

The Hiding Place

by ofankoma

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Chapter 1 of 1

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These were the days when the newness of things had begun to wear off. The routines of late autumn in all their mundane glory had settled into place, but thoughts of the holidays were too far off yet to do anyone any good.

For the students of Hogwarts, this *usually* meant that the schedules they'd still needed to look at in September were now permanently lodged into their brains. It usually meant that the lunchtime conversations of summer adventures had finally been eclipsed by the latest Quidditch scouting reports between the houses, that the anxieties over the early rounds of exams had already passed, that the detention-earners had already scoured out hours worth of cauldrons, and that the kitchens had already been raided for chocolate to mend a few broken hearts.

But these days *these days* were anything but usual.

And this year was a different year.

These were days of routine, to be sure, but not the same old, same old.

He had waited inside the classroom for the *click-clacking* of hard-soled shoes to pass before he made his move. He didn't know who it was, hadn't even given it much thought, and still he waited until they were moving away from him. *Better to wait until you know you're safe* he thought. After scanning the length to his left, then his right, he stole away along the stone wall as quickly and as quietly as he could, moving with soft knees and flexible feet, willing himself to remain unheard, to remain unseen, to remain uncaught. Though they wouldn't say a thing, he was still unsettled by the feeling of the portraits' eyes following him.

At least he remained uncaught.

After rounding the first corner and passing a row of alcoves in the stone, he was startled into hiding by the frustrated voice of an older woman as it approached from an empty room. *Was it one of them?* he wondered. Without stopping to check, his instinct took over.

Best to assume the worst.

Because that usually was the case.

Without even thinking through his actions, he tucked himself into a shallow indentation in the wall, hidden behind a worn tapestry. Though it had survived more than six centuries of life unscathed, newly singed holes in the wool allowed him a view of the woman as she headed towards him. Her arms were weighed down with ferns and greenery, her fingers brown with dirt, her eyes, mute and sad.

Ah.

It was her.

She was safe.

He could come out from behind the...

But a rasping voice howled after her, interrupting the genial woman's *tut-tutting* and subdued grumbling, a voice laced with venom and idleness as it demanded a list of students needing punishments.

She froze in position.

She called back her 'No-one's and 'No problems today, Alecto' with a hollow cheeriness that rang in the stale air.

And he didn't move as she didn't move, not knowing if the other woman would be satisfied with these answers. Not knowing if she would trot over to join them *joiner* to continue the exchange.

Instead, he merely watched the Herbology professor stand there for a moment, tense as she gazed in the direction of the bellows and hollers.

She waited for a response.

It never came.

When enough time had passed so that Alecto Carrow lumbered off to wherever she had come from *click-clacking* all the way, the woman allowed several of the pots from her left arm to fall to the floor. With her right and with her fury, she hurled the last one against the far wall.

As it crashed into pieces, she folded in on herself as she crumpled, trembling and shaking, to her knees.

* * *

The startled gasp at the shattering terra cotta a few long strides away alerted him to the presence of still another person nearby. He forced himself into the wall and held his breath, standing for a moment as if chilled from the tips of his fingers to the roots of his hair.

Was he seen?

Was he caught?

Who was there?

He clutched the bulging pocket on his chest, impulsively holding its contents and his heart steady, forcing himself to breathe, willing his nerves to a kind of calm. Then he felt his way closer, stone on his right, wool on his left, inching cautiously closer towards whoever was hiding in the dark.

A wave of relief washed over him as he caught sight of the opening to a small alcove hidden behind the tapestry, the view to the hallway completed obstructed from sight. *Whoever it was, they didn't know he was there.* No, they were hiding, just like he was. Like almost everyone was these days.

'Is that Professor Sprout?'

'I think it would have to be, yes, don't you think?'

'And that Carrow woman?'

'Mmm-hmm.'

'Still there?'

'The end of the hallway, by now.'

'We've got to get back to our common rooms before Carrow finds out.'

'What if she already knows?'

'Then we should go with Sprout now!'

'Hmm... No, I don't think that's a good idea...'

'*Why ever not!?!?*'

'Carrow is still out there.'

'So is Professor Sprout!'

'Yes.'

'You don't think that that *Professor Sprout* couldn't keep her fro...'

'No, I don't think so... but she wants to very badly.'

With his move down the tapestry, he lost sight of the older woman in the hall. Should *he* go out and... *No, of course not*, he reprimanded himself. No more decisions... just for a little while. Instead, he listened to a sweeping of dust or dirt, and he pictured the grubby woman piecing together the pot in his mind's eye. It was calming, somehow, to think of her doing this task that every student had seen her perform over and over and over again.

He didn't move, didn't decide, just let himself forget.

* * *

Back to the wall, he slid slowly to the floor, feeling block by block joined in mortar through the heavy fabric of his standard issue robes as he lowered himself down. Listening to the woman scurry off with her pots and hearing the voice *the voices* whisper behind the wall. Two girls. The first one he'd heard was solid and halting, rather driven and exhausted. The second, translucent and light, somehow soothing in its incomprehensible repose. He let out a sigh of relief, giving himself permission to relax in its presence for a moment as the voice at peace whispered again.

'This one's rather pinkish, but it used to be more of a darker fuchsia... magenta... no, fuchsia.'

The other girl failed to respond.

'This one's almost orange. I didn't think they ever came in orange.'

He vaguely wondered what all of her 'this ones' were as he settled on the cold stone.

'This one's a sort of a plummy violet around the outside and an almost grey inside.' She sighed softly. 'My mother wore a dress this colour once. I know it because I have a picture of it. I think I remember the dress, too, but I might just be remembering the picture... It wasn't the grey colour, though. It was the plum.'

A low breath escaped the other girl, but she didn't speak.

'It had white polka dots.'

He strained to hear the words; she was speaking so softly. Of course, even if he could understand her, he didn't comprehend her. Not that he could comprehend any other teenaged girl, either. Who passed the time evading punishment with talk of clothing?

'And a belt. A white belt,' the girl said. 'This one's new. It's my favourite colour.'

Finally, the other girl spoke, her voice tired and strained. 'Luna, I can't see you in the dark.'

Ah, so that's Lovegood talking about dresses, he concluded. A little off, that one. Well-meaning and well-connected, you could say, but not quite right. He'd once seen her wearing her jumper backwards. Wearing mismatched shoes that one he'd seen more than once. Vegetation as jewelry, even wearing four or five pairs of socks stacked one atop another. All the colours she was rambling on about? Must be something like that.

'It's like bilberries.'

'That's not a single colour, is it?'

'No, but neither are they. I like the purplish blue around the edge here best.'

'I'll just imagine it, all right?'

'There were bilberries not too far from our house. Across the river and on the far hills towards your place? Mum and Dad and I would pick them every Sunday and eat them all week long.'

'Mum makes pie from those. Fred and George always found them for her.'

Weasley. Of course it's Weasley. She and Lovegood and Longbottom went everywhere together these days.

'I think she Apparates over for them now herself, though, since we still have bilberry pie all summer long. Or... we did.'

'It doesn't hurt yet, but I suppose that will come tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?'

'It's new. They hurt much worse the next day, I think. Especially the bluish ones.'

She *Ginny* exhaled a long, stuttering breath. 'Yes, Luna. Yes, they usually do.'

* * *

There were noises and sounds, once.

Not even that long ago.

Warm-hearted ghosts used to whisper hints to young students, telling them which staircase to follow or which step to jump. Portraits used to while away the ever-shortening autumn days with the gossip of teenagers. Students themselves used to fill the halls with chatter and laughter, holing up in a window seat to play a game of Exploding Snap with housemates or traipsing down the corridors with their frogs and cats and hazy thoughts of Quidditch maneuvers.

The unnatural quiet in the hallways was still unnerving after these weeks, this month of silence.

Each sound, then buried and hidden, one among many, now resounded within the walls. You could hear everything these days, and you could hear it from three times the distance you ever could before, the noises reverberating off the stone hallways, barely dampened by the fabric on the walls and unimpeded by crowds of people absorbing the sound waves. The echoes might have made everything easier to hear, but they also made everything harder to understand, each sound blurred and muddled beyond recognition.

So it was easy to hear the heavy footsteps in the next corridor. The nighttime patrols of the Carrows were erratic at best, but for whatever reason, Alecto remained where she was when she called after Professor Sprout, pacing the same thirty metres or so. She would duck into their hallway on occasion, but mostly stayed around the corner down the next hall and out of sight.

Their hallway was empty now, a long, cold passage with its alcoves, some with windows, some without, its smattering of now-silent, ever-seeing portraits, and its lone oversized wallhanging. From their *his* hiding place, he could hear both ends of the room where another corridor linked up. To his left, there was the Charms corridor, Alecto trotting in circles around herself. To his right, twice the distance away, the curved archway led to the armour gallery and the trophy room.

Left?

There was someone laying in wait for them all.

Right?

Their chance to get to the staircases and escape.

* * *

'Do you think we should just make a run for it?'

'Can you run on that ankle?'

'I'll hobble quickly.'

'How quietly can you move?'

'Can you levitate me?'

'I'm still not very good at controlling the direction. If we can...'

Suddenly, the steps grew louder, *click-clacking* as they entered the hallway from the Charms corridor.

The girls stopped speaking.

And waited.

And listened to them retreating.

And waited.

'Is she gone?'

He heard a single owl hooting outside, the flutter of wings just beyond the window in the alcove.

And nothing more.

For now.

* * *

Holed up in stone, he could almost believe that he was safe. The *click-clacking* echoes told him *told them* where Alecto was at all times, and they *he* could stay silent when she got close enough to hear him. For all the clichés about a false sense of security, it was nice to be lulled into anything these days. Nice to be lulled, quieted.

He could pretend for a moment that he was in a cottage on the edge of a forest with a houseful of people. He would sit at the kitchen table there with a hot cup of tea that someone had brought him and a lumpy knitted afghan in case the air grew too cold. The owls he heard outside now would deliver a parcel to him there at that home, and someone could hand it to him, and he would open it up and look at it before remembering to check the brown paper to see who had sent him something this time. He would tell himself to remember to write a note of thanks, but even there, he would probably forget.

* * *

'I don't want Harry to die.'

'Hmm?'

'I want to marry him. At least, I think I do.'

'I want a singing Puffskein.'

Ginny nearly choked, snorting back laughter.

'One that *sings*. Or dances? Wouldn't that be nice?'

* * *

Click-clack, he heard moving towards him from the next hallway.

She was still there, walking and stopping and walking again.

Click-clack.

She was there, and he was here.

And they were still there, but they were now wisely silent.

Click-clack.

Click-clack.

Click-clack.

He toyed with the wand in his robe, pulling it out and into ready position, putting it back in place. Pulling it to ready, returning it to rest.

Rest.

Click-clack.

He grasped the thin wad of papers in his pocket, pulling it out and holding it low. He traced the curved edges with one finger, following the folds he had put there weeks earlier.

Around the edges once with his left hand. Once with his right.

And put it back without opening it up or even looking.

* * *

'I don't want to die.'

'That's too bad. You'll be disappointed, then, when you do.'

'You want to die?'

'Not yet,' she answered. 'Someday. But I don't think I'll mind it when it comes.'

'Well, of course, I want to die *someday*, Luna. Everyone wants to die someday.'

'Hmm...' She fidgeted, rhythmically scraping her fingernails over the stone floor.

'Yes?'

'Well...'

'What is it, Luna?'

'I don't think they do.'

'They may not *want* to die, but they don't want to live forever.'

'Do you think most people even think about it?'

'Of course not!' Ginny huffed indignantly. 'It's rather... morbid.'

'Why does it have to be?'

'It's *death*, Luna.'

'Or peace.'

The redhead mulled this over silently.

'And rest.'

'I... suppose so.'

'To die when it's time to die must be rather lovely.'

Ginny chuckled in a low voice, sounding mildly shocked. 'Only you could think that.'

'Actually, I think a lot of people would agree with me. *You* wouldn't, of course. Why would you?'

'Why would *you*?'

'My people are on both sides now,' Luna stated matter-of-factly. 'Yours are all here, so you don't quite understand.'

With the absence of Alecto Carrow's footfall, he could only hear the measured breathing of the girls behind the wall and the continued thrumming of fingers on the ground.

'You will someday.'

Ginny didn't say anything. Perhaps she didn't feel the need to? Or perhaps she just didn't know what to say to her friend. He almost felt uncomfortable on their behalf.

Before he could give it much thought, Luna spoke up again. 'I don't think You-Know-Who wants to die.'

'Obviously not,' Ginny snapped softly, 'since he's trying to take over everything once and for all.'

'No,' she corrected her quietly. 'I don't think he wants to...*ever*.'

'Then I guess *he'll* be the disappointed one.'

'Ginny?' the girl asked, surprised by the bitterness in her friend's words.

'When Harry kills him,' she said with grim determination. 'He'll be sorry then.'

Luna stopped her movements.

And sighed deeply.

'It's very sad, don't you think?'

'Sad?' Ginny questioned.

'It would be so lonely here after a little while.'

'Lonely?'

A part of him impatiently wanted to throttle her. *Ask a real question, Weasley*, he thought, *and you might get an actual answer*.

'Don't you think it would get lonely to stay around after everyone else you know is gone?'

'I... suppose so,' she said, faltering. 'Well... If...'

'You would miss them all.'

'I suppose so...' Ginny responded slowly, trying to follow Luna's reasoning. 'And I suppose... No one would really know you.'

He could almost hear Lovegood nodding.

'How terrible, not to be known. Not to be understood by anyone.'

Ginny was lost for words again, and Luna sighed sadly. 'Does anyone know him now? *Poor Tom*.'

* * *

It was a nervous habit now, fiddling with his things. His mother had always told him to stop it, but he did it without thinking about it. He pulled the papers from his pocket, put them back in.

And again he did it, not even realising it at the time.

And again.

And this time, he began unfolding the papers. Opened it up, separating them, holding one in each hand. He didn't even look down as he laid them back on top of one another, bent them back into place, and tucked them back into his pocket.

* * *

'Why *are* we here?'

'That's a big question.'

'I meant at Hogwarts.'

'I don't think we will be for long.'

'Are you going to leave?'

'I imagine I will soon enough.'

'When?'

'Oh, I've no plans.'

'Oh.'

'It's so *different* this year.'

'I'm ready to go. I wish Mum and Dad had never forced me to come back here. Why bother? It's like we're just waiting for something terrible to happen, and in the meanwhile, what are we supposed to do? Not say anything? I don't think so. Let those Carrows terrorise the younger students? No. No, I won't let them. Or that bastard Snape? I'm sure he'd love to...'

'I'm not so sure.'

'About what?'

'Snape. I'm not so sure he would.'

'Are you kidding me? Harry watched him murder Dumbledore!'

'Oh, I know.'

'Well?'

'I think perhaps he's one of us still. At least, I hope he...'

'Luna, I love you, but you're wrong. You're wrong here, just like you're wrong about all your imaginary Snorknacks and everything else.'

'Snorkacks *are* rea...'

'No, Luna! No, they're *not!* You live in a... a... a *fairyland* where everyone is good somewhere inside even Volde... even *You-Know-Who* and we all let you keep your delusions,' Ginny insisted brusquely, 'but please, Luna, *please* you need to be careful for once in your life!'

He didn't think a Weasley could cut quite so deeply.

And for once, the girl with the messy hair held back her words.

Ginny blustered on, ignoring Luna's silence.

'Whatever you think happened on that tower,' she demanded, 'just promise me you won't do anything foolish around him.'

'I... I...'

Her voice was different paler, thinner than usual.

Resigned.

'I won't,' she said shakily. 'I couldn't anyway.'

'You promise you won't say anything?'

'I promise to... to be wise.'

'Thank you!' she exclaimed, agitated.

'I just think... I wonder...' Luna was almost pleading. 'I think he needs lots of love.'

Lots of love?

He held his breath.

And he heard the exasperation in Weasley's voice.

'You saw George, Luna.' She was fighting back tears. 'You saw him!'

'Yes, and...'

'And a few inches in the other direction, and he wouldn't be here anymore! *My brother*, Luna. Snape almost killed my brother. My George. George who told me stories when we went for walks in the woods, and who let me fly on his broom when he knew Fred wasn't looking. Well, it was probably Fred's broom, but...'

'Yes, but...'

'And who sang songs to me and rubbed my back when I was scared of imaginary things under my bed.'

'He did?' she asked, sounding pleased. 'That's very sweet, you know. Well, I still think...'

'No, Luna. No. *Please*, just shut it and let it go.'

* * *

He had suspected they were there somewhere. He had walked these halls many times before, exhausted and angry and worn thin doing what he did every night and every day. Portraits usually didn't know when to keep their mouths closed, and they always watched him warily as he went about his business. He wasn't sure he would find them, but there they were.

Both of them.

* * *

Sharp, rhythmic noises punctuated the silent hall, so muddled it took several moments of hearing this new sound approaching before he understood they were footsteps.

A voice suddenly bellowed out from the trophy hallway as the sounds came closer.

'Alecto! Alecto, where are you?'

It had to be Amycus Carrow, looking for his sister. The best reason yet to stay out of sight.

He had expected to hear another gasp of surprise from the girls behind the wall, but none came. A soft clap was in its place, perhaps the sound of Lovegood covering her mouth or Weasley drawing Lovegood's attention with a smack to her arm.

'ALECTO!'

Carrow was closer now, close enough for his sister to come running at the sound of his gruff voice.

'Whadd'you want now?' she rasped out, gasping heavily from her hurried entrance.

The pair was arguing less than four metres from them in their places behind the tapestry and tucked away in the stone wall.

'We was following 'em and got 'em cornered Weasley and Longbottom and that crazy one.'

'Where?'

'*Where?*' he repeated, imitating her in mockery. 'Here! This floor!'

'I've been here these twenty minutes, at least!' she barked back in frustration. 'I ain't heard a thing. It's been dull as ditchwater.'

'Crabbe said he tracked 'em down here after he caught 'em painting their damned signs up on the sixth floor,' the burly man replied pointedly. 'He's been posted at the door and hasn't seen 'em leave.'

Ah, he thought. *That's why they're here. Ambushed on their way back to their common rooms, and Weasley injured to boot.*

'All right, then. I'm staying put here block off the exit through the staircase on the other side of the Charms classroom. You stay on the armour gallery stairway and keep them from leaving there.'

'Why the hell should I watch a staircase?'

'So you can send Crabbe or Goyle after 'em.'

'Fat lot of good that'll do,' she scoffed. 'Those lazy sods has bollocks for brains.'

His tone turned lascivious, and though they couldn't see him from behind the tapestry, they hear the man leering. 'Tell 'em they can have the Weasley chit. That's motivation, that is.'

'Crucio?'

'Gods, no!' He spoke more slowly now, explaining himself without stating anything explicitly, thinking this was a clever way to turn a phrase. 'They know about that room up there on the seventh floor. We'll just tell 'em we'll look the other way, and they can do whatever they want with her. They'll be happy as a pig in shite with that piece of skirt.'

He could just make out a quiet whimper behind the stone.

'Snape won't stand for it!' his sister retorted in a hiss. 'You heard it last time!'

And a few quick breaths.

'He doesn't need to know, now do he?'

Alecto didn't respond.

'Listen you wanna explain another botch job from those idiots?' he asked, growing angrier now. 'Goyle may be built like a brick shithouse with cabbage for brains and a face like a busted clog, but he'll do what we tell 'im for a bit of rough.'

'Oh, so it's "a bit of rough", now, is it?' she sneered back. 'You sure you don't want her yourself?'

'If she's good, I can take her later.'

'You'll take Goyle's *kid's* seconds?' she spat, revolted. 'Is she even sixteen?'

It was unexpected, all things considered, to hear a woman who justified the Cruciating of children sound revolted by *anything*.

Her brother didn't respond.

'Avoiding the knob-rot down in Knockturn Alley getting harder and harder to do?' she asked again, needling her brother in disgust.

'I don't give a fuck, Alecto!' he exclaimed, finally answering her. 'Shut it and stay here. Or go back to where you was. I'll take the other staircase, and I'm sending Crabbe and Goyle to go room by room until they find 'em all.'

'Fine!'

'They're here. *I jes' know it.*'

* * *

He hid them.

Hid them both.

* * *

The Carrows stormed off in opposite directions, one returning to her place in the nearby corridor, the other heading off through a labyrinth of hallways, past the trophy room, past the armour gallery, to the far staircase.

Click-clack.

She was there again, but slowly *click-clacked* her way back into the next hallway.

He exhaled, knowing their *his* time was limited.

It was time to go.

And heard a gasp behind the wall.

Then heavy breathing.

Hyperventilating?

'I can't do this, Luna,' she whispered, coarse and frantic.

'We...'

'I *can't*, I just...'

'Ginny, we...'

'I have to leave.' She was speaking faster and faster, repeating herself as if the other girl hadn't heard her the first time. 'I have to leave... leave... leave... I have ~~to~~ leave! I have...'

'Ginny,' Luna whispered slowly, *'please calm...'*

'Oh gods, oh... oh... oh gods, he can't touch me!'

Her voice was growing louder, and she didn't seem to realise it.

What was she thinking? Any louder and they'd be caught.

'I don't care if he Cruciates me, but...I have to leave, oh gods, I...'

A sharp intake of air.

'...have...'

Another.

'...*have* to...'

A soft clap of skin against skin.

Muffled whimpers.

The confined thrashing of limbs.

Stifled breaths.

He pictured the blonde girl's hand firmly clamped down on her friend's mouth, silencing her as best she could.

And then he heard it.

Not the shoes from the next room, but a gentle voice.

Singing.

Luna was singing.

Softly enough that he missed most of the words over the noises of continuous struggle, but snippets of 'dilly dilly' flew past his ears.

And then some words about lavender, heard over a choked, watery cough.

The singing turned into humming, and the humming and the scramble dropped lower and lower down the wall as the struggle eased to the ground, and he finally crept around the corner to look in.

'We *will* leave this place,' Luna whispered, determined, kneeling, one hand walling up the girl's cries, the other reminding her of her brother, rubbing circles on her back. 'Soon enough.'

He watched the girl convulsing on the floor as her erratic movements slowed and steadied, as her friend decided it was safe to remove her hand, as she breathed freely again through her open mouth, as the small blonde girl, almost the same size, curled up around her on the ground.

Click-clack.

And he couldn't listen anymore. Not knowing how much time he had before the Carrows returned, he cast the strongest Disillusionment Charm on himself he could muster and slid out from behind the tapestry, moving as quietly as he could to the archway on his right.

* * *

He had walked these halls many times before.

Grimmauld Place.

Hogwarts.

Ignored the portraits as best he could.

They were both there.

* * *

Stacked like an ordered deck of cards, they were laid front to back like forks and spoons in a kitchen drawer, fitted together over top of one another like the bowls and plates on a pantry shelf.

Almost the same size, both facing up, he folded them in on themselves again and again and again.

From time to time, he would pull them from their linen chamber, close to his heart, deep inside his pocket, and undid each fold and fold and fold, and looked.

And looked.

And looked, and read three words.

Lots of love.

Then a fourth.

He pretended she had written them to him.

And forgot to breathe.

The smaller piece held her face, and he watched her silent beauty moving, moving, always moving, but never aging over these long years as she smiled at at him, of course.

If only he could bring her tea tonight. Perhaps she would forget to tell him that the post had arrived, and they could read together by the fire. He could tuck their afghan around her knees, and she would be warm enough there, and when he saw the hole in the end by her feet, he could repair it with a spotty patch job that did the trick, even if it wouldn't look quite so nice. She would tell him it gave it character, and she would shush him, asking him to keep quiet so that the others could sleep.

He remembered himself, refolded each fold, re-creased each crease, and tucked them away again in his hiding place.

* * *

Headmaster Snape burst in through the archway from behind the suits of armour, all the while calling for Alecto Carrow.

The time for resting, for denial, for pretense was gone.

'Carrow! Carrow, I know you're here!'

Alecto hurried into the empty hallway, *click-clacking* all the way. 'Snape! What are you shouting about now?'

'Longbottom. Up on the fifth floor. The Baron saw him leaving the demonstration zone he and his little friends decorated earlier this evening.'

'...And?'

'And you're going to send one of your congenitally acquiescent goons to take care of it,' he spat haughtily. 'I don't want to deal with Longbottom or his protests anymore.'

'If you knew he was up there, why didn't you take care of it yourself?'

'You dare to question,' he began icily, slowly circling her, *my* authority, Alecto?'

'Jes' want to know why you couldn't take care of it.'

'I find no sport in hunting children. Send me one of the Order,' he said with a sinister grin, 'and I'll enjoy myself, I assure you. Perhaps not as much as with Albus, but a flea-bitten werewolf would certainly do. Beggars can't be choosers, as they say.'

'All right. Fifth floor, whaddya want done to 'im?'

'I don't particularly care. Amuse yourselves.'

'Crucio?'

'One-trick pony, aren't you?' he asked condescendingly. *Not that she'd even notice the slight.* 'You might as well. He's a Longbottom, so don't expect much. Merlin knows they never respond. They'll lie there twitching in a pile of their own vomit and piss before they say or do anything.'

Snape's beady eyes followed the lump of a woman out down the hallway and to the staircase up to the fifth floor, flickering briefly on the hanging tapestry as she scuttled by.

He followed her path moments later, pausing in the archway for just... a second or two. Letting out a stifled groan, he slumped against the stone, allowing a kind of weariness the chance to settle in his bones.

He lifted a hand to his shirt pocket, feeling the small parcel held within.

Disillusioned himself once more.

He was so... so very tired.

So he gave himself a ten count to muster up the energy to leave.

Another pair of eyes followed him as he slouched in the archway, as he was about to bound off towards his chambers.

A pair of eyes in the face of a girl, a face speckled with bilberry-coloured bruises along her jaw and a poorly healed gash above her right eye. She held up her friend as best she could, a hand around her waist willing her to remain upright. The red-haired girl limped along beside her, limbs awkwardly intertwined as they moved towards him.

'Are you all right?' she asked, looking into his weary eyes.

He didn't move.

She shouldn't be able to see anything.

But he didn't look away.

'Just let me... I'm sorry, Luna, I have to shift my...' Ginny replied, adjusting the sling she had made for herself from their school ties, oblivious to his presence.

'No,' Luna whispered, offering him a sad smile, 'you're not all right. Not yet.'

'No, but I think I...yes, I've got it now,' the other girl says triumphantly.

And a small hand closed around roughened fingers that no one could see, running her fingertips over his calluses and pressing them briefly before letting go.

'I'm glad for that.'

'Can you help me to my common room? I know you need to get back to yours, but I'm not sure I can...'

'Certainly.' Luna tied another knot in Ginny's makeshift sling. 'I wish I could stay with you, Ginny, but I don't know how much time I have to get back.'

Her eyes drifted back to the Headmaster.

'Ask the house-elves for a pot of chamomile. It's so soothing. And imagine I was there making it. I would if I could, you know.'

So he hid them.

The one who justifiably despised him and the other who might actually understand.

The letter and the photograph.

One who saw what everyone saw and one who might see everything.

He just stood there.

Watched the girls leave.

He was still standing there, enshrouded in spells and silence when Alecko Carrow returned ten minutes later, seething and shouting and spitting her accusations.

Looking for him, but never seeing him.

Not that *that* was unusual.

Not these days.

These days, no-one *almost* no-one saw him anymore.

finis

Author's Notes: This was written for the 2011 Interhouse Fest. The original prompt from *agirlnamedtruth* was this: 'In their sixth year, they find themselves hiding together from the Carrows (would love to see Ginny break down and Luna comfort her).' This led me to wonder... What would Luna find comforting? How would she share it with Ginny? Many, many thanks go to *mariannefey* for her initial thoughts and reactions (and advice on regionally appropriate fruit) and *tocabepfir* for her keen eye and restraint as she advised me on several important edits and for the final beta on the story as a whole.