she felt the wizard at her side tense at the mention of her friend's name. "Right, let's go!"

Swinging open the bathroom door, they were met with an impenetrable pall of noxious smoke, which stung their eyes instantly and irritated their throats. Snape reeled

back, coughing and clawing at his throat. Gagging, Hermione slammed the door shut again, shoving a damp towel back against the crack.

As she wiped tears from her eyes with the corner of her towel toga, she gave Severus a watery smile. "So, what's plan B?"

"Send for help." His normally velvety voice was rasping and raw, and Hermione winced when he swallowed painfully.

"I tried, but I wasn't any good. Why don't you?"

"Give me my wand, girl, and I will."

Hermione lifted his reeking clothes, some damp towels and a bathmat as she searched, gritting her teeth at his imperious manner.

"Where's my wand?" Severus growled. When Hermione shrugged in ignorance, he swore and made to open the door. "I must have left it in the box room. Stay here while I get it."

Knocking his hand away from the doorknob, Hermione shoved Snape aside. "Don't be so stupid!" she shouted. "You'll die if you go back in there, and I'm not coming in to rescue you from your own idiocy a second time. You... you incompetent... wanker!"

His glare in response would have made the bravest witch quail as he drew himself up to his full height and poured his malevolence down on her, but Hermione saw the boots, the bare legs, the towel and the splotchy patchwork of cream, and she started to snigger. Severus tried to maintain his baleful air, but the pink burn of embarrassment blushed across his exposed skin, and his legs were becoming weak from standing. Sagging down to sit on the floor with his back against the cool tiling, he rested his swimming head in his hands.

"Plan C, Miss Granger?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I just got the giggles; I couldn't help it. And, you're not an incompetent wanker... Honest... I mean you're quite competent... and I wouldn't know about you..."

He turned his dark eyes on her again.

Clearing her throat, she continued. "Yes, well... Plan C? Um... a Bubble-Head Charm, maybe? No, it won't fit over both of us, and I can't get through the other door without you if I cast it just on myself. I could cast it on you, but then I'd be gassed to death while I tried to maintain it for you as you crossed the box room. What about..."

"When you have finished your incessant prattling, perhaps you could try sending your Patronus for aid."

"I did, but it was no good."

"Try again, Miss Granger."

Hermione looked at the man in front of her, bringing to mind his recent kindness to her before he had started brewing and the way he hadn't hexed her when she had laughed. Drawing in a breath and closing her eyes in concentration, she focused on the positives. "*Expecto Patronum*."

A small silver otter trickled forth from her wand-tip and skittered away.

~*~

The only other person who knew the Secret-Kept location of the flat was most disconcerted when Hermione Granger's insubstantial otter arrived and whispered in his ear. "Help, Professor Snape and I are in the bathroom with no clothes."

Here he was thinking they were working safely together, and all the time they'd been in the bathroom getting their kit off whilst he'd been standing out here in the cold like a lemon.

Bloody hell! He was going to give them a piece of his mind.

As he landed in the flat, Remus flung open the door to the box room in his irritation, to be confronted by the same noisome vapours which had halted Severus and Hermione. Covering his mouth and nose for protection, he closed the door and retreated into the sitting room, trying to figure out what had happened. If that tosser, Snape, had cocked up and injured Hermione, he would kill him with his bare hands.

The only thing to do was to Apparate straight into the bathroom, though the thought of encountering them both possibly injured and without clothes did little to help his concentration. Turning on the spot, Lupin made his first attempt but, after a moment of whirling nausea, was thrown back into the sitting room. He tried again another couple of times before remembering the anti-Apparition charms on the box room and bathroom, which activated close to the time of the full moon. The charms were specific to him, having been set years prior when they first moved in and he had used the box room during his werewolf transitions, before they had built the luxury cage in the sitting room where Severus had spent many nights keeping watch over him.

Stopping to think, Remus realised he recognised the hideous odour of the Peripatus, but he had never seen such a dense cloud. Normally, if you worked in a ventilated potions lab, all the fumes were magically vented and neutralised.

Remus paused in his pacing, slapping his head for being so stupidly remiss. He had nearly killed his mate by forgetting to set up the ventilation system which he had promised.

Running back to the box room and opening the door, he cast a series of spells which started drawing the noxious gases out of the room. As soon as the haze cleared and the smell dissipated, Remus picked his way, with caution, around the murky puddles on the floor. On reaching the bathroom door, he knocked.

"Are you two respectable in there?"

Initially, there was no reply; then the door flung open wide, and Lupin's arms were suddenly filled with an almost naked sobbing witch.

"Remus! You're here! I was so scared. We were stuck in here, and I thought he'd die. And you came. I needed you. He was better, but now he's worse. I didn't know what to do next..."

"Hush, love." Lupin soothed, hugging her shaking body tight and stroking her wild hair before easing her away from him. "Here, wipe away those tears, and let's see what needs to be done."

Stepping into the small bathroom, Remus nearly tripped over Snape's booted feet and was disturbed by what he found. The dark wizard lay sprawled on the damp floor, his chest rising and falling erratically. Where the man's skin was not livid with burns and plastered with salve, it was pale and clammy. His eyelids flickered over glazed eyes. Remus was on his knees at Snape's side in an instant.

"Severus, you look like shit. I always said potions would be the death of you."

Hermione watched as the werewolf's hands, gentle in their touch, travelled over her professor's skin, his voice low and calm as he whispered incantations. She could not hear the words, but sensed the healing and care being lavished upon the prostrated man. Leaning forward, Hermione peered over Lupin's shoulder as his hands worked and thought she heard him whisper, "We're both here, mate. You can't die yet. She said you wouldn't."

Hermione frowned with confusion. She had said she thought Snape might die, not that he wouldn't. Shrugging, she turned her attention back to Lupin's ministrations and was surprised to see him grasp Snape's left wrist and hold it steady.

"This might help," Remus muttered, running his free hand up Snape's forearm and over the Dark Mark, which rose stark from the man's pale skin.

Severus shuddered and tried to withdraw from the physical contact, but the other man held firm.

Tears dropped onto the evil blemish as Remus pressed a thumb to its edge. Hermione watched with fascination as a pale glow spread from Lupin's thumb until the dark tattoo was limned by a silvery haze. Severus groaned, drawing in a deep breath, which sighed out again slowly. The sound was almost erotic. Hermione blinked and turned away as she heard Remus whisper loving words, which could only be meant for one person to hear.

"That's better, isn't it? It's a long time since I've had to do that. Now, let's get you to bed."

Hermione turned back to see Lupin lifting the limp form of the dark-haired man and cradling him in his arms. As he angled sideways through the door with his burden, Remus gave her a lopsided, almost embarrassed smile. "You won't repeat what I said to him when he was unconscious, will you?" he asked quietly.

Hermione's gaze fell on the dark wizard as she shook her head in reply. Automatically, she caught the towel which was slipping again and repositioned it across Snape's groin.

"Nothing I haven't seen before," Remus said, grinning, "but show some decorum in the presence of a lady, mate."

Arms and dragonhide-booted feet dangled, and his head rested on Lupin's shoulder, but Snape's eyes were now open, and Hermione was glad she was not on the receiving end of the man's glare.

"Can you open the door through to the flat for me, lass? I don't think I can manage with this ugly lump in my arms." His lips grazed Snape's temple as he spoke as if they longed to place a kiss there, and Hermione heard the lack of malice in his tone.

"Sure," she replied, giving herself a shake as she crossed the box room to the concealed door. "Damn! It still won't open for me."

"If I set Severus on his feet, can you hold him while I get the door?"

The sick man wrapped clammy arms round Hermione's neck, his height allowing him to rest his cheek on her hair as she held him up.

"You smell better now. When shall we do this again, Miss Granger?" The words, spoken in Snape's drawl against her skull, drew a small squeak from the girl.

Remus rolled his eyes at her as he lifted Severus back into his arms with ease. "Come on, Sev. I'm taking you away before you embarrass yourself. Hermione, love, I'll only be a minute; then I'll be back."

As soon as she was alone in the debris-cluttered box room, Hermione became acutely aware of her semi-nudity. Picking her way carefully back across the room, she was soon dragging her grimy clothes back on. She needed to get back to Harry, but could not pull her mind away from the two men who had just left. There was something about them which disturbed her equilibrium. Her burned fingers hurt as she fastened buttons and pulled up zips, and tears stung her eyes as her emotions swirled.

Anger rose within her. What the hell was going on? How dare Lupin embroil her in their obviously complicated relationship? At least with Harry and Ron, she knew exactly where she stood and what her role was in the threesome. With Lupin and Snape, boundaries shifted, and it made Hermione feel uncomfortable.

Hermione scraped her hair back into a hasty ponytail, stuffed the rest of her belongs into the beaded bag then Disapparated.

Hearing the tell-tale crack as he entered the room, Lupin swore. "Bugger! What did I do wrong this time? I told her I was coming back, and didn't I ask her to wait? Bloody woman! I never get it right, do I?"

He heaved an enormous sigh, muttering to himself as he made his way back through to the flat. "I suppose I'll have to go and sort out Snape now. Make him a cup of tea, heal his wounds and send him back to his cushy home at Hogwarts."

Remus continued to grumble under his breath as he waited for the kettle to boil. "No doubt he'll be his usual grateful self, the wassock," he said, pouring the boiling water into a couple of mugs.

"Aw, pish! I forgot to put in the tea bags." He slammed a hand down on the counter and took a calming breath. "Snape, this is your fault. You can't stay out of trouble, can you? And the two of you together, you and that Hermione Granger... chit, you mess with my head."

"What?" Severus blinked blearily as a cup of hot liquid was shoved into his hand.

"Drink it. It's good for you."

"Hot water? Isn't there supposed to be something else in here?" The dark wizard eyed the contents of his mug with suspicion. "Can't you at least add some honey and lemon?"

"Fuck off! Go and do it yourself, if you can walk as far as the kitchen."

"What's twisting your tail, Lupin?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes. You. Here's me, trying to ease the pressure on you by getting someone to help make Wolfsbane. Someone I know will be *adequate* in your estimation. No, in fact she'll be bloody amazing, given time and the right guidance. And there's you, trying to kill yourself by throwing toxic chemicals all over the place, inhaling the fumes..."

"The ventilation..."

"... then you took off all your clothes..."

"I didn't..."

"... and then you sniffed her!"

"Ah! Indeed."

"Is that it? Is that your comeback? *Indeed?*"

"So, this is really about Miss Granger."

Lupin flopped down onto the couch next to Snape. "You don't understand, Sev. It's been you and me against the world for so long now, but things are changing. We need

Hermione, and you've got to keep her safe. Do you realise how important she is for us?"

"Us? You mean the Order?"

"No. Us," said Remus, indicating the two of them with a back and forth motion of his finger. "You and me."

"How?"

"Well... It's a bit complicated, and I can't tell you exactly. Just trust me on this one."

"Trust a werewolf?"

"Stop being such a dickhead, Snape. I haven't got the energy for your snide comments. Time's running short. I'm worn ragged, running to and fro as negotiator for different factions. I had hoped I'd have some spare Wolfsbane to take to the allied werewolves tonight." His head drooped back on the cushions, and his eyes closed as Remus took a long, slow breath. "I'm just knackered. Completely fagged out. And, then this... and you... and it scared me."

Remus felt the other man's heavy gaze upon him and opened his eyes, meeting the look with his softer, tawny gaze. "Don't give me that look, Severus. You know I'd miss you. I'm probably the only one who would." Poking Snape's thigh, he added, "Apart from Hermione, who'd be devastated to lose such a devilishly handsome, crispy-skinned, ointment-slathered, hair-sniffing soul mate."

The glare he received in response made Remus snigger. "Aw, c'mon, Sev. You know I love you, mate. And one of these days, you'll admit you love me too."

"Over my dead body, Lupin."

"Aye, well. With things as they are, that may be sooner than you think."

"It could have been even sooner, thanks to your ineptitude with ventilation charms, dog brains."

"Yeah, sorry 'bout that."

Severus remained silent, his lips pressed into a thin line.

"No, I am. I'm really sorry. I forgot completely, and it could have been..." Lupin's voice tailed off as he wiped a tear from his cheek. A wobbly smile curved his lips when he continued. "Gods, I'm glad you're both safe. Anyway, I'd better give you a hand to get back to Hogwarts, and then..."

"What about the Wolfsbane?"

"There's enough for this full moon, but we'll need some more for next month."

Severus sighed, dragging a hand over his face. "I'm not sure how much spare time I'll have in the next few weeks. I'll have to..."

"Yeah, you'll have to teach Hermione how to make it."

"I know where she is..."

"Don't be a pillock, Severus. She'll have packed up and moved on already if she thinks you know where she's camping."

"So, how do you find her when you need her?"

"Animal instinct," Remus replied, tapping the side of his nose. "Tell me when you're free, and I can pass the message on to her."

"No, it's all right. I have my own means of contacting Miss Granger, should I wish to."

"How?"

"Headmaster's privileges," replied Snape, smirking as he mimicked Lupin's nose tapping gesture. "After all, she is still officially a Hogwarts student."

"You might want to remember that the next time you go sniffing her hair and asking her for a date."

"Stop sniggering, wolf boy. I did not."

"You..."

"I happen to like the scent of the soap she used. It reminded me of... of someone..."

"That's because you made it."

"Did I?"

"Don't you remember?"

"No. Who did I make it for?"

"Um... someone you had a bit of a thing for." Remus looked away, avoiding Snape's inquiring eyes.

"When was that?"

"At about the time we left school."

"Lily?"

"Um..."

"I'm not sure. Lily was more a strawberry girl. This has subtle, warm scents and is quite pleasant."

"Well, there you go then. Perhaps you could make some shampoo with the same scent for Hermione. She broke the last bottle."

"What a clumsy witch!"

"Look who's talking, Mr Cauldron Tipper."

"That was not entirely my fault, as you well know, Lupin."

"It'd be a great thank you present."

"Hmm. I'll see what I can do."

"Good. Hey, look at the time! I know you won't call on any of the staff, but why don't you contact young Malfoy and ask him to pick you up from the school gates. I'll get some clean clothes for you to put on before you leave. We can't have you frightening the little cherubs on your return, can we, Headmaster?"

"This towel was enough to cover my modesty in the presence of you and Miss Granger."

"But we've both seen you with far less on."

"You mean, she..."

"How d'you think you ended up in your birthday suit?"

Cursing, Severus hid his blushing face in his hands as Lupin left the room laughing.

~*~

As Hermione lay in her bed later that night, she tried to be logical in her thoughts but could not escape the image of Professor Snape in nothing but his boots and towel, slumped against the bathroom wall, or leaning loose-limbed against her, even cradled lovingly in the other man's arms. The dour wizard clearly needed more care and support than he was getting at Hogwarts, judging by the number of poorly healed wounds on his pale skin. Remus was obviously busy and couldn't be there for him all the time.

Turning over, she tried to banish the thoughts, but somehow the man's vulnerability stirred an unusual sensation in her gut.

Suddenly, Hermione realised why she felt ill at ease.

"Damn it! I couldn't even take care of my best friend, Ron, and now I've just taken on another lost cause at a time when I really can't afford to."

~*~

"The way I read this, sir, it suggests there was not only a spy at Hogwarts, but some kind of three-way alliance between Hermione Granger, Remus Lupin and..."

"All unsubstantiated claims as far as I am aware. Now, please return to the documented, historical facts."

"What about you, sir?"

"Eyes on your book and reading, Malfoy."

The dark-haired professor was becoming uncomfortable with the increasingly personal questions from his students. History wasn't really his forte, and he had assumed these classes would not open old sores. The longer he stood in for Professor Binns, the more he looked forward to leaving teaching altogether.

A/N:

Arthur's Seat is the main peak in a group of hills in the centre of Edinburgh. It overlooks the Palace of Holyrood and up to Edinburgh Castle. History says King David the First had an encounter with a stag below Arthur's seat, and mythology in the poem *Y Gododdin* implies King Arthur was associated with the hill fort on Edinburgh's Castle Crag.

Translation:

Fagged - tired, bothered

My beta guru is Sunny33, and Clairvoyant provided her admirable admin skills. Thanks, ladies.

Freckle

Chapter 15 of 17

Freckle *n.* light brown spot on skin. Some people like freckles.

Freckle

Disclaimer: Thon keech mak's me hee-haw.

Translation: Scots This rubbish earns me nothing.

Despite wearing his winter cloak, the cold cut through Ron Weasley as he stood looking through the trees towards the castle. Anxiety gripped his gut as he gazed at the multitude of turrets and worried about the inhabitants. He tried to distract his pessimistic preoccupation by planning for the day ahead, but found it increasingly difficult with snow-laden wind slicing through to his bones.

Brushing snowflakes from his pale eyelashes, Ron turned to his companion whose long hair hung with icicles.

"The castle's quite close to the town, isn't it?"

"What's worrying you, Ron?"

"Someone might see us."

"We're not staying at the castle. Our place is a bit further on. There's a decent-sized wizarding community."

"Don't the Muggles notice?"

"In this part of the country, the local Muggles have been accustomed to various unusual comings and goings for centuries. Besides, we usually exit towards the mountains, which aren't far away."

Ron grunted his acceptance before turning to trudge away from the castle on the hill, his feet scuffing through the falling snow.

"Good idea, my brother. Let's get going."

"Where are we?"

"Romania."

Ron huffed, his breath visible in the cold air before being whipped away by the wind. "I'm not stupid; I figured that out. More precisely, Charlie?"

"Well, that's Bran Castle, and we're heading over this way. It's still a fair walk."

"Why can't we use our brooms?" Ron asked, whining a little as he dragged his aging Firebolt behind him.

"We have to keep the airspace clear for rapid deployment."

"Oh." Ron's tone was flat and disinterested.

Charlie Weasley wrapped a muscular arm round his little brother's thin shoulders and gave him a half hug. "Come on, Ron. I know this is hard for you to believe, but you are going to love this place. Our base is a little further up the hill and into the forest. I've got a nice, warm room ready for you, with views across the river, and there's plenty of hearty food. Not as good as Mum's, mind."

Ron scarcely responded as his brother chatted and guided him onwards. Charlie's good spirits flagged a little, but he remembered the boy beside him desperately needed support, and he had promised his parents he would do what he could. The older Weasley brother felt a little overwhelmed by the responsibility; after all, he was a dragon keeper, not a psychologist.

"We've got some fantastic dragons, and you're going to love it here. We're training an aerial squadron, and..."

"Are we nearly there yet?" Ron asked, not interested in how long the journey was, only concerned with reaching their destination so he could retreat to bed.

"Sure." Charlie gave him a lopsided grin and another quick one-armed hug. "If I stop talking, we'll get there a bit faster."

~*~

When he first arrived in Romania, Ron went about the tasks Charlie set him without enthusiasm. Over time, the physical work of cleaning out the dragon stables gradually built his muscles, and the regular tasks gave his life structure. No longer was he able to drift into introversion when the dragons needed him for their most basic care in their winter quarters. His days were filled with shovelling, hauling, feeding and yet more shovelling, with no magic allowed in case it roused the dragons from their hibernation.

Initially, Ron resisted the anti-depressant potions his brother gave him. He watched Charlie dispassionately as his older brother sat on the edge of the bed and cajoled him. The older Weasley's fingers flexed as he resisted the urge to hex his stubborn little brother into submission and force the medication down his throat.

When Ron did take the medicine, its effect on his mood was not immediate, so he began to doubt he would ever feel better, and the side effects were unpleasant. He sat next to Charlie at meal times, head down and scowling at the food he spooned automatically into his mouth, in an attempt to quell the anxiety and nausea warring in his belly. Ron hated having to take the potions, he hated not being 'normal', he hated how his body bloated up after all the preceding weeks of deprivation, and he loathed his big brother for constantly being so bloody cheerful and *nice*.

Very gradually, his depression lifted, and he started to look forward to the days ahead. There was no specific date he could look back on and say that was the day he had started to feel better. The process was slow as his mood picked up, his ability to concentrate improved and his desire to live returned.

Ron felt as if a huge weight had been lifted off him; his head came up and his eyes opened. Taking a deep breath, he took up his tools in his capable hands and walked with a sense of purpose to get on with his daily chores. Once or twice, a brief, anaemic smile tweaked his mouth as he watched the antics of the younger dragons wrestling together and testing their growing strength.

Now, his evenings were spent in the communal areas with his brother. While Charlie chatted amicably with the dragon handlers and the riders, Ron sat quietly by his brother's side, adding little to the conversation, but not retreating to his room as soon as the evening meal was finished.

After a day's hard work in the clear mountain air, his nights were spent in dreamless sleep as his tired muscles melted onto the comfortable bed. No longer plagued by restless Horcrux-induced nightmares, Ron's sleep was deep and restorative.

Occasionally, he thought of Harry and Hermione as he drifted into sleep. The overwhelming, burning hatred he had felt towards them leached away, and he realised he missed them. As he lay curled on his side with his head on the soft pillow, his concern for their well-being flowed through his chest, tightening around his heart. Hot, slow tears welled from the corner of his eye, pooling in the hollow on the side of his nose before brimming over and dropping heavily onto the pillowslip. Sniffing, he brushed away the moisture with an angry hand.

"I'm not good enough... not strong enough, yet."

~*~

Pushing long hair, plastered to his forehead with sweat, away from his eyes, Charlie watched his little brother working alongside him. He grinned as Ron shoved his sleeves up his arms for the fourth or fifth time, only for the cuffs to flop back down again and come to rest dangling over his hands and getting in the way.

"Take your shirt off."

"It's your shirt, Charlie. That's why it won't do what it's supposed to."

"Why do you think I work with my shirt off, little bro'?"

"To show off your toned torso? Shame it's so pale and freckly and looks more like a toad's underbelly."

"Ah, but the girls love it."

"Arrogant git."

Charlie tensed his arms, making his pectoral muscles dance under the pallid skin.

Ron grimaced. "That's gross. All that writhing, gingernut, freckled skin. Put it away."

Clapping a hand on Ron's shoulder, Charlie roared with laughter, the muscles in his chest rippling with his mirth.

"You don't get it, do you, Ronnie?"

"No..."

"Take a look at your little dragons, then look at who the witches favour. Then, count how many freckly redheads there are in this community." Charlie winked as he left Ron standing wide mouthed in the middle of the stables. "See if I'm not wrong."

~*~

The skin beneath his hands was pale and speckled, smoother than he had anticipated and surprisingly cool to the touch. He had expected heat and roughness, vibrant colours and ferocity. Instead, Ron was captivated by the vulnerability of the dragon hatchlings.

All of them looked like their parents, but with less aggression and minimal fire-breathing, reminding him of the miniature dragons the competitors in the Triwizard Tournament had received. The main difference was the gangly legs and lack of coordination, and Ron laughed as a baby Horntail tripped on its neighbour's outstretched wingtip and fell forwards onto its snout with a squeak and a miniscule puff of soot. He could swear the silver dragonlet next to it sniggered in smoky breaths.

"I think I'll call you two Harry and Draco. How do you like that, little dragon?" He laughed as the silver youngster cocked its head and nipped at his fingers before strutting off and ignoring Ron while he got on with his work. "Yeah, I picked the right name for you, didn't I?"

Ron's fingers worked on the fledglings, rubbing oil into their growing scales, which irritated them as they grew quickly. The one currently in his hands was his favourite: a young female with the palest skin, her veins visible as a steely blue beneath the fine pattern of speckles across her chest. Long rows of golden spikes ran in horned ridges, from the bridge of her nose up over the dome of her head like a gilded headdress and cascaded gracefully down her back, coalescing into a burnished spur at the tip of her tail.

Gently, he eased open her wings, smoothing emollient over the wrinkled crêpe of skin between the slender bones. She looked fragile, but Ron knew only too well her feisty nature, having watched her stand up for herself against the strutting boys.

The small dragon purred and rolled over on her back, exposing her soft, freckled underbelly.

"You're just a little tease, girl." Ron smiled, running a finger down her smooth chest and tickling her tummy. He gave her belly a rub, and she curled around his hand, holding tight with tiny clawed feet, winding her tail around his wrist and nipping at his thumb. Ron rubbed harder until the little dragon was growling, biting and wriggling wildly. Suddenly, the hairs on the back of his hand were seared by an unexpected snort of vivid, red flames.

The young dragon shot to her feet, immediately adopting a defensive stance as Ron cursed and sucked at his burnt skin. With eyes wide in surprise, she watched as the redhead buckled over laughing. The other fledglings clustered around with curiosity. They had rarely seen this man smile and had never heard him laugh. Horned noses nudged him, and clawed toes scratched his skin as they clambered over each other and tried to investigate the cause of the unusual disturbance as Ron collapsed in a giggling heap on the floor.

"Gods, you guys are beautiful," Ron said, wiping a tear from his eye and pushing inquisitive snouts away from his face. Tilting his head back to look at the speckled dragon who was peering down on him with an amused look in her multi-coloured eyes, he grinned. "Especially you, Freckles."

"Ég elska freknur."

"Huh?" Ron's head tipped further back, seeking the owner of the voice. Two thick plaits of hair swung forward, and an upside-down witch's face adorned with a sunny smile appeared above him. Ron's replying grin was embarrassed and goofy. "Sorry. I didn't catch that."

"I was just agreeing with you. I like freckles, too." She gave him a hand and hauled him to his feet with surprising strength for someone of slender build.

"Yeah, she's an Antipodean Opaleye and a real beauty."

Brushing stalks of straw off his leather, dragon-handler's britches, Ron straightened up to face the girl who, although petite, appeared to be the same age as him.

"Ron. Ronald Weasley," he said, automatically sticking a hand out in introduction before he realised he was wearing no shirt. Folding his other arm protectively across his chest as a flush of embarrassment scalded his freckled skin, Ron's head dropped, and his proffered hand sagged. "Um..."

A small hand clasped his firmly. "Frigg Ragnarsdóttir."

"Eh?" Ron lifted his gaze from their joined hands to the girl's friendly face.

"Frigg."

"Frig?" Ron snorted. "Really? As in..." His amusement dissipated slightly as he saw the thinning line of the witch's lips.

"Why does my name always make you English boys laugh? It's from Iceland."

"So, it's friggin' cold." Ron could not stop the quip escaping, despite lifting his free hand to cover his mouth.

Rolling her eyes, the girl continued. "Frigg means to love, by the way." She ignored Ron's snort. "I wish I'd been called Eir after the goddess of healing like my sister. Instead, I got something that makes immature idiots snigger and think they're comedians."

She huffed as Ron tried to close his mouth over the resurgent giggles bubbling up in his chest. The deeper the girl's frown, the more insistent his laughter became.

"Boys! You're all the same!"

Ron held onto her hand as she tried to spin away from him.

"I'm s... sorry," he gasped, resting his forehead on their joined hands. "You just caught me by surprise, and my mouth sometimes opens before my brain has had a chance to catch up."

Frigg shook her hand from his grip, folding her arms across her chest, which rose and fell with her indignation.

Ron's fingers ran through his unruly hair, making it stand up in orange flames of colour, which clashed hideously with the embarrassed pink of his cheeks.

"Ha! Your hair is funny! And *you* laugh at my name, *Wheezy*."

"Weasley." With a grimace, Ron acknowledged her amusement. "Yeah, well, we can't all be dark-haired and swarthy with buff bodies. Some of us have brains instead."

"Pff! Yours must be well hidden."

"Touché." Ron turned away, trying to hide his hurt feelings.

Again her slender hand sought his. "This time, I apologise. I should know not to make fun of anyone's name or their hair. I mean, look at mine."

Ron's fingers reached for one of the thick plaits. "What's wrong with your hair?"

"Look at the colour. It's mousy brown..."

"...Ash blond..."

"...And mouse-brown is such a horrible colour."

"Mice must like it..." Ron blushed again at his own stupidity. "Well, I like it," he continued in a mumble, clearing his throat and letting his hand fall from where it had been stroking the girl's silken braid.

"And I like freckles," her slim hand brushed across his bare shoulder, "but only on a man with intelligence!"

Turning on her heel, she left Ron standing and gawping after her.

"Did you hear that, my little ones?" he asked the hatchlings crowding around his feet after he'd recovered his wits. "She likes freckles on a man with intelligence!"

"Intelligence? Has someone been talking about me?" Charlie queried as he appeared through the door. Noting the look of surprised elation on Ron's face, he smiled.

"Don't be so cocky, Chas."

"They were talking about you? Well, well." Seeing his blush, Charlie ruffled Ron's hair teasingly and dropped a fraternal kiss on his temple. "It's great to see you smiling again, but be careful with the girls around here."

"Why? Will they break my heart?"

"Nope. They're tougher than they look, little bro'. They'll break your balls."

Ron swallowed nervously. "Even the little ones?"

"Especially the little ones."

"And I thought Hermione was scary."

"Hermione's nowhere near as scary as a dragon keeper. They're like the dragons themselves. They may let you ride them, but you'll never really be able to tame them."

Ron's giggle sounded almost like a whimper.

~*~

A loud commotion at the entrance to the dragon compound had people running from all directions.

"Le' go of me!"

"Hold him! Ishbel, Snodgrass! Round the other side!"

"Le' go, I say!" The voice boomed across the enclosure.

"Stop! You can't just walk in there! The dragons will kill you! Help me, everyone. Please!"

"Charlie! Tell them to let me be."

Charlie Weasley's face, flushed from running, broke into a broad smile as he saw the cause of the disturbance. A person stood rigid in the centre of the courtyard, surrounded by a swarm of witches and wizards, some with wands drawn, others holding onto his arms and legs to restrain him.

"Get these varmints off me." The huge man looked down at the gaggle of dragon keepers hanging onto the sleeves of his bearskin coat. He gave his leg a shake, dislodging a couple of the smaller wizards.

"Let me through." Ron pushed his way through the crowd and threw himself at the man's chest. His arms struggled to span the width, let alone hug the vast expanse covered by damp, hairy cloth. "Hagrid!"

The half-giant's eyes glistened with merriment, and his wild beard danced with his hearty laugh. "Well, if 't ain't young Ronald. Whatcher doin' 'ere, lad?"

"What are *you* doing here?"

"I jus' dropped in fer a chat and a cuppa wi' Charlie." His eyes sought the older Weasley for verification.

"Yes. You can all let him go now. I know him, and he's reasonably harmless."

"He was trying to enter the adult dragon's lair."

The huge man looked down at his toes, his beard wiggling as he mumbled into it.

"Hagrid?"

"I was jus'..."

"You could have been killed." The chief dragon keeper still had his wand trained on the half-giant, though the rest of the crowd had relaxed a little after the Weasleys both welcomed the stranger. "Have you any idea what you were doing?"

Shoving a hand into one of his capacious pockets and rummaging, Hagrid hesitated when a ripple of raised wands were pointed in his direction. Slowly, he withdrew his meaty paw, clutching a small photograph between oversized fingers. "I jus' wanted to check he was a'right."

This time he looked to Ron for assistance.

"Norbert? You want to see that evil beggar? Blimey, Hagrid, are you bonkers?"

A loud snuffle preceded his reply. "I miss 'im."

"Her." A small feminine voice from the back of the crowd corrected him. "Norbert's a girl."

"Frigg?" Ron's jaw dropped in an unattractive fashion.

"She's my allocated dragon," Frigg continued, wending her way through the crowd until she stood before the enormous man, looking up at him from her diminutive stature. "Anyone wanting to visit her must deal with me. I won't let any stranger into my dragon's lair. And you appear stranger than most, big man."

Her gaze ran over Hagrid's chunky boots, hairy coat and exuberant beard, resting briefly on his massive hands wringing with nervousness, before stopping at his sparkling eyes. The girl reached up, stilling the fidgeting of hands which dwarfed hers.

"But, if my Weasley says you're harmless, I trust his judgement." She offered a sunny smile to Charlie, who winked in reply and gave her a cheery thumbs-up. "I'm Frigg Ragnarsdóttir."

Hagrid's beard wriggled as he broke into a smile. "Frigg?"

"Yes." The girl dropped her head, sighing in expectation of the usual response from an Englishman.

"Ragnar and Freyja's little girl?" He patted the small witch's shoulder so hard, she stumbled. "You were tiny the las' time I saw yer. Ha! You haven't grown much, have yer? How's that rascally father o' yours? He an' I used t' catch sea unicorns together."

"Ah! Now I know you, Rubeus Fridwulfasson. I am well, thank you."

"Good, good. Now, Frigg Ragnar's daughter, are you goin' to let me visit my pet dragon?"

The witch's friendly smile was soon back. "Come, Rubeus. They say never tickle a sleeping dragon, so we won't do that, but taking a peek at her will do no harm. I'm sure you wouldn't disturb my dragon's winter slumber, would you?"

Ron watched the interaction with open-mouthed confusion as Frigg led his giant friend away through the crowd, which was starting to disperse. A hand on his shoulder startled him, and his mouth snapped shut on the questions he wanted to ask.

"Great to see Hagrid, isn't it?"

"Huh? Yeah... yes... great. I'll just go and get cleaned up for dinner, and... and see you later, Charlie."

"Did you see Frigg?"

Ron nodded, not wanting to look his older brother in the eye.

"Fantastic, isn't she?"

"She seems..."

"Did you know she and I have been partners since Norbert arrived?"

Swallowing hard, Ron looked at his feet, which started to swim behind a haze of tears. "No," he whispered, his voice clogging with emotion.

"Yeah, really. I couldn't believe it when she asked me. She's one of the best, you know."

"I had no idea."

"What's up, Ron?"

"I didn't know you and Frigg..."

"Yeah, mate. She's Norbert's rider, and I'm Norrie's keeper. We work really well together."

"Work?"

"Yes, Ron, *work*: the thing that keeps food on the table and a roof over our heads."

"So, you're not... you know..." Ron's finger waggled in the air. "You're not..."

"Me and Frigg?" Charlie's infectious laugh rang out around the now empty courtyard. "No chance, little bro'. Not for the lack of trying, mind you. Nah, she's one of the few I haven't... She's my work partner and one of the best dragon riders in Europe. She's never shown any interest in any of the guys here, as far as I'm aware."

Ron felt his hunched shoulders relax.

"Oho! Ronnie!" Charlie laughed, nudging his brother in good-natured ribbing. "Now I understand. You've got a crush..."

"Shut up, Charles," Ron muttered as he brushed past his brother, but a small glimmer of hope flickered in his chest as he made his way back to his room.

~*~

"Sir, was Hagrid sent to Romania by members of the Order of The Phoenix to liaise with European giants, or was he just making a side trip to visit his old pet after a personal visit to Madame Maxime?"

"Yes."

"I beg your pardon, sir. I didn't understand your response."

"Yes, Potter."

The enquirer's hand remained half raised in the air in confusion. "Oh."

"Indeed. Now, continue with your essay preparation."

A/N: Sunny33 is my wonderful beta, and Clairvoyant is the tireless admin.

Bran Castle is situated on the border between Transylvania and Wallachia in Romania and is commonly known as Dracula's Castle.

Frigg is a Norse goddess and was Odin's wife.

In Iceland, a person's surname indicates the first name of the person's father (patronymic) or in some cases mother (matronymic). They are usually called by their first and surnames together, or by their first name alone. Rubeus Hagrid's mother was Fridwulfa, therefore he could be called by his first name and his matronymic (Fridwulfa's son), hence Rubeus Fridwulfasson.

Translation:

Ég elska freknur Icelandic I like freckles.

foofaraw

Chapter 16 of 17

foofaraw *n.* 1. a fuss or disturbance about something very insignificant. 2. an excessive amount of decoration or ornamentation. Some people are fussing about nothing.

foofaraw

Disclaimer: "Gonnae no' dae that," says Jo. "How no'?" says I. "Jist gonnae no'."

Translation: Scottish vernacular "Please don't do that," said Ms Rowling. "Why not?" I asked. "Just don't."

This was the time of day he enjoyed the most, Amycus mused as he licked the last scraps from his plate. After dinner on Fridays, the previous week's miscreants were named, detentions were read out by the headmaster and the Carrows would find out what delights lay ahead of them over the weekend.

He and Alecto had missed the last couple of weeks after Severus had given them both surprise long weekends. Amycus was pleased with how accommodating Snape had been towards his two newest teachers. The headmaster had explained that as novices they may be feeling the pace more than those who had been teaching for longer, and he didn't want them wearing themselves out when they were clearly so important to the Dark Lord. Alecto had agreed, commenting on how wizened and dry some of the older staff had become. The look on McGonagall's face had been pure acid, and Amycus shuddered at the memory. No, he definitely didn't want to end up like that harridan.

Wiping drips of custard from his chin and protuberant belly, he threw his napkin onto his empty pudding plate and belched quietly. He did enjoy his grub. What had the lovely little blonde called him? A gastrolith, was it? Amycus decided to ask his sister later. Alecto would remember; she was such a clever little thing.

Rubbing the full roundness of his stomach, he leant forward, drawing Alecto's attention away from her conversation with her neighbour.

"I do believe the fun is about to begin, my sweet. Are you finished with your jam roly-poly? You really should eat more, Alecto," he said, patting her bony hand with his pudgier one, "but if you've had enough, I could always squeeze a little more in."

His spoon was dipping into her pudding before she had a chance to answer, and Alecto pushed her bowl closer to her brother, simpering. "You need it more than I do, and I couldn't eat another thing; I'm so excited. Snape said he has an announcement to make."

As if on cue, the headmaster rose to his feet, and the already subdued atmosphere in the Great Hall quietened to silence as the students awaited their punishments. Some were already cringing and holding hands with their friends for support as Snape's dark-eyed gaze swept the room. Alecto clapped her hands with uncontrollable excitement, stopping only when Severus scowled at her.

"My esteemed colleagues, students and others...," his gaze flicked briefly over the Carrows before he continued in an almost bored tone, "... the only detentions this week are for Neville Longbottom, Gryffindor..., " Snape's sneer was like a reflex, "... and Theodore Nott, Slytherin, for being in the upstairs corridors after curfew without due cause."

Neville's shoulders hunched as he awaited the pronouncement of his punishment. The last detention had been with Hagrid; he had escaped the Carrow's clutches so far, but he knew his luck would not last much longer.

"For such flagrant flouting of school rules, you will work every evening of next week..."

Alecto leaned forward in expectation, trembling fingers fluttering over her top lip.

"... In Greenhouse Five, helping Professor Sprout to spread dragon dung."

"That's disgusting," muttered Amycus to his pouting sister. "Imagine having to do that. It makes me quite queasy to think of it."

"There is one more announcement from the Board of Governors."

Everyone's eyes were on the headmaster, whose face was expressionless, and they held their breath collectively.

"On the last night of term, there will be a Winter Ball."

A susurrus rippled around the room. Most students looked surprised, some concerned, but very few appeared to be excited.

"More information will be posted on the notice boards and will also be available from your house representatives after the weekend."

"Finally, following recent attacks on Muggle-borns in the area, tomorrow's Hogsmeade weekend has been cancelled. There will be no more until further notice." Severus paid no attention to the protests from the students and the Carrows' displeased looks. He raised his voice slightly to be heard above the increased volume of noise. "That is all. Please, retire to your common rooms immediately. I must remind you that any misdemeanours will continue to be punished... severely."

Drawing his robes around him, he swept out of the room, a cacophony of ignored questions following him.

~*~

"I was just thinking..."

"Why does that phrase fill me with dread?"

"Do I really scare you, Draco?"

"Lovegood, you are the most unnerving witch I have ever met."

"You say the sweetest things."

"I wasn't paying you a compliment, you idiot."

"Malfoy, you do look funny when you sigh like that and roll your eyes."

"For the love of Merlin, Lovegood, are you going to tell me what weirdness was going on in your head, or do I have to guess?"

"I love guessing games."

"Please, stop dancing and clapping and just tell me."

"No guessing?"

"Lovegood!"

"I was just thinking..."

"..."

"You've just given me another of those looks."

"..."

"Ah! It's not a look of constipation, is it? It's a 'get on with it before I lose my temper completely' look, isn't it? So, I'll just keep talking and tell you what I was thinking. I was just trying to figure out the safest place in the castle to be in the event of an invasion of Glumbumbles or Pogrebin or maybe even Mackled Malaclaws..."

"I thought it was Horny Gollochs, Lovegood."

"Don't be silly, Draco. I already know about them. I'm not completely daft, you know."

"You..."

"If the school is ever invaded, how do you think they'd get in?"

"The main gate?"

"Too heavily warded."

"One of the towers?"

"Too obvious."

"I give up."

"Really? You're just going to surrender? I thought you Malfoys had a bit more fight than that."

"That's not what I meant! Oh, I see; you're trying to get a rise out of me, Lovegood."

"You can stop looming over me, Malfoy. Do you want to know what I think?"

"Yes!"

"No need to get tetchy. I was just about to tell you. Initially, I thought of one of the magical loopholes, but..."

"Magical loopholes?"

"Yes, you know, like the Chamber of Secrets, the Headmaster's Oculus or the Room of Requirement."

"The Room of Requirement? I know all about invasions through that place."

"Things have changed since last year, Draco."

"You don't need to tell me, Lovegood; they're a hundred times worse. Have you any idea what those evil bastards out there are planning?"

"No. Do you?"

"I... um... I can't..."

"No? Of course not. So, anyway, I realised I was just being silly. Despair wouldn't come knocking at the door announcing its arrival. It would lurk in the dim, dank places on the periphery."

"Are you implying the dungeons would be a point of entry for whatever it is you're talking about?"

"Not the dungeons, but that is a brilliant thought I'll come back to later. You ought to brush up on your magical creatures, Draco. Have you really no idea what I'm talking about?"

"Lovegood, I am lost in your elliptical thought process."

"Are you sure you're not paying me a compliment?"

"Get. On. With. It."

"You know, your parents will regret paying for your expensive dental work if you continue to grind your teeth like that."

"..."

"And don't scowl, the wind will change, and your face will stay that way. All right, all right! Keep your hair on. I'm continuing with my line of thought. So... points of access

would be the Forbidden Forest..."

"The Forbidden Forest? Why didn't I think of that?"

"I don't kn...Oh! You're being facetious, aren't you, Malfoy?"

"Are you becoming socially aware, Lovegood?"

"Are you even listening to me, or are you just escorting me around the school grounds out of some sense of duty?"

"I'm all ears, Lovegood. No, you don't need to run your hands over my head to see if it's true. It's a figure of speech, you daft witch."

"I knew that."

"Are you going to disentangle your fingers from my hair, then?"

"Um... well... I was thinking... about the dungeons..."

"Here we go. If you're going to start on about watching out for Plimpies..."

"Plimpies are fish. You'd be in real trouble if you had them invading your common room..."

"...Or Bowtruckles or some other ridiculous creature taking up residence amongst the Slytherin slime in the dungeons. Don't bother, Lovegood, I've heard it all before. We're arrogant, power-hungry scum as far as the rest of the school is concerned."

"Don't pull away from me, Draco."

"Why not? I'm one of those untrustworthy Slytherins."

"It's my fingers; they're still caught..."

"Ow! Get off, Loony!"

"Oof! You're surprisingly solid, Malfoy. You knocked the wind out of me when you tripped and fell against me."

"I did not trip! You were holding me by the hair when I tried to leave."

"I... you... Draco, your eyes are fascinating when viewed from this close."

"They... I..."

"Mhmm. All stormy greys with hints of serenity, and shot with silver."

"Serenity is not a colour, Lovegood."

"It isn't? Don't you feel colours with emotions and see them with feelings?"

"Aah..."

"You've distracted me, Malfoy. I was trying to talk to you about the dungeons."

"You were..."

"We can't dillydally out here all night. As I was trying to tell you, when the final invasion comes, it won't come through the Room of Requirement again, so that will be safe. We can use that for our... um..."

"For what, Lovegood?"

"Shouldn't we be heading back indoors now?"

"What are you going to use the Room of..."

"The dungeons! I was talking about the dungeons before, wasn't I? They're the safest place in the castle."

"If that was an attempt to distract me, it was pathetic."

"Come here, Malfoy. You are a wonderful... smart..."

"Stop kissing my forehead, you daft bint."

"Promise me you'll lead your Slytherins, and anyone else who might need safety, down to the dungeons when the time comes."

"Whatever, Lovegood."

"Perfect."

"Well, I'm glad you're happy with this discussion, though I use the term loosely, because I'm a little confused."

"Don't worry your pretty Slytherin head."

"Hey! Are you implying I'm an airhead, Lovegood?"

"Of course not, but neither are you a Ravenclaw."

"Thank Circe for small mercies. One mad Ravenclaw in the vicinity is plenty."

"Precisely. Don't just stand there shaking your head, Draco. Haven't we got a house reps meeting to attend? If we're late, the headmaster will have a conniption."

"Goodness, yes. What's on the agenda tonight?"

"The Winter Ball."

"You realise we'll all have to take a partner, Lovegood."

"Mmm?"

"Don't look at me with those big eyes. You know you..."

"What, Draco?"

"There's no point asking me to partner you."

"No?"

"You know I can't. And, I wouldn't want to... I'm a Slytherin, and there would be all hell to pay if anyone thought I was going with a girl from another house. ~~Not~~going with because that would imply you're my girlfriend, and you're not... you know... It's dangerous."

"Well, Draco, I'm glad we've clarified a few things."

"Luna, wait."

"Draco, I understand. Truly, I do. You're trying to protect me. Now, take care where you're walking, otherwise you'll get slush marks on your brogues."

~*~

Hundreds of miles away, Ron Weasley sat crouched over a board. His concentration was improving, and the long winter evenings were the perfect time to hone his chess skills. Unfortunately, playing against his brother was becoming a little tedious.

Charlie had been kind to him initially when the depression still affected Ron's concentration span and had let him win a few games. Then had come a period when the older Weasley brother had tried harder and beaten him several games in a row, but eventually, Ron started winning consistently. As Ron leant over the chessboard in contemplation, waiting for Charlie's next move, he realised he needed more of a challenge.

A slim hand appeared in his line of sight, indicating but not quite touching one of Charlie's knights, and Ron heard a low murmur as the person leaning close to the dragon keeper whispered in his brother's ear. Charlie rumbled a thank you and moved his knight in an L shape, sweeping aside one of Ron's pawns and threatening his queen.

Ron's eyes flicked up to catch a sunny smile lighting the face of the Icelandic dragon rider as she observed the outcome of her suggested move. He moved his gaze back to the game, letting out a long, slow breath as he processed the shift in power caused by one single move. It was a bold option and not one his brother sitting across the board from him would have made without encouragement. One of the twins might have considered such an unexpected move, but then would not have been able to follow through with the killer blow. Ron's breath hissed through his teeth as several permutations ran through his mind, all of them ending in his defeat, aware the smiling witch was probably already more than one step ahead of him.

"Check in two, mate in three, she tells me. Submit?"

Ron's hand hovered over the board as he tried to visualise a series of moves which could save his king, but nothing presented itself. Eventually conceding defeat, he tipped his king gently on to its side, grimacing as his brother hugged and kissed the laughing girl with a casualness which made Ron feel inadequate.

"What's it going to be next, Ronald? Your shirt?"

Ron's skin blushed vividly as he hesitated before slowly peeling off his work shirt, swearing he would never play strip chess again. Especially not against Frigg Ragnarsdóttir, whose clear eyes currently followed his movements. Ron felt a flush burn across his pale chest, and his newly burgeoning muscles rippled as he pulled his hands roughly from his shirt sleeves before crossing his arms in a protective gesture.

Frigg's laugh was throaty as she licked a finger tip and made a sizzling sound as she touched it to Ron's fiery skin.

"Don't tease him, Frigg." Charlie hugged the witch close against his side. "You and I make a great team, don't we, girl?"

The witch replied in the affirmative, but Ron was pleased to see the subtle shift of her hips as she removed herself from his older brother's encircling arm.

"Perhaps you can help me in Norbert's den now you're half stripped for work, Ronald."

"Um... yeah... okay." Ron's eyes followed her as she left the room. Swallowing hard, he turned to his brother with a watery smile. "I suppose I'd better go and... um... help her. Do you think this could be dangerous, Charlie?"

"Undoubtedly, little brother," Charlie answered with a broad grin and a cheeky wink.

Squaring his shoulders as he rose, Ron swallowed again. "Wish me luck, Charlie."

"Luck, bro'."

~*~

Finally alone, Severus leaned back in the armchair in his study, stretching his long legs and easing the day's aches out of his shoulders.

The house representative's meeting had run quite smoothly with just the students, the Heads of each house and no Carrows present. He hadn't had to pay too much attention to the subject being discussed; Flitwick was perfectly capable and ridiculously enthusiastic when it came to planning school events. Severus had taken the opportunity to take a back seat and observe the proceedings.

He had wondered why the Board of Governors had made the decision to hold a ball, especially when the Death Eaters among them were well aware of the build up to a final conflict between the Dark Lord and Potter. Perhaps because of the impending call to arms, they were hoping to give the dunderheads one last night of fun before the nightmare began. Looking at the four young people in front of him, he had pondered how well each of them would fare if they were conscripted to fight and couldn't restrain a derisory snort.

Minerva had given him her best tight-lipped, waspish look and had asked tartly whether he wished to add anything to the discussion. Her eyes had narrowed a little when he had waved away her query with an assurance they were all quite capable of organising the debacle better than he. The corner of her mouth had lifted a fraction when he had suggested he could help with the decoration on the day. Telltale signs of McGonagall's dry sense of humour had been evident as she had accepted his offer and noted how much she would enjoy watching him tie bunches of mistletoe with festive ribbon. Lovegood's comment to watch out for Nargles in the mistletoe had elicited a small raise of the Head of Gryffindor's eyebrow and quirk of her thin lips in Snape's direction.

Turning his attention to the fey Ravenclaw, Severus had watched her interactions with the other student representatives. He had noticed how she sat next to Malfoy, occasionally tapped his knee or pulled his sleeve for attention, which, Severus had noted, rarely strayed very far from the blonde witch. It was clear to the more observant there was more than a Slytherin agreement to protect Lovegood going on with Malfoy. Despite Draco's feigned indifference, as he had lounged with his arms lying languidly along the back of the couch, Severus could have sworn the young man's fingers had twitched every time Luna's pale curls had swished past them with animated movement.

What about Lovegood and Longbottom? Snape had still not been able to figure out what the unlikely couple, along with their Weasley accomplice, had been planning to do

with Godric Gryffindor's Sword once they had stolen it, nor had he any clue how they had removed it from his office and disposed of it so quickly.

His musings had triggered a scowl, and he had been mildly gratified by Longbottom's predictable flinch. Was this nervous wizard really the best of brave Gryffindor house? Neville's recovery and returned quizzical look had been unexpected, and Severus had started to wonder if there was indeed more to Longbottom than he had given him initial credit for.

Which left the other one: the Hufflepuff. He was the invisible man, neither quiet enough to be completely ignored nor gregarious enough to stand out. Even as Severus tried to cast his mind back over the evening, he could not recall anything the boy had said, nor even the colour of the nondescript lad's hair, let alone his eyes.

Some spy I am.

Then, at the close of the meeting, Lovegood had asked if it was true they would have to attend the Winter Ball with a partner. Severus had flicked his gaze to McGonagall, who had nodded confirmation. With that, Lovegood had leant forward, put a hand on the Hufflepuff wizard's knee and asked if he would agree to be her partner.

Uproar had ensued, if there can truly be uproar in such a small group. The Hufflepuff had blushed and stammered, shrinking back in his seat; Longbottom had grabbed Lovegood's hand, telling her not to be silly. And Malfoy? Malfoy had turned ashen, his lips pressed tightly together, and the muscle in his jaw jumping before he had surged from his seat and had left the office without saying a single word.

Severus had dismissed the remaining students with curt instructions. "Lovegood, you will work with Professor Flitwick on Charms, Longbottom entertainment, and you, Fringe-Flighty..."

"F-finch-Fletchley."

"You shall assist Professor Sprout with... floral... arrangements..."

The gathering had dispersed rapidly. Minerva McGonagall had been last to leave. Pausing briefly as she passed through the doorway, Severus had been taken by surprise when she had pressed a small coin into his palm.

"My Knut is on Longbottom and Lovegood. My Gryffindor against your Slytherin. I don't believe the Hufflepuff is truly in the running."

As he sat alone now, twirling the coin over and under his fingers, Snape's lip curled into a faint smile. It was a small token, but this had been the first positive interaction with McGonagall since...

His fingers stilled, and his eyes dropped to the Knut in his hand. Severus hadn't realised quite how much he had missed the sharp witch's dry humour and competitive banter.

It was one of the many things that had changed since...

With determination, he drew his thoughts back to that awful day. Despite his years in the ranks of the Death Eaters, the first time Snape had cast Avada Kedavra had been only a few months prior, atop the Astronomy Tower with Dumbledore on his knees before him... imploring him. "Severus, please!"

His mind veered away from the image, and he closed his eyes as bile rose in his throat.

Swallowing hard, Snape pressed fingertips against his eyelids, causing a sharp stinging and sparking redness in an attempt to obliterate the vision of the deadly green curse.

"Albus Fucking Dumbledore!" he roared into the empty room, releasing his pain.

Gradually bringing his breathing and emotions back under control, Severus let out a long, slow breath. He realised raging at the manipulative, and very dead, old coot was not productive, even though it provided some short term relief.

With a deep sigh, he relaxed against the cushions again, focusing his attention back on the coin in his hand. Curling his fingers around the Knut, Severus felt a small glimmer of hope. The werewolf had obviously been true to his word and spoken to Minerva, and this was her token of truce. Snape wasn't stupid enough to believe the Scot wouldn't have questions she wanted to ask, but this was a start, thanks to his old friend.

Lupin appeared to be as trustworthy and loyal as any Gryffindor, despite his affliction with lycanthropy.

~*~

"You're slinking into bed late tonight. Are you going to tell me where you've been?"

Lupin's hand stroked gently over the swelling curve of his wife's belly as he contemplated his reply. "Did you feel that? The baby kicked me."

"Stop being evasive and answer my question. Otherwise I'll kick you, and it will hurt a good deal more."

Remus chuckled as he laid an ear on Tonks' pregnancy bump. "I do love it when you get all authoritative."

"You still haven't answered my question, love." Tonks felt a sigh heave through him and ruffled his hair in response. "I know you can't tell me exactly where you've been or what you've been doing, but it might help to talk."

Lupin sighed again as he rolled onto his back, tucking his hands behind his head and staring up at the ceiling. "I never expected married life to be like this, with me sneaking into my marital bed late at night, covering my tracks and unable to talk with my wife about my actions."

"You haven't lied to me, have you, Remus?"

Turning to meet her enquiring gaze with his shaggy hair flopping over his eyes, Remus gave her a reassuring smile. "No, you know I wouldn't, 'Dora, darlin'."

"Don't you 'darling' me until you've given a reasonable account of yourself, *husband*."

"I do love it when you emphasise that word. Ouch! No need to elbow me."

"Get on with it then."

"With what? This? Or this? Or perhaps...?"

Tonks giggled as her husband's hands strayed over her body. "Enough!"

"Enough? So soon? You're easily pleased, my dear wife."

"I'm not so easily distracted. Please, give me some credit."

Snuggling into his wife's side, Remus smiled at her insistence.

"Are you going to tell me about the other woman now, or do I have to use my Auror's interrogation skills on you, Remus? At this point, I should warn you, I have been trained in the use of acceptable force for the extraction of information. Don't laugh! You'll regret it if I have to use any techniques requiring coordination."

"What makes you think there's another woman?"

"I can smell her on you."

"What if I told you Severus made the fragrance?"

"Severus doesn't smell like that."

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"Not as far as I'm aware."

"I never have, 'Dora. I care for you too much."

"Yeah, I know. And that's half the problem: you care for me, but you'll never truly love me. I understand that. Honestly, I do. But sometimes, I think we should never have married. Remind me why we did, Remus."

"Because you're an oddity, and I'm a dangerous misfit; we both needed the security, and no one else would have us." Lupin's touch was gentle as he kissed his wife's temple.

"Now I remember."

"Considering we weren't particularly close before we got married, I think we've managed remarkably well."

"Do you ever wish you'd married for love?"

Remus paused before speaking. "I think we did the right thing, given our circumstances."

"You haven't answered my question. Don't think I didn't notice."

"About the other woman?"

Tonks sighed deeply. "That as well."

"I think I've found *her*."

"Her?"

"Yes. I think I've found *the one*."

"Are you trying to tell me you've found the love of your life?"

"I'm talking about the woman I've been looking for."

"Carry on." Tonks' voice had a hard, grim edge.

"Remember I told you before we got married how I had been given certain... guidance about what will happen."

"A prophecy?"

"Like that, but not exactly. Though they kept their cards close to their chest, I managed to wheedle a bit of information from someone with inside knowledge."

"I still don't understand how anyone can know for certain what's going to happen in the future."

"It's a bit complicated, but you'll have to accept the person involved is completely trustworthy and not some crystal-ball-gazing flake."

"You still won't tell me who it is? They could have more intelligence helpful to the Order."

Remus opened his mouth as if to speak, but no words were forthcoming, and he shook his head as a brief look of frustration flitted across his open features. "No. I still can't tell you."

"And the woman you've found? She's *the one*?"

"Definitely."

"Are you able to tell me who she is?" Tonks tried to keep her tone light as she closed her eyes and swallowed hard, uncertain if she wanted to hear her husband tell her he had found a lover.

"It's Hermione."

"Hermione Granger?" The breath whooshed out of her lungs, and she scrunched her eyes more tightly shut. *Oh, gods, so young and beautiful. I can't possibly compete with that.*

"Yeah, I know. I wonder why I never realised before. She's absolutely perfect."

"Perfect..." Tonks could scarcely speak past the lump in her throat.

"Sev's going to love her."

"Severus?"

"Yes, she's brilliant, and they'll work really well together."

"Oh, I thought... I thought..."

"You thought what, sweetheart?"

"I thought you..."

"Don't cry, 'Dora. Oh my goodness! You thought I was taking up with another woman. Oh, sweetheart, you know I'd never do that to you. I care far too much for you to ever do that."

Later, as Remus became intimate with his wife, spooning in behind her and running his hands over her gently swelling, fecund belly, a silent tear escaped and slid down Tonks' cheek. The realisation of how devastated she had felt when faced with the possibility her husband might have a lover drove home the fact she had fallen in love with the wizard who now held her tenderly in his protective embrace.

She also realised this was not what she wanted.

They never spoke of love, only of caring, and Tonks did not want Lupin's gentle caring. She did not feel she could cope any more with his eyes closed during their lovemaking, his gaze averted and his tears dampening her post-coital flush. Tonks craved absolute devotion, unrestrained lovemaking and animal passion, which she knew lurked beneath the werewolf's subdued exterior. She had seen flashes of it when he interacted with...

Damn him! She wanted his love.

Turning in her husband's arms to confront him with her desires, Tonks found Remus to be sound asleep.

A/N: Sunny33 is an amazing lass. She can make sense out of my drivel. How good is that?

1. Also, with my apologies to the Scottish comedy series *Chewing the Fat*, which had this as a recurring theme.

Translation:

foofaraw *n.* 1. a fuss or disturbance about something very insignificant. 2. an excessive amount of decoration or ornamentation.

Fecund

Chapter 17 of 17

Fecund - *a.* fertile, fruitful. Some interesting developments occur.

Fecund

Disclaimer: Fit wye nae?

Translation: Scots/Doric Why not?

As Severus lay cocooned in the warmth of his comfortable bed, drifting on the edge of sleep, he finalised his plans for the next day, which included spending the evening teaching Miss Granger more about Wolfsbane. This time, there would be no risk of poisoning themselves with dangerous fumes, thanks to Lupin setting up the ventilation charms.

He also planned to finish making her shampoo as Lupin had suggested, and he hoped Miss Granger would welcome the small token of thanks. On reflection, Severus had realised without the young woman's help he could have died, so he had spent some time concocting shampoo from the memory of the scent. Bearing in mind the unruly nature of her hair, he had thought perhaps a conditioner would be a good idea, as well.

The subtle honeyed scent clung to his skin and invaded his senses as he slid slowly into the depths of his dreams. A hand travelling languidly over his newly healed skin stirred a twitch in his groin as fingertips trailed down the sparse line of coarse hair on his lower belly, tangling in the curls.

His other hand skimmed up over his chest, delighting in the smoothness as he appreciated Miss Granger's healing powers. Scarcely a nick or scar remained on his skin, and he was in less pain than he had been for many months with his myriad of long-term aches and niggles alleviated. Wouldn't it be marvellous to have her caring for him like that regularly? It would be... unethical... unwise. After all, technically she was still his student and very young.

He sighed and stretched, long fingers cradling his balls as his thumb rubbed the velvety skin of his shaft. What Severus really needed was the woman of his dreams, the one he had dreamt about since his teenage years. Drifting into sleep, he thought of her, visualising the lustre of her hair and the feel of her body beneath his touch. Severus had difficulty recalling her features, as usual, but tonight, he could virtually sense her curves beneath his fingers, and now he could almost smell her. A warm, subtle scent with spiced undertones snuck into Snape's subconscious, and he scarcely noticed the slight increased curl of the hair of his dream lover, as his brain whispered, *Hermione*.

~*~

Remus frowned as he ran a finger over the graze on his sleeping wife's shoulder before healing it with a murmured spell. Hating himself for having hurt her as he had gently rocked into her from behind earlier on, trying, but unable to stem the flow of his tears. He regretted not just the physical injury of biting down on her perfect skin in an attempt to stop himself crying the name of his love as he had come, but also the emotional pain he had caused. Remus had never lied to her and knew she was aware his heart would never be fully hers. 'Dora deserved better. She deserved someone who loved her completely.

Lupin's hand rested on the curve of her belly, feeling the wriggle and kick of their baby below his palm. He knew his own time was limited, and he could not wait to meet the youngster developing in his wife's womb before his end came. He and Tonks had already named him, and Remus whispered the boy's name over the burgeoning bump, telling the growing infant how much his dad loved him already and pouring his hopes for the young one's future into his speech.

Eventually, with a sigh, he swung his legs out from under the covers and headed for the bathroom. It wasn't yet midnight, and Lupin already had to leave his warm bed for another rendezvous. Gods, he hated this war and wished for it to end. His only hope was for some good to come of all the work he did, for the Light to prevail, or at least for some of the Order members to survive the upcoming onslaught.

Pulling on his clothes, he recalled what he had been told about the future. It was very little, but he believed a handful of his Order companions would survive. Quietly, he repeated the names he knew to himself, throwing a cloak around his shoulders as he walked to the front door and finishing the litany with, "... and Severus and Hermione, thank Merlin, I love you guys."

As he closed the cottage door quietly behind him, he missed the sound of his wife's soft sobbing.

~*~

Striding up the path to the front entrance, Draco was grateful for the clouds obscuring the moon and dimming its radiance. He felt less exposed in the dark with no one to watch his approach and observe the anxiety he felt as he drew closer to his destination.

He had been woken from his sleep by the burning of his Dark Mark calling him to an audience with the Dark Lord. Slipping out of the school gates, he had realised an invitation at this time of night was not a good omen and had felt a lurch of fear.

Now, as he scrunched across the gravel at Malfoy Manor, Draco schooled his aristocratic features into cool haughtiness before proceeding up the steps to the front door. Just as he approached, the door swung slightly ajar, and a small, pale figure snuck out, closing the door carefully in an attempt at silence.

Malfoy's wand was drawn and trained on the exiting individual without conscious thought. Large eyes turned on him, and with a frightened squeak and a soft pop, the figure disappeared.

"What the hell? I wonder what they were doing here?" Draco muttered as he swept up the final steps two at a time.

He was cautious as he opened the front door and stepped into the entrance hall, but the house appeared to be quiet, and nothing stirred. Making his way quickly down the corridor to a small, private drawing room, he found the Dark Lord sitting staring into the dying embers in the fireplace.

"My Lord," he murmured, dropping to one knee and averting his eyes in front of the hideous wizard.

A bony hand was proffered, and Draco kissed the back of it with courtesy, though his instinct was to recoil from the cold, scaly skin. With his gaze downwards and trained on an irregular, brown stain on the Axminster at the Dark Lord's feet, he noticed a slight twitch of the older wizard's fingers as if he too found the physical contact abhorrent. Draco tried to avoid contemplating what had caused the mark on the carpet and why his parents had not ensured it had been cleaned by the house-elves.

"Malfoy. You will be wondering why I have called you here tonight."

"Sir?"

"You have been given a task to perform. This time, I will brook no failure. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Draco tried to keep his voice steady and his tone deferential.

"Excellent."

There was a long pause. Draco remained kneeling, head bowed, focusing on the fine embroidery along the bottom of the other wizard's cloak and awaiting the Dark Lord's next words.

"I expect much of you, young man. I realise you may find it a challenge being unable to discuss the capture of the Lovegood girl with any of my Death Eaters, as I asked of you. In view of your inability to complete your assignment earlier this year, I have decided to provide you with a mentor: someone with whom you can plan your mission."

Again, there was a significant pause, during which Draco almost forgot to breathe.

"Are you not going to thank me, young Draco?"

"Thank you, my Lord." The younger wizard forced the words out.

"Good, that's settled then. Let me introduce you to someone who has been on my side since my first rising, though few people are aware of it. Malfoy, meet your new associate."

A pair of sturdily-shod feet and the hem of a travel-grimed cloak came into view, and Draco lifted his head, running his gaze up the length of the person who had entered the room.

"Oh!" Seeing the familiar face, the exclamation escaped before Draco could bite it back.

An acknowledging nod was the only reply.

Voldemort gave a short, dry rustle of a laugh. "You may leave my presence now. I'm sure you have plenty to plan. I believe the pair of you will work together admirably."

~*~

Far from Malfoy Manor, Ron peered in to the dark maw of the dragon's den. Heat rolled over his skin, and he was glad he had lost his shirt in a chess match, having been outmanoeuvred by the Icelandic dragon rider. The friendly witch had asked him to come down to Norbert's winter den, but as his eyes strained to make out any details in the darkened enclosure, Ron felt more than a little nervous about what he was doing.

The humid air stirred and whooshed slightly, and a prickle of adrenaline ran through Ron's skin in response.

"Frigg?"

"Over here. I'm oiling her scales to keep them in good condition."

Ron peered in the direction of the voice, and as his vision adjusted to the dim light, he discerned Frigg's diminutive figure working stretched out against the irregular bulk of a slumbering dragon. Taking a few shuffling steps across the uneven floor, Ron questioned the sanity of entering the dragon's lair.

He jumped with fright as, with a rustle and swish, the creature's serrated tail twitched across the floor and curled up behind the dragon rider's legs. To his surprise, Frigg gave it a hefty push with her foot, shoving it away from her.

"Frigg?" Ron's voice squeaked with anxiety as he wiped sweating palms on his leather britches. "Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely, Ron. Come over here."

Approaching with caution, the redhead took a couple of calming breaths, telling himself if a girl could do it, so could he.

"Here." Her small hand reached for his as he came closer.

Ron swallowed hard before trusting himself to speak. "This is my first time, and I'm a bit nervous."

"You're a virgin?"

"With dragons. Yeah. They're a bit scary, aren't they?" He winced at the whine in his voice.

"Only when they're awake."

"Well, obviously when they're awake. It's all that fire and claws and... stuff. But they're still pretty scary when they're asleep. I mean, look at the size. What if it wakes up?" Ron's face screwed up with fear, and he felt his heart rate rising as he imagined the dragon waking.

"Don't worry. Once they're in hibernation, they'll sleep through almost anything."

"Really? What about the rule 'never tickle a sleeping dragon'?"

"Ah, yes! Their bellies are quite sensitive, and that's something they can't stand. If you tickle them when they're asleep, they wake up grumpy, and all hell breaks loose. Fire breathing, goring, crushed skulls, severed limbs... that sort of thing."

"Oh!" Ron backed away, but was held by Frigg's strong grasp.

"Which is why we have to be firm with our handling."

"I'm not sure if I can do firm handling." Ron closed his eyes.

"I could... teach you."

Taking another steadying breath and opening his eyes, Ron was surprised to find Frigg holding both his wrists and looking up at him, her gaze open and inviting. In the dim light and heat of the dragon's den, her pupils were huge and her skin flushed. Ron's breath caught, and his groin reacted as he watched a slow trickle of sweat run down the side of her neck, pooling above her collar bone. Swallowing hard, he tried to focus.

"Dragons. Firm handling? Right?"

"Are you willing?"

"Yes..." Ron groaned at his insanity.

Frigg's sunny smile lit her face in the low light. "Good. Not many wizards are brave enough for me."

"I'm not brave. My brother Charlie's brave. Shouldn't you be doing this with him?"

"Charlie? Oh, yes, I love Charlie."

Everyone loved Charlie. Ron knew that, but it didn't stop a small stab of jealousy.

"But Charlie is all here and here," Frigg said, pointing to her biceps and her groin, "and not enough up here." She tapped Ron's chest, then his forehead. "This is what I need."

"Um... so, how's my skull going to help you with your dragon?"

Frigg's roar of laughter startled Ron.

"Shhh! It'll wake up. Hush!" Frantically, he tried to stifle her mirthful outburst with a hand held firmly over her mouth. Once she had subsided into gentle giggles and snorts, he took his hand away, and she wilted against his shirtless chest where his heart still pounded with anxiety. "Bloody hell, Frigg! Are you mental?"

"Maybe."

Ron sighed. "Yeah, well, you're not the only nutter in the room, then."

"Nutter?"

"Yeah, you know. Headcase, psycho, lunatic..."

"Hush, Ron you're not..."

"You don't know me very well then, do you?" A bitter tone edged into his voice.

"I know you better than you think, Ronald Weasley. You were unwell when you arrived, not mad, and now you're much better."

"Doesn't mean you should trust me. I'm damaged goods."

"Ron, you're good and kind. I see that every day when you care for the hatchlings. You're loving. Your interactions with your brother show me that. And you're brave."

"Brave, huh?"

"You're the first to dare enter Norbert's den... apart from Rubeus Hagrid and Charlie."

"So, I'm actually third behind Hagrid, the hairy half-giant, and my flirtatious, but slightly thick, beefcake of a brother. Is that what you're saying? Geez, girl, you know the way to a man's heart."

Frigg giggled. The brush of her braided hair across his chest as she looked up into his eyes sent a shiver through Ron's heated skin. A slender hand crept up, cupping his blushing cheek. The slide of her other hand around and up his sweat-slicked back drew him closer, and Ron cringed as the bulge in his trousers pressed firmly against the witch's body.

"Brave," she murmured, running a finger tip down bare skin and over the work-tautened muscles of his chest. "Very brave and a little bit hot, but I'm at least one move ahead of you, Ronald Weasley. I got the shirt off your back before you even entered my dragon's den."

Ron swallowed hard. His hands longed to smooth up the witch's toned arms, but instead, leaned against the solid object behind her head, catching on the roughness.

"Frigg," he whispered close to her ear, "you're leaning against a huge, scary monster."

"Is that what you call it?" Her sniggering response and a firm pressure on his erection made Ron jump and yelp.

"You know this scares the pants off me, don't you?"

"Really, Ronald? Your pants still appear to be in place."

Ron stiffened in response to a firm hand on his leather-clad crotch and Frigg's throaty laugh reverberating through his body.

"Fuck me!" he murmured, resting his forehead on the dragon rider's heated brow, his hips pressing Frigg firmly back against the solid bulk behind her.

"No, Ronald..." Ron's eyes met hers with desperation, questioning her perceived rejection, until she continued, "... I think you fuck me."

His knuckles scraped against rough scales as he eased the shirt from her shoulders, exposing creamy skin. Pushing the work-stained cloth aside, his mouth descended to the delicate hollow above her collar bone, licking saltiness from the heated flesh. Slowly, in case she changed her mind, and he frightened her off.

Fingers fumbled with the fasteners of leather dragon-keepers britches, tongues trailed across exposed skin and fervent kisses melted the pair together in the sweltering atmosphere.

Ron's skin was ablaze with sensation as her hands descended with a firm, steady motion, following lean muscles down and releasing his restrained erection. He gasped as his need leaped forward into her accepting grasp, glancing down to see himself held in small, capable hands. His breath hitched as fingers curled around his shaft.

Dragging his gaze upwards, he cupped her face with gentle hands, cooling the heated moment as he sought acceptance in her eyes. "Are you sure about this, Frigg?"

Steadily, she returned his look with a half smile and a small nod, rising up on tiptoes to capture his mouth with hers, at the same time giving his cock a quick squeeze.

It was enough to release the dam of restrained emotion in the young man. With rough desperation, Ron shoved her shirt down her arms, stripping the straps of her bra off her shoulders and pushing aside the material to expose perspiration-slicked breasts. Thumbs rubbing firmly across her tightening nipples, Ron groaned with pleasure into Frigg's mouth and pressed himself deeper into her encircling fingers.

When she released her grip on him, Ron nearly whimpered with the loss until he sensed her deft hands pushing her own britches down over the curve of her bottom. The shimmy of her hips as they fell, pooling on the rough floor, sent liquid heat flowing to his groin. Placing a foot on the dragon's leg, Frigg opened herself to him, guiding his length into her.

Ron's breathing shuddered as he pushed into her welcoming warmth, stilling to savour the sensation. "Bloody hell!" he murmured. "How can you feel so good?"

With a chuckle, she pulled his hips in closer. "I'd feel better if you moved."

Laughing aloud, Ron plunged in deeper, pounding hard and fast. Frigg's shirt snagged on the dragon's scales as his exuberance pushed her in erratic jerks up against the great beast's slumbering form. Ron's hands slipped from her shoulders in the sultry atmosphere to anchor her hips with his firm grasp until he came in long shaking bursts.

His voice broke into anxious fragments as his breathing steadied. "I'm... so... sorry..."

"Hush, Ron. Sorry for what?"

"I was too quick... You were... and I wanted..." He looked up at the high, dim ceiling, tears pricking his eyes, and wished he could be smarter... better... stronger... braver.

"First times are always a bit... you know... scary."

"Yeah, well. I'm sorry, Frigg. I mean, you've still got your shirt on. What kind of guy must you think I am?"

"Perfect." Her gentle touch brought his gaze back to her face, flushed now but still open, friendly and, dare he believe it, accepting. "Thank you for making my first time less scary, Ronald."

Folding her into his long arms and hugging her against his chest, Ron smiled into thick ash-blond hair as he kissed the top of Frigg's head before setting her away from him and easing her shirt back up her arms. "I've got a good feeling about you, my lady. Now, make yourself respectable, and we'll finish taking care of your dragon." He chuckled again as she gave him a sceptical look. "No, that is not an English euphemism for... for..."

If he thought he could blush no redder in the over-heated room, Ron Weasley was very wrong.

~*~

Draco's hand trembled a little as he wiped stringy saliva from pallid lips. The smell of vomit made his stomach churn, and he retched again, splattering the hem of his cloak and his shoes with his stomach contents. Clutching the bars of the school gate, he leant his forehead on the cold metal, appreciating their comforting solidity against his clammy brow.

Swallowing back bile, he took a deep breath and stood up, straightening his shoulders.

"Stand tall and be strong. Act like a Malfoy, and do not dishonour the family name any further." As he repeated his father's words, Draco noticed a small surge of inner strength, but still felt fearful of what lay ahead for him.

With another deep breath, he started walking towards the castle, though his legs wobbled below him, thanks to the Dark Lord.

As he had reached the door of the library at the manor, Draco had relaxed slightly, believing he had got off without punishment, only for the Dark Lord to call him back, deeming him to have not appeared grateful enough for his new partner. The after effects of the Cruciatius Curse still left the young man's muscles twitchy and weak as he headed for the front door. His progress was somewhat erratic as he limped up the path.

With his stomach roiling in rebellion, he recalled the person the Dark Lord had chosen as a mentor for him. Certainly, it was someone he was familiar with, but Draco could not think of anyone he considered to be less appropriate or less trustworthy. How on earth was he supposed to plan and execute a mission with someone like that?

Making his way with head down in contemplation, he was taken by surprise by a pale figure standing at the top of the steps.

"Draco?"

He paused briefly.

"You look like you've been trampled by a Crumple-Horned Snork..."

"Now is not the time, Lovegood." Brushing past her, he reached for the door handle but stumbled on the top step, falling hard against the stone door jamb. His cursed muscles spasmed, and pain spiralled through his limbs. Air shivered in and out through his gritted teeth as Draco tried to breathe through the agony.

The slim hand laid on his shoulder was caring and gentle.

"Fuck off, Loony! I don't need you. Go away!" He shrugged away from her touch, only to trigger another shudder of cramps. Swearing, the blond wizard crumpled into an inelegant heap on the doorstep.

Stepping over him, Luna pushed open the great wooden door. "You're right; you don't need me, Malfoy. Shall I just leave you here to die of hypothermia and to be found in the morning by the house-elves?"

Draco's eyes betrayed his distress as another paroxysm made him groan.

"Or, I could give you a hand, and nobody would be any the wiser about your predicament and your nocturnal jaunt." Kneeling beside him, Luna whispered in his ear. "This is where you're supposed to admit how much you need me."

The prostrated wizard sniffed indelicately, catching a hint of the witch's fresh scent. "Luna, I don't... I can't. You don't understand what's involved."

"Of course I don't, silly." Her hands slid under his armpits as she eased him back to his feet. "Which is why you're going explain it all to me as you walk off your nasty cramps. That horrid Voldemo..."

"Don't use that name!" Draco's hand clamped down on the witch's mouth, and he lurched slightly with the movement, pulling them off balance and stumbling into the entrance hall.

A grim-faced figure stood in the middle of the hall with hands resting on the handle of a broom, frowning at the entwined, staggering couple.

"Miss Lovegood, Master Malfoy."

The blond pair looked up, grey eyes wide with apprehension.

"I can only presume there is a perfectly good explanation for this... these shenanigans, which will not require me to serve you both with a detention."

"Um..."

Disentangling herself from Draco's clammy embrace, Luna approached the man. "I was just looking for moon-frogs, but it's the wrong phase of the lunar cycle, and I saved Draco from..."

"Of course you did, Miss Lovegood, and I shall complete my report appropriately."

"Thank you, Mr Filch." She gave the wizened caretaker a brief hug and a peck on his gaunt cheek, grabbed Draco's hand and dragged him up the staircase behind her. "Thank you," she called again.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Miss Lovegood. Now, get out of my sight." The old man's face creased in the semblance of a small smile as he watched the pair go before returning to sweeping the stone floor in a vain attempt to relieve his insomnia.

~*~

"Excuse me, Professor. I can't see in the text who Malfoy's associate was."

"Apparently, you are as well prepared for your lesson as usual, Weasley. Do you think Hogwarts: A History is really the correct source to find such information? And you! Yes, you sitting next to Weasley, put your hand down and stop whispering the answer in his ear. We are all well aware of your near encyclopaedic knowledge of a plethora of textbooks."

The dark-haired teacher scowled at the student waving a hand in the air, watching as the arm wilted under his gaze. "Perhaps you would like to use some of your hand-waving energy editing this excessive essay of yours into a more readable length before I dock points for verbosity."

Rubbing the ache from the small of his back, he watched the class settle back to their study. When was Professor Binns returning? If Binns didn't come back soon, he might have to start actually teaching these idiots something, instead of just letting them wade through the morass of set texts in the hope they would draw the right conclusions. Allowing teenagers to carry on with minimal guidance, in the expectation they would figure things out for themselves, brought out the best in some of them while others floundered. As he well knew from his own experience.

A/N: I'd just like to say a quick thank you to those of you who are continuing to read this, especially those of you who have left reviews or have added it as a favourite story. And, of course, huge thanks go to Sunny33 for her ongoing encouragement, goading and beta work.

Translation:

Fecund - a. fertile