

Babbity Git

by pokeystar

Out of the frying pan, into the fire. Sometimes, getting away from it all means there's nowhere to go when it all comes to you.

Part One

Chapter 1 of 5

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Babbity Git, Part One

~Prelude~

Severus flexed the slits on either side of his throat in concert with his webbed feet and propelled himself across the murky lake with a silky whoosh. Eddies of water billowed in his wake as he glided through the shadowy depths.

A hypnotic silvery voice lilted out a giggle as he caught a glimpse of glittery green scales and long flame-like hair just ahead. He kicked out again and his reaching fingers brushed against a diaphanous fin. He chuckled with predatory fervour as the fin jumped slightly and then shivered in delight. He swooped suddenly and caught his Piscean nymph by the waist and murmured, "Tag, you're it," in her perfect shell-like ear.

But she wasn't laughing anymore. She turned to face him, concern filling her bright green eyes and said, "Breathe, Snape! Dammit, wake up and breathe!"

This directive confused Severus. He didn't need to breathe. The gillyweed he had consumed was a super-strength potion-enhanced strain guaranteed to last four hours, and he had only been dreaming of swimming in the lake for a half an hour at the most.

Dreaming?

Mermaid Lily slipped out of his embrace and vanished into the turbid depths as the voices outside Snape's dream state penetrated the illusion and tore it to shreds like a hippogriff with a tasty ferret.

Damn. Just when he was about to give her one.

~Rules of the Game~

"...I still say we're bringing him out of stasis too early, Potter."

That Slytherinesque drawl was music to Snape's semi-conscious ears.

"Unfortunately, we don't have a choice, Zabini. The diagnostic scans show he has his full magic back and is completely healed..." Potter sounded almost... apologetic.

"Physically! The scans still show emotional and psychological scarring..."

"No one believes the headmaster deserves a better life and full health more than me."

"Former," Zabini muttered. Potter ignored him.

"But this is *Snape* we're talking about. He's been under almost five years already. Full emotional and psychological health could take another decade at least."

Ungrateful, insolent, callow, half-witted, egotistical dunderhead.

"You have a point," Zabini conceded.

Three hundred points from Slytherin for disloyalty, Mr Zabini.

"Besides," a new voice piped up, confusing Snape. It sounded familiar somehow, yet different. "He's the only one we can spare or trust..."

His semi-conscious mind chased itself in circles, like a Crup puppy spotting its forked tail for the first time...familiar, different, familiar, different...until it gave up on him and decided to take a kip.

Maybe the ever-lovely mermaid Lily would visit him again...

The first thing Snape did upon regaining full consciousness was to demand various key morsels of information from Blaise Zabini, a far more forthcoming nurse than Poppy Pomfrey. Of course, it helped that Zabini had been Snape's covert informant since he was a Firstie barely out of knee-britches.

The second thing Snape did was to tell the tiny speck of hopeful romanticism still residing in his soul, "I told you so!" His not-so-inner bitter cynic was immensely smug when he realised that Dumbledore, not satisfied with sixteen years of guilt-ridden, pain-filled, and mind-numbingly boring (that was the teaching bit) service, had...by asking Snape to kill him...set him up to die for his sins. For a scrap of black wood wrapped in power, glory and legend, no less. The irony caused Snape to grimace in dark humour. Zabini, observing him quietly, mistook that grimace for a pain response and upped the dosage on the Dreamless Sleep and the Relief Draught accordingly.

When Snape next woke, he noted the complete absence of hopeful romanticism from his soul. He decided to celebrate his descent into fully depressed cynical bitterness...with just a *smidge* of hopeless romanticism; there was still the aquatic ghost of Lily to deal with...by presenting the Chosen One with a list of his demands.

He was very much surprised, though he hid it well behind a contemptuous sneer, when Potter immediately agreed to the entire list. Before adding a caveat of his own. And the insolent whelp dared to twinkle at him whilst doing so!

Bugger.

"The thing is, Snape, your Dark Lord isn't *quite* all gone, yet."

If Potter offered him a lemon sherbet, he'd shove it up his bloody arse. Without magic.

"Mr Zabini told me you killed him. And he is not *my* Dark Lord anymore." He would not be guilt-bound to this half-arsed protégé pretender. He'd done enough.

"Well... That isn't the complete truth either. Turns out, by Summoning Dumbledore's wand, Draco controlled it. When I took Draco's wand off him, I controlled it. So when Riddle tried to use the Elder wand on me, the magic backfired. He killed himself, really. Twice, if you count the forest. Not so quick on the uptake, was he?" The twinkling achieved mirth-filled vibrancy.

His near-death had saved Draco, then. It was a fair cop.

That didn't stop Snape from grinding his teeth; he could sense the other shoe was about to drop.

"Turns out ol' Voldie had another Horcrux up his sleeve." Potter wasn't twinkling anymore.

Buggity bugger.

The voice that had confused Snape earlier spoke again, increasing in volume as it moved from the doorway to Snape's bedside.

"We've pinpointed the location of the last Horcrux, and thank Merlin, the remaining Death Eaters have not. Yet. Which is why you have been revived, Headmaster," said Neville Longbottom as he came into view. "We need you to guard it against discovery."

Longbottom met his former boggart's eyes with quiet confidence. His innate magic was almost a physical presence in the small makeshift sickroom, and Snape was vividly reminded of Neville's father, Frank.

"Why me in particular?" he enquired neutrally.

"Because the enemy thinks you are dead," replied Longbottom. "The Death Eaters and their allies have become quite active again. Everyone on our side has been busy counteracting that activity."

Neville declined to spell it out, but Snape didn't need reminding what activity his former mates were up to. Been there, done that. Had the ink stain to prove it.

"We are very certain they are aware of Riddle's ace in the hole, as it were. Intercepted communications indicate they have started searching for it. If they happen to find it, we'll need you there to keep them from taking it. A resurrection would be inconvenient, to say the least."

Harry chuckled darkly, which caused Neville to raise a sardonic eyebrow in reply. Snape repressed a shudder, feeling as if a goose had walked over his grave.

"We don't anticipate them locating it, seeing as it is stashed in a somewhat remote locale. You'll probably end up rather bored. Think of this as a vacation, if you will."

Snape's curled lip was condescendingly scathing. He'd heard a variation of this song and dance before, too. *If* they find it, Mr Longbottom? How did you come to know about this Horcrux and its location?"

"I inherited Dumbledore's Pensieve," said Harry. "After the battle at Hogwarts, I was looking for answers. Neither Riddle nor Albus were very forthcoming, were they?"

Harry and Snape shared a brief look of mutual disgust for their former "masters."

"During the rebuilding process, I came across a room full of chamber pots, and I found a box of bottled memories there. One of the memories showed Riddle having tea with Hepzibah Smith. She had acquired Godric Gryffindor's mace and wanted it authenticated. As an employee of Borgin and Burkes', Riddle was well-qualified to do so. In fact, he had done so for Madam Smith in the past. He also killed her and stole all the Founder artefacts she had collected. He made Horcruxes of the rest as well, which we destroyed, so I was sure he'd made a Horcrux of the mace, too."

Harry stopped his explanation when Colin Creevey entered the room and handed him a roll of parchment. He muttered a decoding spell, broke the wax seal and scanned its contents.

"Ron says the mission is a go," he stated, first looking at Neville and then Snape as Creevey handed him a sealed wooden box.

"Colin here is your main point of contact, Snape. His code name is Hopping Pot. Neville is Sir Luckless, Ron is Sabre, Zabini is Altheda, I am the Third Brother, and you are Babbity Rabbity. Base code name is Stump." He waved his hand over the box, opening it. "Memorise the codes. The Death Eaters might know about the underground frequencies."

He showed Snape the contents of the box, pointing to each item with his wand. "Miniaturised supplies, including the books and firewhisky you required." Snape raised an eyebrow, and Harry continued, "Yes, Ogden's Old Special Reserve."

Harry held up a thin metal disc strung on a long piece of supple black leather. "This is a glamour amulet, which you will wear at all times, in case of a skirmish with a Death Eater who might escape."

It appeared to be an ordinary St. Anthony's medal.

"You'll have all the peace and solitude you asked for," Harry said as he tapped a small seashell. "This is your Portkey, Headmaster. It leaves in two minutes." Harry dropped it into Snape's hand.

Snape fiddled with the shell. "I haven't agreed yet, Potter. Your code is transparent and juvenile. Do you have a contingency plan? What is the catch?"

"Riddle put up extensive wards around the Horcrux. Those wards allow for the innate magic of two full wizards on the island," Harry explained. "You can do small magic up to the equivalent of the second wizard, but do so sparingly. We may need to Portkey in occasionally, yeah? Those wards are nasty. You wouldn't like to find out just how nasty the hard way. You'll need to do almost everything the Muggle way. No catch."

Snape rolled his eyes and tossed Potter the Portkey. Or tried to. It seemed to be stuck to his hand. Potter handed him the re-sealed supply box, which Snape accepted automatically with his empty hand, while still trying to shake the shell off.

"Bon voyage, professor." Harry twinkled as he waved cheerfully at a glowering Snape. "As you cannot use Magical forms of communication, there is a pedal radio on the island. We'll be in touch shortly."

"Island? Where the fuck am I going, Potter? You'd better hope those Death Eaters get to me first, Potter. Because if I get to you, *Crucio* will seem like a slap and a tickle!" He was just working up to a good bollicking when Snape felt a strong tug behind his navel. "You utterly gormless gobshite!" he ranted as he whirled out of sight.

"That went really well, don't you think?" Harry commented mildly as he turned to Colin and Neville.

Neville shrugged and quirked a grin. "About as well as we expected it to."

"Does Snape know how to operate a communication radio?" Colin asked in puzzlement.

"He will soon enough. I charmed the bit with the talking manual to expand first no matter which thing he chooses to un-shrink," Harry replied, unconcerned.

"And the liquid peace offering included with the manual?" Neville enquired with amusement.

Harry smirked as they left the medical room. "Couldn't hurt to calm him down a titch."

~Home Sweet Home~

Severus landed with a bone-jarring crunch on hard rock and abruptly fell to his knees, barely managing to set down the supply box before ejecting the meager contents of his stomach onto the slimy gray-green moss that covered the land beneath him.

He loathed Portkey travel more than snakes and only a little less than Potter, father or son. The list of things he hated was long, granted, but it was variable depending on season and location, excepting the top three positions: Potters, Portkeys, and poisonous snakes. Some things were, by merit, eternal.

He attempted to wipe his mouth, and almost cut his lip with the edge of the seashell he still held. He dropped it to the ground next to the supply box and eyed the pattern of sick before him.

Jackson Pollock, eat your heart out. The wizard Snape was a maestro of artistic regurgitation.

Severus got to his feet cautiously, wanting to avoid upsetting his stomach again. He was also keen to evade touching the disgusting-looking moss. He could feel it, wet and clinging to the hem of his dingy grey nightshirt. *Idiots.* They hadn't even let him change into proper clothes. At least he had slippers on his feet from a timely visit to the loo. He stared at the supply box. It appeared to be locked tighter than a Gringotts vault.

Brilliant.

Potter's crack support team was performing as expected. He feared it was too much to hope that the *blasted* box contained a change of clothing, let alone food or water. Heaving a long-suffering sigh, Severus looked up and realised he had over-estimated Potter's logistical skills.

He was standing on a low atoll, composed entirely of moss-covered rock, perhaps nine hundred metres across at its widest point. It was, for the most part, long and narrow. And completely bereft of shelter, fresh water, or edible vegetation. He stared out at the placid sea with bemused resignation. Well, he was fucked now. He nearly laughed out loud. And that made his life different how?

The shell. He could use it to pry the box open. Surely, Potter or Zabini had packed his wand. He would reactivate the Portkey...as much as he hated them, he was beginning to loathe the slimy moss more...and encode it to transport him to New Zealand. He would live out his remaining days in drunken obscurity.

As if summoned, the shell floated up to hover before his face, and morphed into a scroll of parchment. It unrolled itself and script appeared on its surface.

Turn around.

Severus curled his lip in disdain, but did so.

Oh.

The medical coma had clearly dulled his normally sharp sense of surroundings, because he had to windmill his arms backwards to keep his footing. He was standing on the western edge of the atoll, facing the sheer cliff wall of a much larger island.

He shaded his eyes against the sun and tilted his head up. The cliff wall was immense. He closed his eyes for a moment and calculated the dimensions in his head. *Perhaps four hundred metres high and at least a kilometre wide.* He heard a rustling and opened his eyes.

The parchment was before him again, this time displaying a map of the island. He studied it with keen focus, noting the location of a hut, the lagoon and stream. There was also a coral barrier reef, which seemed to form a natural cove at the southern inward curve of the island. A section of the map glowed faintly red in the ghostly outline of a... cave, where Voldemort's last Horcrux was located. Severus traced the tunnel to the entrance with his forefinger and then gently nudged the map aside to scan the surface of the cliff wall.

Ah.

There it was, about two hundred metres up. The opening was barely detectable, recessed under a narrow overhang and just large enough for a full grown man to slip into sideways.

I could destroy it now and then bugger off to New Zealand.

The parchment flapped back in front of his face.

No. The wards would kill you.

Severus rolled his eyes. Did Potter think him a nincompoop? Or worse yet, a Gryffindor? He was well-acquainted with the workings of the Dark Lord's devious mind. Given enough time, he would devise a plan to dispose of the soul fragment and wash his hands of this absurd affair.

In the meantime, how was he meant to get to the blasted island? Flying would expend too much magical energy and set off the "nasty" wards, assuming he had a wand. He had never learned to swim properly, and he was reluctant to try out his doggie paddle against an unknown current pattern.

The parchment rustled to attract his attention. It displayed the map again. As he watched, a small rowing boat appeared at the northern tip of the atoll, about twenty metres from where he stood, and floated on the current down along the cliff face into the cove, coming to a rest at a wooden dock sheltered by a grove of palm trees.

Ah ha.

The parchment rolled itself up again with a neat snap and tucked itself into the breast pocket of his nightshirt, next to his wand.

Wand?

Had it been there all along? He withdrew it from the long, narrow pocket and blushed. Clearing his throat, he picked up the supply box and shuffled cautiously over the slippery rocks to the spot where the rowing boat was hidden. He set the box down again, reaching out with both wand and hand to grasp the invisible rope he felt with his magic.

As soon as his wand touched the scratchy coil of hemp, the small rowing boat bobbed to the surface of the water and steadied itself against the rocky beach of the atoll. He put the box in the boat, and then clambered onboard inelegantly, his slippers affording no purchase on the wet rocks. The oars slipped into the water with barely a ripple, and a few minutes later, the boat docked itself at the island.

~Code Names~

Severus pocketed his wand, hefting the box under his arm to disembark. He checked the boat's moorings, making sure they were secure, and left the dock for the shelter of the lush palms swaying overhead in the tropical breeze. He removed the scroll from his pocket and unrolled it, noting a narrow pathway just north of the dock leading to the lagoon and then beyond it past some palms to the hut. Which was undoubtedly uphill and probably both steep and rocky.

He needed proper shoes, at the very least. He set the supply box down on the dock and tapped the lid with his wand, muttering *Alohomora*, "almost under his breath, reluctant to disturb the tranquillity around him. The box opened with a tiny pop, and Severus exhaled in relief. He selected a promising-looking minuscule trunk and placed it on the dock, a ways apart from the supply box.

"Engorgio."

The trunk resized itself obediently, and Severus opened it to find a plethora of brightly coloured long-sleeved shirts in tropical patterns, light-weight cotton trousers in khaki and white, Bermuda shorts, flip-flops...he curled his lip at all of it, but reserved his deepest disdain for the flip-flops...thick cotton socks, white y-front underpants and a pair of rugged, deep brown hiking boots. He tugged on a pair of khaki trousers, the thick cotton socks and was lacing up the boots when he heard a throat clear itself in the vicinity of the supply box. Withdrawing his wand, he crouched into a battle stance.

"Show yourself," he hissed.

"Radio is one of the principle means of communication within all units of the army. It is used between rapidly moving units where wire communication is difficult..., " a tinny voice droned, ignoring Severus completely.

Keeping his wand at the ready, he approached the supply box with constant vigilance.

"It is subject to interception, location and jamming by the enemy and is affected by terrain and weather conditions..., " the radio manual continued in a Texas twang. It lay full-sized at the top of the supply box, a bottle of Ogden's Old Special Reserve nestled at its side.

"Silencio," Severus said. He picked up the bottle and opened it, taking a healthy swig.

"In order that radio communications may follow the proper channels of tactical command, the radio station of the superior unit and the radio stations of its next subordinate units are grouped, by being on the same frequency, for operations with one another. This group is called a net. The composition of each net depends..."

"Muffliato!" He took another drink.

"Correct radio procedure under any operating condition is characterized by brevity, uniformity, and simplicity. When special operating conditions require procedures not illustrated in detail in this Manual, the briefest common-sense application of the principals and signals contained herein will be..."

"Shut. The fuck. Up."

"Every radio net is assigned a frequency on which it must operate, and every station is assigned a call sign by which it is identified. Stations within the same headquarters should be assigned different call signs. A call sign, termed the..."

Severus raised his wand menacingly. "I shall set you on fire."

The manual paused its lecture, flapping its cover closed so that Severus could read it.

U.S Radio Manual

Army standard issue 1945

Waterproof - Fireproof

Then it flapped open and continued where it left off. "Termed the 'net call,' is also assigned to designate the entire net. Call signs are composed of three or four characters. Call words, often used to identify a radiotelephone station, consist of a word, or a word and a sign, such as..."

Severus took a last long drink from the bottle, set it gently in the supply box and shut the lid on the yapping monograph. It finally got the message and ceased speaking. If only Miss Brown had been as easy to dissuade. Unfortunately, both Dumbledore and McGonagall had frowned on locking endlessly prattling students up in boxes.

His life would have been infinitely more pleasant had such a course of action been allowed.

Que Sera, Sera.

Now feeling a bit squiffy, Severus reduced the trunk, pocketed his wand, stacked the trunk on the supply box and tucked them both under his arm, before striding haphazardly up the path past the lagoon.

He was right about the trail to the hut. It was steep. And rocky. The waterfall was pretty, though. And the falling water had a soporific effect that boded well for his future sleep pattern. But first, he had to get up this Brobdingnagian hill. He made a pouch of his nightshirt, looping the hem through a high section between two buttons, to cradle the trunk and supply box in its confines. Then he crouched over, using his free hands to grasp at the low vegetation for balance as he scaled the incline.

A long while later, Severus stood, sweaty and panting, before a slightly derelict Quonset hut painted in tropical greens and covered in leafy netting. He wanted nothing more than a slap-up meal and a dozen pints of tea. Even his toes were hungry after that arduous climb.

He found a large rock, opened the supply box, took out the Radio Manual and set it down on the wooden deck the Quonset hut sat on. Quickly, before it could start talking again, Severus plunked the heavy rock down on it.

"There, Brown," he said, feeling slightly foolish, but regarding the wriggling Manual with smug satisfaction nonetheless, "enjoy your new home."

He then rummaged through the supply box, locating a crate of Operational Ration Packs and a Tommy cooker in short order. He resized the crate and fired up the cooker, wrinkling his nose at the smell of burning Hexamine. He was ecstatic to discover the tins of soup and beans, the water purification tablets, the neat little envelopes of tea and Brown biscuits. But he nearly wept tears of joy at seeing the precious packet of Marmite tumble out of the meal box. Clutching it to his chest, he swept a metal bucket off the shelf near the door of the hut and practically skipped to the stream to retrieve some water.

Several hours later, after a grand meal and a long kip, Severus was rudely roused by a crackling noise emanating from the pedal radio situated near his bunk. He stumbled over to it, and blearily rubbed his eyes before locating the communication switch.

"What do you want?" he barked.

There was no response, though the crackling was fainter.

He sat down and tried pedalling for a bit.

"Babbity Rabbity, Babbity Rabbity. Are you there? This is Hopping Pot. At the Stump. Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Babbity Rabbity, Third Brother here. We can hear crackling, but not you. Depress the talk button."

Severus frowned at the machine. He picked up the microphone and pushed the talk button.

His response was a tad more acerbic the second time around. "Yes. I am here."

He hated repeating himself. It held position eighteen on his list in the autumn, position seven in the spring and position fifty-three during the summer hols.

"We've been trying to reach you, on and off, for the last twelve hours, Babbity. Did you have trouble finding the hut? Over."

"No."

"Did you read the Manual, Babbity? Over."

Severus jabbed at the talk button. "Don't you mean *listen*, Potter?"

"Er, yes. Well, it worked then. Good. And please use the code names, sir."

"You can take your code names, Potter, and shove them where the sun doesn't shine."

"Thank you, sir. I'll keep that in mind."

"Don't you mean Babbity, Potter? Over."

Harry grinned and set down his headset.

Colin looked up at him with wide eyes. "He sounded cranky."

Harry's grin grew wider. "Just like old times, bless him."

~Hobbled Boat~

It took Severus a day or two to situate the hut to his liking...there was extensive testing of the four beds available, after which his first choice nearest the radio was proclaimed just right...but following that, his hours blurred together in a comfortable routine of eat, sleep, read, drink, harass Stump. Rinse, repeat. He didn't bother marking the days as they passed. The weather was mostly pleasant, whether it rained or not, and as long as the trade winds blew, the humidity didn't bother him much. When he was content, he would read his books and contemplate the meaning of the wards in the Horcrux Cave. When he was restless, he'd tramp around the island, collecting edible plants to supplement the Rat Packs' lack of nutritious greens. When he was overtired, he'd let Brown talk him to sleep and dream of pixies who lectured him on proper radio protocol. When he was feeling cranky, he'd radio Third Brother and quiz him on the state of the wizarding world. When night fell and he was drunk, he'd radio Hopping Pot and reminisce.

"Hopping Pot."

"Yes, Babbity?"

"Were you a boy scout?"

"Yes, I was, sir."

"I thought so."

"Sir?"

"Hurmph." This sound passed for 'You have a question?' in Severus's sozzled state.

"Why do you ask?"

"Merely curiosity."

"Oh."

"Were you a wolf cub, Creevey?"

"Just a cub, sir."

"I wanted to be wolf club."

"You did, sir?" Colin was sure he'd heard that wrong.

"Yes. My Da wanted a normal lad."

"Oh." Maybe he wouldn't tell Longbottom *everything* he'd heard later.

"And normal boys were wolf cubs. But Mum never had the dosh for subs."

Colin didn't know what to say to that.

"So. I would follow them around, like. And learn things. Like how to build a fire or shelter. How to bind a twisted ankle. Games. Songs. I was good at spying."

"You were, sir? Even then?"

Severus snorted. "I am Slytherin, boy. No one saw me unless I wanted them to."

There was a long silence as Severus took a drink of firewhisky.

"Indicate the way to my habitual abode, I'm fatigued and I want to retire." Colin's singing voice sounded thin and wavering through the radio static. It was sweet, nonetheless. "Oh, I had a little liquid sixty minutes ago, and it went right to my cerebellum."

Severus recognised the tune and felt obliged to join in. His deep baritone bolstered Colin's voice and the wavering disappeared.

"Wherever I may perambulate, on land or sea or atmospheric bubbles. You will always hear me humming this melody: Indicate the way to my habitual abode."

Colin's voice trailed off last, as if he were reluctant to end the magic.

Severus never remembered these whisky-soaked interludes. Or didn't allow himself to. There were several dozen of them that Hopping Pot kept under his lid.

Eat, sleep, read, drink, harass Stump. Rinse. Repeat.

Until one day, Severus noted his food supplies were running low.

"Babbity Rabbity calling Stump. Hopping Pot, are you there?"

"Yes, Babbity. How are things out there?"

"Fine, fine. I am running low on food, however."

"Fecking hell! I nearly forgot it's been four months!"

"Will more food being coming, then?"

"Yes, sir. We'll Portkey supplies straight away, sir. You'll need to retrieve it from the atoll tonight, sir. A storm is headed your way."

"Storm?"

"Tropical cyclone Cilla, sir. And she's a doozy. A level four, we heard. It's January, sir. The height of cyclone season."

"It's January, Creevey?"

"Yes, sir."

"What date?"

"The tenth, sir."

"Ah, well," Severus murmured to himself, "Happy birthday to me."

"Come again, sir?"

"Never mind, Creevey. Just get me that food."

"Yes, sir. We're sending it now."

Severus eyed the long line of empty bottles on the shelf above the radio. "And, Creevey?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't forget the whisky."

"No, sir. We won't."

Cilla hit the island two days later with the ferocity of a scorned, premenstrual, chocolate-less female.

The Quonset hut rattled and shook under the buffeting winds as Severus huddled under the blankets on his bunk, attempting to sleep. After the fifth time the branches of a palm slapped against the metal roof with a bang, Severus tossed the blankets aside, muttering, "Sod this for a lark." He decided to drink instead. Two bottles of whisky later, he fell asleep mid-sip despite the racket overhead...

Severus flexed the slits on either side of his throat in concert with his webbed feet and propelled himself across the crystal clear water of the cove towards the coral reef with a silky whoosh. Eddies of water billowed in his wake as he glided through the sunlit shallows.

A hypnotic silvery voice lilited out a giggle as he caught a glimpse of glittery green scales and long flame-like hair just ahead. He kicked out again and his reaching fingers brushed against a diaphanous fin. He chuckled with predatory fervour as the fin jumped slightly and then shivered in delight. He swooped suddenly and caught his Piscean nymph by the waist and murmured, "Tag, you're it," in her perfect shell-like ear.

But she wasn't laughing anymore. She turned to face him, concern filling her bright green eyes and said, "Babbity Rabbity, do you read? Babbity Rabbity, are you there?" in Hopping Pot's panicked voice, which confused Severus, because Lily had never sounded particularly boyish.

Also, *her* voice had never caused his head to pound like a giant pounding a hugely-sized thing with another hugely-sized thing.

Severus had the microphone in his hand and the talk button depressed before he realised he'd got out of bed. He tried to speak. It was no good. His tongue had grown fur. He growled into the mic and dropped it in favour of lighting the Tommy cooker to heat water for blessed tea or coffee, whichever was closer to hand.

Ah, the smell of Hexamine in the... Morning? Afternoon? It hardly mattered. Coffee mattered. Much, much more than time.

The water boiled, and he poured it into the mug over the tiny crystals of caffeinated relief. He blew on the hot, dark liquid and then swallowed a mouthful. It slid down his throat in a wonderful trickle of hydration that caused him to expel an enraptured moan. He tipped a dram of whisky into the mug and drank deeply.

"Severus, are you there?" Potter squawked.

"Yes, I survived the storm."

"You sound rough."

"You'd sound rough too, after thirty kilometre winds and two bottles of firewhisky."

"Ooooooooo, were you a big girl's blouse, Snape?"

"Shut your gob, Potter."

"All right, I'll leave off, then. Assess the damage and radio us back, yeah?"

Severus didn't bother replying.

Fortunately, Cilla had stormed over the island quickly, and the Quonset hut withstood her fury well, only losing the camouflage netting and a few boards off the deck. After Severus repaired the deck, he scouted the rest of the island, looking for damage.

There wasn't much. Apparently, Cilla was all bark and no bite. She felled a palm tree in the lagoon, and uprooted a fair amount of grasses and shrubs, eroding a great deal of soil on the flat cliffs above the Horcrux Cave. So much so, in fact, that Severus was able to dig a hole into the cavern near the base of a shrub with yellow and red flowers that smelled like star jasmine. Luckily, it was the only one of its kind on the island.

He tossed a pebble into the hole and watched it bounce off the wards a few metres below the cave's ceiling. They sparkled in hues of violet, midnight blue, and forest green. He'd never seen that particular combination before. He would have to consult with Potter and perhaps a book or two before attempting a closer inspection. Ah, well. At least he had created an escape hatch of sorts. It was sure to come in handy at some point.

Severus stood up, dusting his knees off and then his hands. He ambled over to the cliff's edge overlooking the dock and the cove beyond it to see how the rowing boat had fared.

Well, wasn't that something?

Cilla had bite after all, or rather, she had taken one out of a Bulgarian ship. It was caught up on the lowest point of the coral reef, a ragged hole the size of a troll's massive club in the larboard side near the bow, just above the waterline. There didn't appear to be any survivors.

He made his way, nimble as a mountain goat, down the trail and approached the Bulgarian ship, wand in hand.

"Homenum revelio," he whispered.

Nothing. He waded through the shallow water to the side of the ship. Climbing through the club-sized hole, he rummaged the ship for supplies. There wasn't much he could use. A scratched mirror, an old-fashioned strap razor, some water-logged spell books, and a specimen jar that contained two sea horses. He gathered all of it up and took it back to the hut. He named one sea horse Romaine, because it looked like a branch of leaves. He named the other Dandelion. It resembled an overgrown weed.

When he tried to radio Stump that night, he couldn't get through.

The radio was out for several days.

He assumed it was due to the storm.

Part Two

Out of the frying pan, into the fire. Sometimes, getting away from it all means there's nowhere to go when it all comes to you.

Babbity Git, Part Two

~Enemy Sighting~

Severus was bored.

He hadn't realised how much he relied on daily communication with Stump. He held fanciful conversations with the sea horses. He drank quite a bit more than he normally did. Which was a lot.

He got creative with coconut shells. He carved some into animal shapes. He constructed a tea set for eight, complete with saucers, cups, and a teapot...even a sugar bowl. He drilled holes through others, and played Conkers with a strong-looking palm tree. He nearly always won. He used the hole bits to make marbles, polishing the coconut hair off with care. He carved faces into a few, and named them all. His favourite was Milky Joe. Joe would listen to him as he expounded on ways to dispose of a Horcrux and offer suggestions on how to disassemble the wards in the cave. Milky Joe reminded him of Percy Weasley, so earnest and helpful. He wondered if Percy had survived the Final Battle.

He dreamt of Lily often, always as a mermaid, always out of reach. Sometimes the sea horses helped search for her. Sometimes Milky Joe joined in the chase. Several times, they all played games of Foxy between the boat and the coral reef. Severus was always 'it'.

It was during one of these dreams that the radio crackled to life. Which was how Colin became 'it' before Severus fully woke up. He was chasing Romaine to the ship hull as Severus opened his eyes.

"Babbity Rabbity. Babbity Rabbity, are you there? Over."

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Wee Willykins, sir."

"And whom, precisely, is that?"

"Seamus Finnigan, sir."

"What happened to Hopping Pot?"

"They got him, sir. His whole family...mother, father, his brother Dennis and two sisters...they were all home for his mother's birthday."

Severus tossed down the mic and opened a bottle of whisky.

"They've been targeting Muggle-borns lately, more than before. We reckon they're frustrated. They've been searching in Eastern Europe and haven't found anything."

"That would be a logical place to search. Tell your team that the cyclone left a gift behind. There is a Bulgarian ship on the coral reef in the cove. There was no one aboard. The ship is damaged, but it can be repaired. I will require wood and nails in the next Portkey shipment."

"Babbity, Sabre here. Do you think the ship and the eastern European search are connected?"

"I suppose it is possible. I found nothing on the ship to indicate that, though. Still, it's something I hadn't thought of. I will check the ship again."

"You do that. We'll send the wood and nails with the next rations delivery."

"Colin was a good man." Severus raised his bottle to the sky and took a long swallow.

"We know."

Eat, sleep, read, drink, harass Stump. Rinse. Repeat.

He investigated the ship more thoroughly, but didn't find anything that connected it with the Death Eaters. As a precaution, he cast a spell to obscure the ship from detection overhead. Luckily, the reef lay outside of the island's wards, because it was a strong act of magic. A new rations shipment arrived, and with it came wood, nails...even tools and books on shipbuilding.

Eat, sleep, read, drink, harass Stump. Work on ship. Rinse. Repeat.

It gave him something to do while his mind was busily assembling and rejecting plans to deal with the Horcrux Cave. He had consulted with Potter regarding the wards, to no avail. Which was hardly surprising. He had consulted his books, to no avail. Which he found disturbing, because books had rarely let him down before.

And yet something niggled at the back of his brain, like a Niffler looking for Knuts. He hadn't seen that combination of hues before in the Dark Lord's presence, but he had seen something like it, somewhere. He hoped it wasn't in one of the memories he tried to give to Potter. Most of them had been restored, but there were still small gaps. He assumed that a few of them had escaped collection. A loss was to be expected, given that they were transferred under arduous circumstances. After all, he had never really expected to get them back.

He spent the morning bailing water out of the Bulgarian ship through the hole in its larboard side. The sea was calm, and he expected it to remain so for a while, now that the cyclone season was over. Bailing water was sweaty work and he was more than ready to take a break when his stomach rumbled around noon.

Severus jumped ship, and sat on the dock to enjoy his meal in the relatively cooler breeze found there. He took a bite of Lancashire Hotpot and frowned at the tin of dessert. It was probably treacle pudding again. It was nearly always treacle pudding. He despised treacle pudding...position five on his list of hated items...because it reminded him of Potter.

He held his breath as he opened the tin, and let a sigh of relief escape his lips. Fruit dumplings and custard, his favourite.

It must be his lucky day.

He was just digging his spoon into the mélange of doughy bits covered in odd-coloured sauce...custard typically was not pink...when he felt the wards over the island hum faintly. He glanced up and dropped his dessert face down into the sand below the dock.

A pair of men in black robes flew high overhead on brooms, in a circular pattern. One of them pointed to the atoll. Severus held his breath as they swooped lower. The Lestrage brothers. The hum of the wards increased and Severus began to feel painfully dizzy. The brothers flew closer to the atoll, hovering above it for a few moments,

before flying off to the west. They hadn't noticed the ship sitting on the reef.

The wards ceased humming, and Severus took several deep breaths before he made his way cautiously up the hill to the Quonset hut. He grabbed a bottle of firewhisky and collapsed onto his bunk. He drank half the bottle before he felt ready to radio Stump. Potter had been right, the wards were truly nasty. He knew it would be so; he just hated having to admit it.

Having to admit things he didn't want to acknowledge was position eight on his list. Most of the time.

"Babbity Rabbity calling Stump. Wee Willykins, are you there?"

"Yes, Babbity Rabbity. This is Wee Willykins. Go ahead."

"I need to speak to Third Brother."

"Sorry, Babbity. I'm the only one here at the moment."

"Shite."

"Sir?"

"I had a close call just now. The Lestrangle brothers paid the island a visit."

"They landed?"

"Thankfully, no. But they did seem very interested in the atoll."

Seamus's exhalation whistled sharply through the speaker. "Shite."

"Precisely."

"I need a drink."

"Don't mind if I do."

"I propose a toast." There was a pause as both men poured liquor into a mug.

"Yes?" Severus prompted when the seconds stretched out between him and relief.

"May this crap day end soon."

"Amen." Severus drank his whisky in one swallow.

"I propose another toast." There was another pause as both men poured more liquor into their mugs. "To all the girls I've loved before."

"Loved very many, have you?"

"More than the fingers on one hand."

"*With* the fingers on one hand, more like."

"Shut it, you wanker." There was a moment of silence in which Seamus remembered exactly who he was speaking to. "Sir."

"I propose a toast."

"Sir?"

"To all the girls you've loved before." They drank. "In your imagination, with the fingers on one hand. You wanker."

"Git."

"That's Babbity Git, to you."

"Yes, sir."

"Drink up, Willykins. It's going to be a long night."

Several hours later, it occurred to Severus to propose another toast.

"To Hopping Pot. A good man."

"To Colin," replied Seamus. "A good wizard and a great friend."

"To Mr Creevey," added Severus. "A good singer, of middling talent and excellent taste."

"Colin sang?"

"Yes." A deep melancholy struck Severus unexpectedly. "This was his favourite song...

Show me the way to go home,

I'm tired and I want to go to bed.

Oh, I had a little drink about an hour ago,

and it went right to my head.

Wherever I may roam,

on land or sea or foam.

You will always hear me singing this song:

Show me the way to go home."

He began to sing the song again, and Seamus joined in.

"Show me the way to go home,

I'm tired and I want to go to bed.

Oh, I had a little drink about an hour ago,

and it went right to my head.

Wherever I may roam,

on land or sea or foam.

You will always hear me singing this song:

Show me the way to go home."

~Little Girls~

Severus was drinking his second cup of coffee with firewhisky the next morning when the wards screamed, tearing a jagged path of pain through his frontal lobe. He dropped his metal mug and clutched at his head, resisting the urge to curl into a mewling ball on his bunk.

The wards suddenly stopped caterwauling what seemed a lifetime later, but was more probably a few seconds. He stood shakily, and made his way to the scratched mirror over the dry sink in the hut's kitchen area. He wasn't bleeding out his eyeballs, then. That was a good thing.

Severus's keen intellect came out of hiding.

The wards.

He stared into the mirror and realised he looked like himself.

This was not good.

He wasn't ready for this. Lulled into complacency by the sun, sea and good food, Severus had misplaced some of the edge he had honed during the long years between the wars. He took several deep breaths before panic could set in.

Wand. Clothes. Glamour. Stealth mode.

It was coming back to him now. He took the parchment from the shelf beside his bunk and unrolled it.

"Homenum revelio," he whispered, touching his wand to the map's surface.

Five violet dots appeared on the flats above the Horcrux Cave.

Shite.

Five. He peered at them, his mind racing. They weren't moving. He kept the map in one hand, and held his wand up in the other as he crept silently out of the hut, down the deck toward the stream that separated him from the tableland. He crossed the stream at a low point, barely getting the soles of his boots wet. Then he checked the map again. The dots remained where they were, unmoving. Severus dared to hope. With any luck, they would be dead already.

He stopped in the middle of the camouflaging shrubs about five metres from his unwanted guests, and shaded his eyes against the sun. He wanted to get a good read on them before he stuck his neck out any further.

"What?" he said, and was so startled he nearly jumped out of his skin.

His voice certainly sounded different. Like he gargled glass as a hobby. The reason for his altered voice captured his singular attention again. He took a few steps closer to the clearing without realising it.

The interlopers were shorter than he expected. They were not wearing black robes, either. They were wearing navy blue skirts, and knee socks and white short-sleeve broadcloth shirts. All of them. Except for one. Severus surveyed the sky for a moment, and then strode over quickly to the prostrate figures.

She was dressed in a prim little navy blue suit and sheer hose, her hair spilling out on the ground in a halo of wild curls. Her shoes, plain navy pumps with a short heel, rested near her out-flung hand...as if she were reaching to put them on.

Severus knelt next to her, and was relieved to discover a pulse and regular breathing. He checked the other girls, and found the same results. Just unconscious, then. He spied a manky old boot near the littlest female and surmised that the wards had caused their Portkey to malfunction.

Seriously?

He looked up at the sky, tracing a cloud's movement for a moment or two.

It had to be her.

Of course it did. His life thus far had been a never-ending series of Karmic smack-downs. There was no reason to believe that Karma would not follow him here. To this tiny hunk of uninhabited volcanic rock in the middle of the South Pacific. No fucking reason at all. He wondered who he had been in his past life to end up on her most wanted list. Caligula? Ghengis Khan? Bonaparte? Stalin? Nero? Hitler?

Not that he hadn't done anything of particular note in his current life; but really, wasn't enough, enough? Karma didn't think so, apparently, for she had delivered unto Severus four young school girls and Miss Hermione Granger.

Inquisitive, intelligent Hermione Granger. She had a mind like a steel trap with almost perfect recall. She made Voldemort look like an inbred moron. Albeit, an inbred moron with a hair-trigger temper, questionable sanity and a thirst for power.

How the fuck was he going to do this?

He paced the wooden planks between the large table and the bunk row, occasionally glancing with apprehension at the last bunk, where Miss Granger lay, still unconscious. As they all were. A fact he was grateful for, as he needed time to think.

Once he had moved his unwanted guests one by one to the hut, situating them on the available beds...thank Merlin there was a double bunk for the bigger girls and the two smallest had fit on the other single side by side...he had radioed Stump with the headphones on, as quietly as possible.

They were no help at all, explaining that the previous day's sighting of the Lestrage brothers had put the team on high alert, and that a travel Portkey would not be forthcoming any time soon, no matter how much he begged. Sabre suggested a supply delivery via Portkey, under cover of night, to be dispatched when a list of needs had been compiled. On the assumption that if it were intercepted by their enemies at some point, no lives would be lost. And preferably consisting of more than just firewhisky; such as things the females might find useful. Severus reluctantly agreed.

Sabre promised a travel Portkey would be arranged as soon as it was viable to do so.

But then things went from uncomfortable to downright impossible, in Severus's opinion. Third Brother and Sabre ordered him to reveal as little as possible of his mission and identity to any of the girls, barring what they would need to know for their safety. Miss Granger, it seemed, had suffered a breakdown after the Final Battle, due to post-traumatic stress. It had taken her three years to fully recover, and another year to reunite with her parents and restore their memories.

Clever girl.

After that, they had charged her with transporting war orphans to Australia, where her parents watched over them. With Andromeda Tonks's help. To keep her safely away from their more dangerous work. She had changed, Severus was warned. She was not the same girl he had known at Hogwarts. He was hard pressed not to snort at that. Of course she was changed. That didn't mean she was suddenly stupid or incompetent.

However, he did see the wisdom of breaking things to her gently. He did not believe that she was fragile, but a little caution wouldn't hurt. Besides, the longer he could evade harassment and endless questions by being a stranger who deserved company manners, the better. He had an enormous headache already, contemplating the travails of living with five females.

~Taking Over the Hut~

"Who are you? Where are the girls?"

Severus stopped pacing mid-step and turned to face Miss Granger.

"The girls are on the bunks next to you. They appear to be healthy, other than mild abrasions and such."

She sat up slowly, and looked over at the girls, then back at Severus. Every movement she made was careful, as if she didn't trust her body yet. "Where are we?"

"On a small island in the South Pacific." He sat on the chair by the pedal radio.

"Did our Portkey malfunction, Mr..." Miss Granger peered at him in puzzlement. "What did you say your name is?"

"I hadn't," replied Severus. "It's Zabini. Walter Zabini." He held out his hand for her to shake.

She did so daintily. "Do you know Blaise Zabini?" Severus...Walter...nodded. "You look a little like him."

He knew that, having glanced in the scratched mirror after placing the medal on his neck. Third Brother had informed him during their radio call that Blaise had constructed the glamour, since he excelled at them. He'd learned the craft at his mother's knee.

Plus, Severus thought, his picture was next to the definition for narcissist in the dictionary.

"He's my nephew."

"Ah," Miss Granger said, as she looked around, taking in her surroundings.

The Quonset hut was built from cedar with a reinforced aluminum roof. It measured a roomy five by twenty metres that housed, as far as Hermione could tell, three bunks, a long table and chairs, a pedal radio station, a small kitchen area with a dry sink, storage shelves and an enormous pile of rubbish that needed to be burned as soon as possible.

"That needs to be burned," she muttered, pointing at the offensive mass.

"We can't light a fire," said Severus.

"Why ever not?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "Because it could be spotted. You can't do magic, either."

"Oh." Miss Granger worried her bottom lip. "Is there indoor plumbing?" she added hopefully.

He snorted. "No."

"What if?" she started delicately, only to have Mr Zabini interrupt her brusquely.

"There's a field of low shrubs out back and a bucket and shovel to help."

"Help?" asked Miss Granger.

"With burying." He pointed at the rubbish. "Bog roll, Miss..."

"Granger. Hermione Granger." She pointed to the girls, one a time. "That's Harriet on the top bunk, she's twelve and a tomboy. Annie is on the bottom bunk. She's fifteen, very girly and artistic. Elisabeth is ten. She can be very dour. And last is little Jenny. She's six. She hasn't spoken since her parents died."

"Murdered?"

"Yes," said Miss Granger. "By Death Eaters."

The girls began to stir. Miss Granger swung her legs over the edge of the bed, standing up carefully while straightening her skirt. She also did her best to smooth down her hair before walking between the girl's beds.

"Take it easy, girls," she said, soothing them with a calm voice. "We've just had a bumpy landing."

"Are we in Australia?" asked Elisabeth. She sat up, looking around. "This place is a dump."

"Elisabeth!" Miss Granger admonished. "Mind your manners."

"Who for?" Elisabeth muttered querulously.

"Our host, Mr. Zabini," Miss Granger replied. "That's who."

Severus shifted uncomfortably as four sets of young female eyes looked him over. "Good evening," he said.

"Good evening," they replied as one, except for Jenny, who merely waved at him.

"I need a drink," muttered Severus. He uncapped the half-empty bottle on the shelf next to the radio and poured a generous measure into his mug. Five sets of eyes watched his every move.

"Mr Zabini," began Miss Granger, clearing her throat. "Not in front of the children, please."

"I didn't want them here." Severus took a drink and smacked his lips.

"Mr Zabini!" Miss Granger's eyes fairly bulged from her head.

"We aren't in Australia, are we, Miss Granger?" asked Annie.

Miss Granger turned her attention to the girls. "No, we aren't, girls. Our Portkey malfunctioned. I think we should all have tea while we discuss this, don't you, Mr Zabini?"

"Go right ahead," Severus said with a smirk. "Be my guest."

"Do you have a tea set, Mr Zabini?"

"Where do you think you are, Miss Granger, the Palm Court?" Severus began, before halting abruptly. "Er, yes. I think I do. On the shelf over the dry sink."

"And how do I boil the water?"

Severus strode over to the kitchen area and lit several Hexamine stoves, before retrieving some Operational Rations Packs for the girls to open, since they were all now sitting at the table. He felt a bit grumpy sharing his things until he found out that all the girls loved treacle pudding and loathed Marmite. Excepting Elisabeth, who nearly snarled when he reached for her packet.

He drew back his fingers so quickly that all the girls giggled, including Miss Granger. Only Jenny made no noise.

When she recovered, Miss Granger cleared her throat. "How are we to get to Australia, Mr Zabini?"

"You could swim," he suggested. He popped a Marmite-covered Brown biscuit in his mouth and chewed.

"That is not funny," Miss Granger said, as Harriet and Annie dissolved into peals of laughter again. "Harriet, sit up straight, you are going to fall off the bench."

"My name is Harry." The girl's mouth adopted a mulish cast.

"Oh, yes," said Miss Granger. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm a bit distracted."

"That's all right," Harry said as Jenny pushed her treacle pudding over to her plate. She petted Jenny on the head and dug into her pudding.

"Seriously, Mr Zabini. Do you have a boat or perhaps..."

"There's a Bulgarian ship caught up on the reef. But it won't get you anywhere, seeing as there is a massive hole in its side." He took a drink of tea and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, which he then crumpled up and threw onto the rubbish pile. He ignored Miss Granger's gasp of outrage. "My contact said the team will have a travel Portkey ready for you in a couple of weeks. The area is too hot to send one just yet. For the time being, you should compile a list of necessities, as they *are* able to Portkey supplies. At least, we should hope they are."

"Where will you stay while we wait for our travel Portkey?"

"What do you mean, where will I stay? Right here, in the Quonset hut." Severus stood his ground at the head of the table.

"I'm afraid that is unacceptable," Miss Granger said, standing to face him. "There are young impressionable ladies present, and not enough beds to go around." She folded her arms across her chest.

"Where do you suggest I sleep, then?"

She tipped her head and thought for a moment. "You said there was a Bulgarian ship?"

"With an enormous hole in its side, practically at the water line!"

"Surely there is a dry room on one of its decks?"

"Yes," Severus muttered. "Surely." He turned to fill his supply chest with a few items. "I'll come back for the rest in the morning."

"Have a good night."

"There is one small matter you've disregarded."

Miss Granger tilted her head again. "And that is?"

"The radio. I'm the only one who can operate it."

"I'm sure we can work out something in the morning, Mr Zabini." She smiled widely at him. It was almost menacing. "Sleep tight."

He grabbed two bottles of whisky as he stomped out the back door. "I'm sure I will."

~The Father Figure~

The next day, Severus awoke early and spent most of the morning puttering around the boat, in an effort to make it somewhat habitable. It also kept her Highness waiting, as a much desired bonus.

When it got close to lunchtime, he reckoned he would put in an appearance. Firstly, because it would impose on her manners and she would be forced to feed him. Which served her right for kicking him out of *his* hut. And secondly, he remembered they needed to submit a supply list to Stump as soon as possible. Those rat packs wouldn't last very long, with five additional mouths to feed.

Once he got to the hut, he stomped loudly on the deck to alert the females to his presence. Severus wasn't about to knock on his own bloody door, manners or not. Luckily, everyone was busily working on large piece of material he couldn't identify at the long table.

Miss Granger looked up from her section of cloth. "Oh, Mr Zabini. I didn't see you standing there. Did you knock?"

"It's my hut," he replied evenly.

She pursed her lips, but said nothing in return.

He leaned against the supply shelves and watched them work. "Do you have a supply list ready?"

"Yes, almost. I need to add an item or two after lunch," she said, putting several stitches in the cloth. "Would you like to make lunch for us, Mr Zabini, while we work? Or have you already eaten?"

His stomach rumbled before he had a chance to answer.

"Obviously not," Harry sing-songed. She didn't look up.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Where did you get that cloth?"

"From the rubbish pile," Miss Granger said. "And I borrowed the sewing kit from the shelves behind you. I hope you don't mind."

Now he recognized the cloth. It was an old silk parachute left by some prior occupant. They had washed it and were in the process of darning all the little holes in it.

"What are you going to do with it?"

Miss Granger looked up at him with a smile. "Hang it as a curtain between my bunk and the pedal radio. So that you can use it while the girls are sleeping or getting dressed."

She thought she was clever, didn't she? It wouldn't keep them from overhearing him, though. And that wouldn't do.

He looked over where the rubbish pile used to be. It had been reduced to a neat stack of boxes. He looked back at Miss Granger. She was worrying her lower lip between her teeth as she sewed.

"We also sorted the rest of the rubbish heap out, as you can see," she said after listening to the girls chatter for a while. "The bog paper, as you called it, has been put in a box next to the necessary pail."

He decided not to tell her the Bulgarian ship had several functioning heads.

"Mr Zabini, may I ask you a question?"

Well, at least she wasn't waving her arm around like the Whomping Willow. "Yes."

"Did you by chance find a small beaded bag near where we fell? I couldn't find it in the hut."

"Can't do without your lippy, eh?"

Miss Granger huffed in exasperated indignation.

"No, I did not." Severus started to make lunch.

"Or a cricket bat?" asked Harry.

"No."

Annie sighed mournfully. "I lost my perfume. It was expensive, too. Twenty quid a bottle."

Elisabeth rolled her eyes. Severus quite agreed with her assessment.

The girls cleared the table, placing the parachute on Miss Granger's bed, and they all sat down to eat. Except Severus, who remained standing, while he ate his beans directly from the tin.

"Mr Zabini, won't you join us?"

"I'm fine right here, thanks," he said. He tore open a packet of Brown biscuits with his teeth and used his bean spoon to spread Marmite on them.

Elisabeth did the same. Exactly the same.

Miss Granger stared at him with the intensity of a surgical laser beam. "Might I have a word, Mr Zabini? Outside?"

"Of course," said Severus. "Shall we go out the back?" He led the way.

"Girls, keep eating and when you're finished, practise your times tables," Miss Granger said over her shoulder, before shutting the back door closed with a snap.

She faced Severus and folded her arms across her chest. "Just what do you think you are doing?"

"What do you think I am doing?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, and held her ground.

He counted silently to sixty just to make her wait and then responded. "Eating lunch."

"You had better manners last night."

"That was before I was kicked out of my hut."

"Did you build it, then?"

He shook his head no.

"I didn't think so."

"I was here first."

"Are you twelve?" Miss Granger retorted in disgust. "Didn't your mother bring you up to be a gentleman?"

He gave her a filthy look but didn't answer her. His family was not his favourite topic of discussion. In fact, it held position nine on his list of hate.

"The girls are watching you, heaven help them," Miss Granger said. "You are the closest thing they have to a father figure right now."

Severus snorted. "Good luck to them."

"No," Miss Granger said, stepping closer to him. "Good luck to you." She held up a finger for each edict. "No swearing. Sit down when you eat with us. Use dishware and the proper utensils. Knock and wait for permission before opening a door. And no drinking."

"In front of the girls."

"Period. It's bad for you. At the rate you're going, you'll have a pickled liver by fifty."

"You are not my mother. Or my wife. Or even my daughter, though you're nearly young enough..."

It was Miss Granger's turn to snort. "Nearly!"

Pity the glamour hadn't de-aged him. But the Zabinis had kept that little trick for themselves.*Bloody gannets.*

"In short, you are not the boss of me," Severus said. "In point of fact, I am the boss of you." He ignored her gasp of outrage. "You shouldn't be worrying whether I use a spoon to eat beans out of a tin at all, Lady Muck."

Sod being gentle.

"I spotted Death Eaters two days ago. They very well might come back. Don't do magic. Keep the girls calm so they don't either. Don't let them play in the open. If someone calls on the radio, fetch me straight away. Do you understand me?"

Miss Granger snapped her jaw shut and nodded her head in acknowledgement. She swallowed visibly and was very pale. He noticed her hands were shaking.

"Do you need some firewhisky? It's Special Reserve."

It was her turn to give him a filthy look.

"Pull yourself together, then. We need to radio that list of supplies in."

"I'm fine," she gritted out after taking several deep breaths.

They went back inside the hut. He even held the door open for her. The girls were working quietly on their times tables, though Severus suspected they had made a mad dash for the table as soon as the adults had approached the back door. None of them would look up to meet his eyes.

Miss Granger found her list, added some lines to it, and met him at the radio.

"Babbity Rabbity to Stump."

"Wee Willykins here." Seamus's voice sounded different. Smart lad.

"We have our supply list ready."

There were scrabbling noises at the other end. "Hang on a tic, I need to grab another quill. This one's tip is broken."

"Mr Zabini, there are a few... feminine requirements on the list," Miss Granger said, clearing her throat. "Are you sure you wouldn't like me to read it out loud?"

Severus rolled his eyes at her. "Just hand it over, Miss Granger."

"Stump is ready, Babbity," said Seamus.

"Twenty pairs of knick..." Severus came to a halt as his eyes slid down the list. They shut in horror at the word "tampons." He gave Miss Granger the list and wordlessly showed her how to depress the talk button, before he grabbed a bottle of firewhisky and left the hut. Her laughter followed him out the door.

"Babbity, are you there?"

"Babbity has left the building," Hermione said into the mic, still laughing. "I'll read the list to you instead."

"All right, fair Maiden, start reading."

"Why did you call me that, Willykins?"

"Code names, miss. You never know who's listening."

~Not Playing Nice~

She got straight up his nose, even now, when she wasn't there to purse her lips at his slovenly ways, or huff in indignation at some outrageous comment he felt compelled to make whenever she tutted at him or stare straight through him, like she could see every lie he'd ever told. Possibly since birth.

Trying to tell him what to do. Father figure.*Bah.* He hadn't been comfortable as a role model when he'd been teaching. He wasn't going to ease into it now. No way.

With any luck, his little speech would keep them all out of his hair for their entire stay. He was sure it had made a lasting impression on Miss Granger. He thanked the stars above she was inclined to respect authority. For the most part, anyway. And since new supplies were on the way, he had packed his trunks to the brim, and brought them to the ship. He'd left the radio there for now, and most of the firewhisky, until he worked up the strength to move it.

Or the nerve to test a pet theory of his. That Voldemort had not considered witches and wizards to be equals. More fool him. The Dark Lord certainly had called his mother weak more than once in Severus's hearing. He had treated Bellatrix more like a toy or a pet than a powerful witch. Severus could count the number of female Death Eaters on one hand. Most of the women in that circle were merely wives of Death Eaters, and never bore his Mark. If he was right, and he was right most of the time, then Severus was sure he could still do small acts of magic without setting the wards off.

Although. The Portkey, with five females attached, had definitely set the wards off. Yet a Portkey was a strong piece of active magic. And probably man-made as well. The Ministry could not have changed that much in five years. Keep the witches busy with theoretical magic, leave the practical magic to the men. And the Ministry was backing Miss Granger's humanitarian missions. Hopping Pot had informed him, as a show of reparation after the Final Battle. It was just bad luck that had placed her trajectory directly over the island this time. Or maybe the Ministry had adjusted the usual route to avoid a storm of some sort. He'd have to check with Willykins.

"Mr Zabini!"

Merlin's frozen hairy testicles, did that woman *never* listen?

He rolled off the spar deck hammock, and peered over the ship's rail.

Annie shaded her eyes, and waved him down. "Mr Zabini, the radio wants you!"

He shushed her with a finger to his mouth and then pointed to the dock. She ran to it and he nodded vigorously in approval, before throwing a rope ladder over the side and climbing down it. He joined her at the dock.

"Willykins called for you, sir. You need to call back," Annie whispered, looking up at him with wide eyes.

"Yes, all right. Let's go."

"I need to stay at the lagoon, sir, and help the other girls with the laundry," she whispered.

"You don't need to whisper, girl. Just try not to scream or shout. Unless you need to."

"Yes, sir."

He left her at the lagoon with the other girls, who were using rocks to scrub their socks.

"I'll whistle when I come by again, yeah?"

"Thanks, sir," said Annie as she waved him off.

Miss Granger was sitting at the table when he entered the hut.

"Would you like some tea, Mr Zabini?"

"Yes, please." He sat at the table, across from her. "Nice curtain."

The mended parachute flapped gently in the breeze.

She poured tea into his mug, and placed a packet of Brown biscuits next to it. He fetched some Marmite, and offered a pouch to her. She waved it away with a smile.

"Annie said that Willykins called?"

She took a sip of tea and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. "Yes. About an hour ago."

He stood up to walk over to the radio.

"Please sit down and finish your tea first."

He sat. Only because there was Marmite on the table. And she had asked nicely.

They drank and ate in silence, occasionally giving each other awkward smiles. Actually, Miss Granger smiled. Severus grimaced.

When he was finished, he helped her clear the table. "Well, better make that call now. I wonder what Willykins wants."

Miss Granger cleared her throat and said, "I know."

"You do?" He stopped walking, and turned to face her.

"Yes."

He stepped closer to her. "Well?"

"Well, what?" she asked, linking her hands behind her back.

He heaved a sigh of exasperation. "What did Willykins want?"

"Oh!" She rocked forward on her toes. "Yes. What did Willykins want? I wrote it down. Where did I put that note?"

They looked at the table. No note. They looked at her bunk. No note. The shelves. No note. The kitchen area. No note. The top of the radio. No note.

"Never mind," said Severus. "I'll just call Stump now."

"It won't do any good," said Miss Granger.

He ruthlessly suppressed the urge to throttle her. "Why not?"

"Because Willykins had an errand to run, and couldn't wait."

"So he gave you the message instead."

"Yes, and I wrote it down and I put it somewhere," said Miss Granger, putting a hand in her skirt pocket. "Oh! Here it is. Silly me, I had it all along."

Severus held out his hand and Miss Granger dropped the note into it. He attempted to read it. Gobbledegook was easier to translate.

"I can't read your handwriting."

"Sorry! It's in Gobbledegook. Here, I'll read it."

He handed it over to her.

"Babbity Rabbity, are you there?" she began.

"Skip to the message, please."

Her eyebrows rose in astonishment. "Skip the protocol?"

His right eye twitched in alarm. "Oh, for fu...dge's sake, did you take the rock off that book?" He glanced uneasily at the front door.

"Yes. But only because it seemed cruel," she said. "After a bit, I put it back on."

He nearly laughed. "Horrid, isn't it?"

"I found it interesting," she replied. "Elisabeth begged me to do it."

He couldn't help but grin.

"After she threatened to set it on fire."

He did laugh then. "Please read the message."

Willykins said the supply Portkey is a no go. Luckless was injured and he can't make one right now. The others are out on assignment. He says we'll have to make do for at least three weeks."

"Three weeks?" Severus looked at the supply shelves. "We only have enough food for one week."

"Not to mention a distinct lack of clothing for the girls," added Miss Granger. "If only I could find my bag."

"You said it was small," Severus said. "How much could it hold?"

Miss Granger's eyes twinkled. "With expansion charms? Quite a lot. All the girls' suitcases. My set of reference materials. A two- month supply of tinned food for six people..." she trailed off at Severus's look of amazement.

"Seriously?" he asked.

"I like to be prepared."

"Speaking of which," he said, looking around. "Where is the whisky?"

She didn't answer, averting her eyes.

"Where is my firewhisky, Miss Granger?" It came out as a growl.

Her eyes whipped to his face in an instant and she narrowed them at him for a heart-stopping moment.

"Where you will never find it, Mr Zabini. You should have taken me seriously when I said no drinking."

He gave her a hard glare, and turned on his heel, striding from the hut almost silently. It was a good thing he wasn't wearing robes or his cover would have been blown. Or, more accurately, billowed.

Part Three

Chapter 3 of 5

Out of the frying pan, into the fire. Sometimes, getting away from it all means there's nowhere to go when it all comes to you.

Babbity Git, Part Three

~Searching for Firewhisky~

He stomped down the path past the lagoon in high dudgeon, forgetting to whistle. Not that it mattered, because the girls weren't there. They had probably finished their laundry and were off playing somewhere.

How dare she hide his firewhisky! Who did she think she was?

And that act she was putting on, like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. Who was she kidding? He saw what she did to Marietta Edgecombe her fifth year. Had tried everything in his power to *erase* what she had done to Marietta Edgecombe in her fifth year. The woman was a menace. A certifiable evil genius. He was going to report her to the Ministry when this was all over. If they didn't watch her carefully, the wizarding world would have one heck of a Dark Lady on their hands.

He shuddered to think of it.

Annie slipped by him on the path. "Good afternoon, sir." She was several metres past him before he thought to respond.

"Good afternoon," he yelled without stopping.

"No yelling, sir," Harry said as she sidled by him, holding something behind her back. "Remember?"

"What are you hiding?" he asked. She ran after Annie before he could try to catch her.

He was almost to the dock when he nearly ran into Elisabeth.

"Watch where you're going, sir," she barked.

"Sorry," he mumbled, his mind still occupied by Dark Lady Granger. What would her anagram be? No L, D, or Y. Well, that was a relief.

As if missing letters would stop her. She'd just change her middle name to include them. Hermione Lindy Granger, perhaps.

"Wait a minute!" he shouted. "Those are *my* shirts, dammit!"

Elisabeth had disappeared into thin air when he wasn't looking.

He walked faster now, passing the dock and rounding the bend towards the beach. Towards the ship. Jenny came around the bend from the opposite direction, running straight at him.

She had a coil of rope slung around her neck, and one of his laundry bags tossed over her shoulder. It was almost as big as she was. He put a hand to her shoulder and kept her upright as he stopped her easily.

"Those are my things, little girl," he said, shaking a finger in her face. "Give them back, now."

She bit his finger, stomped hard on his instep and ran off instead.

He fell down and cradled his foot with both hands. "Ow! That hurt!"

"No yelling!" shouted Harry. She sounded a long way off.

Fucking hell.

The thieving little brats had absconded with nearly everything that wasn't nailed down on his boat. The only things they'd left behind were two full bottles of whisky and his books. He wondered if Granger hadn't thought to ask for them or if he had interrupted before they could finish the job. Even the food was gone. And most of his clothes. They had been very busy indeed while he'd been preoccupied with Miss Granger. Not preoccupied *with* Miss Granger. Preoccupied *by* Miss Granger.

He threw himself into the hammock on the spar deck, and stared up at the cloudless sky. Out-Slytherined by a Gryffindor. It was almost more than he could bear. What had happened to his nice quiet vacation? To lazing about, with nothing more than whisky and a Horcrux on his mind?

A flash of movement caught his eye, and he sat up so suddenly he nearly fell out of the hammock. The Lestranges were back. They circled the atoll, apparently looking for something.

Merlin bugging a duck.

He slid down the rope ladder, and raced up the path to the hut, keeping an eye on the Lestranges the whole time. Only Harry was there, sitting at the table.

"Where is everyone?"

Something in his demeanour prompted an immediate answer. "At the stream, washing bedclothes."

"Stay here." He raced out the back door, not waiting for a reply.

Severus looked up at the sky, and his heart almost stopped. The Lestranges weren't there. He hurried to the stream and nearly ran into Miss Granger, who was crouched in the underbrush with the other girls. She held Jenny in her arms, rocking back and forth, while crooning to the frightened girl under her breath. Elisabeth and Annie watched silently, with faces pale and tense.

"You saw?" Severus whispered.

Miss Granger nodded her head.

He stood up and found a shallow place to cross the stream. "I'll be right back."

Miss Granger bit her lip, but nodded again.

He kept to the underbrush, making his way past the tableland to the cliff's edge that faced atoll. He risked looking over the cropping of rock and found that the Lestranges had landed on the atoll. They were pacing its length, reaching out with both wand and hand, clearly trying to summon the rowing boat. Which was tied up to the dock, where he had left it.

Merlin bugging a bloody bastard of a duck.

The Lestranges had never been very observant. They hadn't seen the dock or the rowing boat the last time, he was certain. They wouldn't be bothering with the atoll now, if they had. All he could do was hope their famously short attention spans would kick in soon. Then they would leave. And hopefully report back that this was the wrong island. Maybe they would assume that Voldemort has cast wards here as a distraction from the Horcrux's true location. Not that he thought the Lestranges were capable of such complex thought. But he was sure whomever was in charge would be.

The two men lowered their arms and walked back to their brooms at the northern tip of the atoll. Severus held his breath until they disappeared into the horizon towards Australia, as they had before, and then he walked back Miss Granger and the girls.

The group trudged back to the hut in silence, Miss Granger carrying Jenny because the little girl wouldn't let go of her neck, where they found Harry pacing frantically.

"Tea?" asked Severus. He started making it without waiting for a reply.

Annie came over and opened rat packs for him while he heated the water. Elisabeth and Harry set the table. Miss Granger sat in a chair and cuddled Jenny close. The girl eventually stopped shivering and fell asleep. Severus scooped her off Miss Granger's lap and tucked her into bed.

When he returned to the table, Annie poured the tea. They all drank deeply.

"What are they looking for, do you think?" Miss Granger asked, keeping her voice low.

Severus grimaced. "I'm not sure."

"They're not looking for us, are they?" whispered Annie, eyes wide.

"No," said Severus and Miss Granger at the same time. She laid a comforting hand on Annie's arm.

"If they know we're missing," Hermione said, "They probably think we're dead."

"And any revealing spells they may have tried to cast," added Severus, "Wouldn't work through the wards on the island."

Miss Granger gave him a look that promised an interrogation later.

He was definitely looking forward to that.

He glanced around casually, trying to catch a glimpse of green bottle glass. He was going to need a lot more whisky.

~Making Friends~

Returning to his boat several hours later, with fresh bedclothes in his arms and a full belly, Severus collapsed into the spar deck hammock with a groan.

He'd forgotten to radio Stump about the sighting. Never mind, he would do it in the morning. He wasn't about to haul his biscuits up the hill again that night. Especially when the girls were most likely asleep by now and Miss Granger could badger him to her heart's content, without fear of being overheard by little ankle-biters.

He rolled out of the hammock, and headed below deck. As he turned a corner in the hall to his cabin, his shoulder bumped against the wall, and a panel popped open. Where he hadn't noticed a panel before.

It concealed a closet. An equipment closet, because it held a pedal radio almost identical to the one in the Quonset hut. Maybe the Bulgarian ship was connected to this fiasco somehow after all.

He continued on to his cabin, bumping the walls every few feet. Couldn't hurt to try. But there weren't any more hidden rooms along that hall. He dumped the bedclothes on his bunk, and returned to the equipment closet. Since he'd taken the captain's cabin, there was enough space for the radio in his room. He hefted it up and took it there.

After he made his bed, he twisted open a bottle of whisky and tuned the radio to the correct frequency.

"Babbity Rabbity calling Stump. Are you there, Willykins?"

"Yes, Babbity. Is this line secure?"

"I am calling you from the pedal radio I found on the Bulgarian ship."

Seamus whistled into the mic. "Shite. Why didn't you tell us about it sooner?"

"Willykins, use your lazy-arse brain for once."

"Because you didn't know about it until today?"

"Precisely. I found it in a concealed closet less than an hour ago."

"Ah."

"What? No, excellent job, Severus?"

"Excellent job, *Babbity*."

"Thank you, *Willykins*." Severus paused to take a swig of whisky. "How is Luckless doing?"

"Fine. Just laid up until his magic renews. Dolohov hit him in the back with a sapping curse in Diagon Alley."

"He was always rather fond of those." Severus took another drink from the bottle.

"Still is, unfortunately."

"The Lestranges came back for another visit today."

"Fuck me."

"No thank you."

"Did they spot any of you?"

"They were preoccupied with trying to find the rowing boat on the atoll."

"Uh-oh."

"That's what I thought." Severus paused to take a drink from his bottle. "Fortunately, the Lestranges have a short attention span and a shallow think tank. They gave up after a while and flew off."

"That doesn't mean they won't be back."

"I'm rather hoping they won't. They might just think, with any luck, that this island is a decoy. What I found interesting is that they know the wards are active and they didn't, or couldn't de-activate them from the atoll. Which means that Voldemort made it impossible to do so."

"That is interesting. I'll pass that along to Luckless and Third Brother."

"You do that."

"How is the fair Maiden?"

"She is." Severus paused to drink. "A right pain in the arse."

"How so?"

"She had the brats steal most of my things off the ship," Severus replied.

Seamus laughed. Severus frowned.

"And she has hid all of my whisky."

"She didn't," Seamus said. "No, wait. I'm remembering how she was at Hogwarts. Of course, she did."

Severus drank another swallow.

"You do drink a bit much, Babbity."

"Et tu, Willykins?" Severus asked. "A bit pot, kettle, don't you think?"

"True enough." Seamus cracked open his third beer. Or was it fourth? He leaned over to count empties in the rubbish bin. "Fifth."

"Fifth what?" asked Severus. He tossed his empty bottle out the open porthole and heard it splash in the cove.

"Fifth beer." Seamus adjusted himself. "That reminds me of a song."

"What does?"

"My beer," said Seamus. "Shall I sing it to you?"

"Be my guest."

*"As I went home on Monday night as drunk as drunk could be,
I saw a horse outside the door where my old horse should be.
Well, I called me wife and I said to her: 'Will you kindly tell to me
Who owns that horse outside the door where my old horse should be?'
Ah, you're drunk, you're drunk, you silly old fool, still you cannot see
That's a lovely sow that me mother sent to me
Well, it's many a day I've travelled a hundred miles or more,
But a saddle on a sow sure I never saw before.
As I went home on Tuesday night as drunk as drunk could be,
I saw a coat behind the door where my old coat should be.
Well, I called me wife and I said to her: 'Will you kindly tell to me
Who owns that coat behind the door where my old coat should be?'
Ah, you're drunk, you're drunk, you silly old fool, still you cannot see
That's a lovely blanket that me mother sent to me
Well, it's many a day I've travelled a hundred miles or more,
But buttons on a blanket sure I never saw before.."*

"And what does beer have to do with it?" Severus asked.

"It's called Seven Drunken Nights."

"Ah." Severus was still confused. He shrugged and opened the second bottle of whisky.

"You're interrupting," Seamus slurred.

Severus blinked at the radio. "Sorry."

Seamus started singing again, and by the fifth night, Severus joined in.

*"As I went home on Friday night as drunk as drunk could be,
I saw some boots beneath the bed where my old boots should be.
Well, I called me wife and I said to her: 'Will you kindly tell to me
Who owns those boots beneath the bed where my old boots should be?'
Ah, you're drunk, you're drunk, you silly old fool, still you cannot see
That's a pair of Geranium pots that me mother sent to me
Well, it's many a day I've travelled a hundred miles or more,
But laces on a Geranium pot sure I never saw before."*

After two more rounds, they took a loo break. Severus peed out the porthole window.

"Willykins?"

"Yes, Babbity?"

"Was one of the girls you've loved before Granger?"

"No, sir," said Seamus. "She scares the shite out of me."

"Me too."

"She had Sabre hooked through the nose for a bit. During her wee collapse even. Barking orders at him from her hospital bed."

"Poor sod." Severus had felt pity for Weasley before, but never fond comradeship. It was an unsettling feeling. "She's getting suspicious about the island. I believe she's starting to wonder why there are wards on it."

"You, sir," said Seamus, "are buggered. Well and truly."

"Well and truly," echoed Severus. He stared morosely at the pedal radio. Seamus would know, wouldn't he?

"I'm tired."

"Me too." Severus laid his head down on his crossed arms. He closed his eyes and felt the boat rock him to sleep.

Severus flexed the slits on either side of his throat in concert with his webbed feet and propelled himself across the crystal clear water of the cove towards the coral reef with a silky whoosh. Eddies of water billowed in his wake as he glided through the sunlit shallows.

A hypnotic silvery voice lilted out a giggle as he caught a glimpse of glittery red scales and long mane-like hair just ahead. He kicked out again and his reaching fingers brushed against a diaphanous fin. He chuckled with predatory fervour as the fin jumped slightly and then shivered in delight. He swooped suddenly and caught his Piscean nymph by the waist and murmured, "Tag, you're it," in her perfect shell-like ear.

But she wasn't laughing anymore. She turned to face him, concern filling her bright brown eyes and said, "You shouldn't be drinking. It's bad for your liver."

Severus sat bolt upright in his bunk.

Even in his dreams, Miss Granger just *had* to lecture him.

~All-girl Crew~

Severus stumbled to the galley and was making coffee before he was fully awake.

Wait a tick. Coffee?

He blinked at the mug of dark, fragrant liquid in his hand. The girls had taken all the food, hadn't they? He looked up at the open cupboard to his left. It had been empty the day before, he was certain of it. But now there were packets of coffee and tea, Brown biscuits and Marmite.

Someone was trying to butter him up, perhaps?

He hated toadies. They held the tenth position on his list. Position four in the spring, when his tolerance wore thin as exams drew near. He was convinced Dumbledore had known and that was why he had made him Head of Slytherin House. Sadistic, manipulating old geezer. At least with Voldemort, the *Crucio* had only lasted until one pissed one's self or blacked out. Whichever came first.

Or. They were simply trying to thank him. Dumbledore always said he expected the worst of people.

Because he brought it out of them, he'd replied. "It's my special gift." He startled himself, saying it out loud.

Severus shook off the old memories and systematically searched the ship, tapping on every wall on every accessible deck. There was still some water in the hull, about knee high, that made it difficult to walk around down there. He found two hidden closets, in addition to the one that had concealed the pedal radio.

His new finds did not yield much. One was filled with nautical charts and the other was empty, save a few trinkets, the best of which was a police whistle. He tried it out, and nearly burst his ear drums in the process. It still worked, then.

He went topside and prepared to continue boat repairs. Adjusting the rope ladder, he climbed down until he was perpendicular to the hole and started sanding its ragged edges.

The purse.

Given what Granger had told him, there would've been a multitude of sundries scattered across the island has its magic failed. But there weren't. So the tiny beaded bag was still intact, even having passed through Voldemort's wards. And the Portkey had failed. The common denominator was the strength and scope of magic involved in creating both objects. Both the Portkey and the purse required a certain depth of skill and intent.

The only difference, as far as he could see, was the sex of their respective creators. Which meant that, if his suppositions were correct, that Voldemort had indeed disregarded, nay, had utterly dismissed witches' power.

What. An. Utter. Knobhead.

Peter Pettigrew had been a complete toe rag, but even he had known to watch his step around a powerful witch. Had Bellatrix suspected the shallowness of her precious Lord's regard for her, there would not have been enough left of him to fit in a matchbox, split soul or not.

Severus snorted. And blinked when a small hand holding the neck of a whisky bottle appeared in front of his nose.

A full whisky bottle.

He reached for it. "Thank you."

Jenny shook her head, and yanked the bottle back.

"You want something for it?" he asked.

She grinned at him.

He rummaged in his pockets and pulled out the whistle.

She reached for it.

"Ah, ah, ah," he said, holding it out of her grasp. "We are going to play for it."

Jenny tipped her head to the side.

"Say three words and you win," explained Severus. "Repeat after me. Rhinoceros."

She cleared her throat. "Rhinoceros."

"Elephant."

"Elephant."

"Wrong."

Hey eyebrows shot up her forehead and her cheeks flooded with pink. "What? I was not!"

"Sorry, that was the word. Wrong." Severus slipped the whistle into his pocket.

Jenny hoisted the whisky bottle over her head and threatened to smash it against the edge of the hole.

"All right, all right," said Severus, handing over the whistle. "Be careful with that, you could have hurt yourself."

She set the bottle down carefully on the deck, and skipped off happy as a clam, cradling her new treasure to her chest.

And returned a half hour later, with Elisabeth in tow. Who had Milky Joe tucked underneath one arm.

"He missed you. Shall I set him next to your bottle?"

"Yes, thank you." Severus gave his coconut pal a fond wave.

The girls giggled.

"Can we help?" asked Elisabeth. "We're bored and sick of lessons."

"Yes," Severus replied. "Grab a bucket and start bailing."

A few minutes later, Harry showed up.

"Oh, I love boats! I used to go sailing with my dad and uncles in Poole Harbour every weekend in the spring. What can I do?"

Severus looked her over. "Do you know how to swab a deck?"

"Yes, sir!"

"There's a mop next to the hammock on the spar deck."

"Aye-aye, sir!" In moments, Harry was merrily mopping down the top deck.

An hour later, Annie arrived. "May I help, Mr Zabini?"

"Jenny and I need a hand," Elisabeth piped up, dumping another bucketful into the cove.

When Harry finished mopping the top deck, she joined the other girls below. They formed a brigade, and soon had a rhythm going that produced a fountain of water into the cove.

Then they stopped for lunch, handing an extra rat pack they'd brought to Severus.

"Where is Miss Granger?"

The girls shrugged.

"I think she's looking for food to supplement the packs," said Elisabeth.

"Or looking for her purse," added Annie.

They finished their meal, Severus quietly listening as the girls chattered about their lessons and their lives back home.

Then the girls supervised him as he painted a new name on the stern of the ship.

"Who is Dandelion?" asked Jenny.

Severus dipped his brush back into the paint can. "A seahorse I know."

After that, Harry showed all of them how to repair the rigging and tie proper sailing knots.

A couple hours later, they helped Severus sand the hole and sang the song he had taught them.

"As I went home on Saturday night as drunk as drunk could be,

I saw a man running out the door just after ten past three.

Well, I called me wife and I said to her: 'Will you kindly tell to me

Who was that man running out my door just after ten past three?'

Ah, you're drunk, you're drunk, you silly old fool, still you cannot see

That's the King of England that me mother sent to me

Well, it's many a day I've travelled a hundred miles or more,

But an Englishman lasting past three sure I never saw before!

"Girls!" Miss Granger's voice rang out, full of shock. "It's time to for tea. Leave Mr Zabini alone, and go back to the hut."

The girls groaned as one, even Jenny, but did as they were told.

Miss Granger crossed her arms over her chest. "Mr Zabini, I will thank you not to teach the girls such questionable songs in the future."

"They were just having a bit of fun." He leaned against the ship's hull and stared down at her.

"Fun." Her lips pursed as if she were sucking a lemon.

"Yes. You're not familiar with the word? I'm sure I have a dictionary around here somewhere." He made a show of looking through the hole into the ship.

She huffed so strongly that her fringe fluttered in the breeze. "I do not require a dictionary, Mr Zabini."

"That's good." Severus sneered. "Because you have nearly everything else that was mine."

"Stop interfering with the girls, you git!" Miss Granger yelled, and stomped off towards the path to the hut.

~Fishing Lesson~

He had three days of blessed peace before Miss Granger showed up again, early one morning.

While he was busy fishing.

The girl had a knack for catching him at a disadvantage. She would have made an outstanding Slytherin, in spite of her less-than-perfect pedigree. Which, in Severus's hard-earned opinion, counted for little more than the parchment such folderol was printed on.

He ignored her in favor of catching the fish that had been eluding him thus far. With a triumphant cry, he scooped it up in both hands and threw it onto the rocky part of the beach, where it flopped helplessly, seeking water.

Severus crouched over again, and held his hands underwater in a basket shape, standing both motionless and silent. Another fish swam through his legs and over his hands, only to end up on the shore, suffering the same fate as his brethren.

Satisfied with his haul, Severus waded to shore, where Miss Granger was waiting for him.

"I'm sorry about the other day," she started to say. "It's just that I left the girls in the hut, doing their lessons, and when I came back, they were all gone. I'm afraid I panicked and took it out on you."

Severus waved her apology off. "I understand. Forget it ever happened."

"I can't do that," she replied. "I'm responsible for these girls until we reach Australia. I promised that I would look after them and that no harm would come to them."

"And none has," said Severus.

"You don't know what it's like, do you? Being in charge of young minds, helping to shape what they will be as adults? It's a sacred duty, Mr Zabini, and one mistake could jeopardise their entire future."

Severus snorted.

"Don't you snort at me, Mr Zabini. All you do is sit around, fishing, and drinking..."

"And working on the boat." He reminded her, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I was getting to that! Working on your boat and teaching impressionable young girls bad manners and bad habits and the words to filthy songs! How hard could it be, to do what you do? I'm sure I could catch a fish in half the time you took!"

Severus swept a bow, and motioned with an elegantly turned hand toward the cove. "Be my guest."

Miss Granger pursed her lips and bent over, rolling her trouser...his trouser...cuffs up above her knees. She shoved her...his...shirt sleeves up around her elbows and waded into the cove.

Where had she managed to find agrey shirt?

And then it struck him. She'd cut off his nightshirt at the waist.

He dropped to the sand and sat cross-legged, propping an elbow on one to hold up his chin on that hand.

"I'm looking forward to this," he called out. "My mealtime entertainment has been scarce of late."

"Hush!" she hissed, copying his crouched position. "You'll scare off the fish!"

He chuckled.

She stood motionless and silent for a few minutes, and then brought up her arms in a flailing motion that splashed water into her face. She repeated this series of actions several times.

It never got old.

The tenth time, she flailed so hard that she over-balanced and ended up on her bottom in the water, thoroughly soaking her trousers and shirt.

"I like fish, but they don't like me," she said pathetically, as she stood up.

Severus stood up and waded out to her. "Here, let me teach you how."

He positioned himself behind her, and nudged her gently on the back, so that they crouched together. He took her hands in his and guided them into the correct shape under the water.

As they stood quietly, waiting for a fish to come along, Severus realised several things all at once.

That Miss Granger was a full-grown woman.

She smelled very nice, like jasmine with a hint of green tea underneath.

She had her hair up, exposing delicate ears and a supple neck.

He had always been a sucker for both.

He longed to caress that supple neck with his lips, and nuzzle her ears with his nose.

Her nipples were erect under his old nightshirt. His wet, and now completely see-through old nightshirt.

She was holding her breath and trying to lean back into him without moving.

Which was very bad. Because he was very hard. And young impressionable minds could show up at any moment, getting an eyeful they would never forget.

"Mr Zabini," she whispered breathily, making him impossibly harder. "Are we going to catch a fish?"

"Hmmm?" he enquired absentmindedly, distracted by the demands being issued by his nether region.

"I said, are we going to catch..." She paused to breathe deeply, and his eyes greedily followed the movement of her chest. "A fish?"

Her exhalation bumped him out of his reverie. "No."

"No?" she asked, and tried to turn into him.

He backed away quickly. "No. Not today," he said, striking out for deeper and hopefully, colder water. "Not ever," he muttered to himself.

When he came back from his doggie paddle, she was gone.

Severus made himself scarce for a few days.

And had to avoid fishing, as well.

It seemed certain parts of his body had established very pleasurable associations with the pastime. Which Severus found embarrassing and rather inconvenient.

No to mention horrifying, if he happened to remember that Miss Granger was a former student.

He tried to remind himself of that fact every time he set eyes on the cove. Which was altogether far too often for his peace of mind.

He was afraid he might go insane.

Milky Joe was inclined to agree.

~Snake Bite~

"Mr Zabini! Mr Zabini!"

Severus stuck his head out of the hole he was measuring for wood. "Yes, Harry, what is it?"

He tried not cringe every time he said her name, especially as he had found out the day she swabbed the spar deck that she insisted everyone use it as a homage to Potter.

Or as she put it, "This way, I have the same name as my hero!"

"Come quick!" The girl was hopping from one foot to the other at double speed. "Miss Granger has been bit by a snake!"

He dropped the measuring tape and pencil he'd been holding and jumped through the hole in the hull, wading to the beach as quickly as possible.

"Where is she?" he asked, trying to catch his breath.

Harry grabbed his hand and started running, "At the hut!"

They made it there in record time, and Severus panted heavily while the girls all tried to speak at once, except for Jenny. She simply sat next to Miss Granger on her bunk, holding her hand and petting it.

Severus made a cutting motion with his hands and everyone quieted at once. He pointed at Miss Granger. "What happened?"

"I was picking berries off the bushes that hang over the lagoon with Elisabeth," Miss Granger began.

"And she fell off the tree trunk!" put in Elisabeth.

"Yes, I fell off. So my foot was in the water when something bit my ankle," Miss Granger said.

"It was a long, ugly snake! I saw it!" Elisabeth yelled, unable to contain herself. Severus frowned at her, and she put her head in her hands.

Annie put her arm around Elisabeth and stroked her hair.

"Then we came back here as quickly as possible," said Miss Granger, finishing the story.

He walked over to Miss Granger's bunk and looked at her ankle.

There were two small puncture wounds visible on her skin above the ankle, actually her mid-calf, as if a pair of fangs had sank in and then let go.

"Girls, I want you to go outside for a while." Severus broke apart an empty crate and put it with some crumpled paper in the dry sink. He set fire to it with matches from the rat packs. "Go!" He said again, when the girls didn't move.

"Listen to Mr Zabini, please," said Miss Granger. "I'll be all right."

"But I want to watch," whined Harry.

Miss Granger patted her on the backside. "Go on, Harry."

The girls left the hut.

"But stay close," Miss Granger called after them.

Severus stuck a hunting knife into the fire, sterilising it. Then he scrubbed his hands in the dish bucket. He brought the knife over to her bunk and put a hand on her leg to stabilise it.

She sucked in a breath that was part hiccough.

"Is it painful?" he asked.

Miss Granger swallowed hard at seeing the knife poised over her calf. "Your hand is wet."

"Now, this is going to hurt a little." He moved closer to see better and gripped her leg more firmly.

"You should enjoy that." She bit her lip and averted her eyes.

"Quiet," he growled, and drew a cut in an x motion across each puncture. "You can yell if you feel like it."

Her forehead wrinkled in pain and she closed her eyes. "I don't feel like it." She bit down on her fist.

"I'm all done," he said, setting the knife aside, and gripping her leg again.

She leaned up, hovering over him. "Do you really think it was poisonous?"

"No sense taking chances," he said, "Lie back, this isn't going to hurt." He put his mouth to the incisions, and sucked, periodically spitting out the blood into a trash bin by

her bed.

"Mr Zabini, I want you to know that I appreciate what you are doing," she said.

He squeezed her leg so that her blood rushed to the surface of the wound. "Save it." He lowered his mouth once more, sucking at the wound again, and spitting out the blood.

Satisfied that he had expelled as much poison as possible, he opened the first aid kit, and bandaged her wound.

Then he stood up and went to the pedal radio, turning it on. He pressed the communication button. "Babbity Rabbity here, calling Stump. Are you there, Willykins?"

"Yes, Babbity. What is it?"

"Get Sabre, will you? There's been trouble here."

"Is this line secure, Babbity?"

"No. Now go get him."

There was a momentary pause and indistinct shuffling in the background.

"Sabre here, Babbity." Weasley sounded like he was talking with cotton balls in his cheeks. "What's going on?"

"You scouted this island, correct?"

"Yeah, I did."

"What kind of snakes have we got around here?"

"Is this question for educational purposes, Babbity?"

Severus sighed. "Not as such. Miss Granger ran into one today."

"Bugger!" Weasley breathed. "Is she all right?"

"She seems to be resting comfortably for now," said Severus. "Find out if they're poisonous and what we can do about if they are."

"On it," said Weasley. "Don't be hero and suck out the venom until we know what kind of snake it is."

Severus turned to face Miss Granger, and their eyes met in horror.

He scrambled for the drinking water, and gargled thoroughly.

A few minutes later, Sabre hailed them again.

"Babbity, I have Altheda with me. Plug in the phones, will you?"

"Hang on," Severus said, plugging them in. Miss Granger sat up, concern writ across her face. "Go ahead."

"It's not good news," said Sabre. "We've checked with tropical experts and according to them, there are three types of snakes indigenous to your area. All of them are extremely poisonous. I'm handing the mic over to Altheda."

Very conscious of Miss Granger's eyes upon him, Severus kept his body relaxed, and his face blank.

"Altheda here."

"I'm pretty sure I got all the poison out."

"It can't hurt you orally, Severus. But if the poison was introduced to the blood stream, there's nothing you can do. Even with magic."

"There must be some..."

"The poison affects the neurological systems. The end will come suddenly, preceded by a general numbing sensation and dizziness."

How very déjà vu.

"I see." He refused to look her in the eye. He could feel the tension emanating from her.

"I recommend that you make her as comfortable as possible, including the liberal use of any strong analgesic sedative you might have."

"I'll look around."

"This is no time to hoard the good stuff," said Zabini.

"Tell that to Miss Granger," muttered Severus.

"What was that?"

Severus grimaced at the mic. "Nothing."

"Call us when it's over, Babbity. Good-bye."

Part Four

Out of the frying pan, into the fire. Sometimes, getting away from it all means there's nowhere to go when it all comes to you.

Babbity Git, Part Four

~Drinking Partners~

Severus had been alone for most of his life, and had felt very alone for a great deal of it. Certain moments of despair stood out over others: when his mother died, when he called Lily a Mudblood, receiving the Dark Mark, All Hollow's Eve, killing Dumbledore.

In all those times, he had never felt so helpless.

"It's bad, isn't it?"

He turned to face her at last. "Where's the whisky?"

"Oh, I knew it!" she said, fretting with the hem of her shirt. "I'm going to die and you're afraid I'll take the secret to my grave."

"Whisky is still the best thing for snakebite," he explained, looming over her. "So where is it, Miss Granger?"

"Stop calling me Miss Granger. It makes me sound like a librarian." She pointed to the kitchen area. "It's under the dry sink."

Severus narrowed his eyes and glared at her. "It can't be. I checked there."

"I know," Hermione replied, reclining on her elbows. "Milky Joe told me. I put it there after you looked."

He gave her a hard stare, which she returned in kind, and walked over to the dry sink. Pulling the cabinet door open, he crouched down and saw that there were at least a dozen bottles on the shelf. He plucked one out, opened it, and drank from it.

"Hey," she said. "I thought that was for me."

"Just making sure it was still good." He poured a measure in one of the coconut tea cups.

Crossing the room, he handed the cup to her. "Drink up, it won't hurt you."

She tipped the cup to her lips and drank. And kept drinking.

"Be careful with that," he said, putting a cautioning hand on her arm. "You'll ruin your amateur standing."

"I'm part French, Mr Zabini," Hermione said as she lowered her cup with a sigh. "My relatives started me on wine mixed with water when I was six." She held out her cup for a refill. "But I don't believe in excessive drinking." She knocked back her whisky in one gulp. "Especially in front of children."

"Ah," he said, to humour her. He was still amazed at her deft handling of a beverage that took most wizards years to get used to. Firewhisky had a real kick.

"Did you know I'm a war hero?"

Severus nodded.

"I'm a war hero," she repeated and held out her cup for another refill. He topped it off for her. "So I went to all the Ministry dinners. They had martinis before dinner, white wine with the fish, red wine with the main course, champagne with dessert, cognac with coffee, and port to finish."

He wondered if Narcissa Malfoy organised the menus. Her kind always floated to the top, regardless of guilt. "Sounds divine."

She drank her cup dry and held it out again. He poured a measure in, and looked at the mostly empty bottle. He'd have to open another one soon.

She took a delicate sip that held him transfixed. Until she fanned herself.

"Is it getting hot in here?" she lolled back at a strange angle and raised her bandaged leg to the ceiling. "Ooooo, it's getting hot in here. Isn't it getting hot in here?" She peered blearily up at Severus.

He guided her around to lie on the bed properly again. "Now, you mustn't move so much. Just lie there quietly."

"I bet you think I'm an iceberg."

Severus was mesmerised as she sat up and twisted herself into a pretzel to take a sip from the coconut she held under her knee.

"Do you know how old I am?" she asked.

"No." He wasn't lying. He'd have to stop and calculate it to actually know.

"To tell the truth, I've read more than five thousand books. I keep track of them in a notebook. I speak four languages, including Gobbledegook, but Mermish gives me a headache. I play the piano very well." She wiggled her fingers. "And I cook a brilliant soufflé."

"That's very interesting." He took another drink from the bottle, emptying it.

"Do you know where Sofia is?"

"That's in Bulgaria, isn't it?" he asked, a little unsure.

"No," she said, sitting up straight. "It's in Bulgaria."

He stood up and went to the dry sink to fetch another bottle. On the way back, he noticed the girls watching them in the window. He walked over to it.

"Miss Granger isn't feeling well," he said and drew down the blackout shades.

He sat down by the bed, and filled the cup she held up.

She sipped a little, looking at him over the edge, a half-smile on her lips. "I had a boyfriend once."

"Really?" asked Severus. He wondered where she was going with that random comment.

"He kissed like a fish. Do you kiss like a fish, Walter?" She leaned closer to him.

Walter? Oh, yes. That was him. Walter Zabini.

"I've never kissed a fish," he replied.

She nearly spit out the whisky she was drinking, she was laughing so hard.

"All right, you've had enough," he said trying to take her cup away.

She collapsed back onto the bed, taking her cup out of reach. She raised her bandaged leg into the air and pointed her toes. "Viktor never would have done what you did to my leg."

"With fish lips like his," Severus muttered. "How could he?"

She sat up and put a hand on his shoulder. "I liked what you did to my leg. The last part, I mean," she said earnestly. "Tell me, I want to know. How did my blood taste?"

"Delicious," he said, reaching for her cup again. "Now, come on, you've had..."

"No," she interrupted, pulling her cup out of his hand. "No no no no, I'm being serious. What did it taste like?"

He gave her an exasperated look. "How would I know? I'm not a vampire."

She was slurring her words together. "Wawawas it salty?"

He thought about it for a moment. "A little salty, yes."

A look of horrified dismay passed over her face. "Not too salty?"

"No, it was just right." Severus felt as if he had landed in a perverted version of Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, tears welling in her eyes. "You thought it was too salty, I can tell. You didn't like it."

He glanced over and saw the girls standing in the open doorway. The little snoops. "I liked it."

"Really?"

He stood up and crossed to the door as he spoke. "Yes, I liked it."

She slumped in the bed, looking forlorn. "You're not just saying that?"

"No, it was brilliant blood!" he said, then turned to the girls. "Go play Foxy or something. Go on." He shut the door on them.

Outside on the deck, the girls looked at each other in helpless misery.

Elisabeth clutched her hands into fists at her side. "I'm going to kill that bloody snake!"

She ran off down the path to the lagoon.

"Elisabeth!" Annie called after her. "Come back here!"

~Not a Snake~

Inside the hut, things took a turn for the surreal. Well, the slightly more surreal, in Severus's opinion.

"You're right about me, you know," she said. "I'm no fun. I worry too much about rules and schedules."

"I never said that," he replied. He'd thought it a time or two, of course. But he'd never said it out loud. He had a glass house of his own, on that count.

"I brush my teeth every morning and every night. And if I don't have a toothbrush," she said, dipping her finger into the alcohol in her cup and demonstrating a brushing motion in her mouth briefly. "I use my finger."

He hummed as an answer. What could he say to that, really?

She pressed her wet finger to her cheek. "Oooo, I feel so numb."

"Numb?" he asked, alarmed and showing it. "Where?"

"Everywhere," she said, suddenly frightened. "What does it mean?"

"Oh," he said, trying to soothe her. "You'd better lie down."

"I'm so cold," she blurted. "Why do I feel so cold?"

He covered her with a blanket. She tried to sit up, but he pressed her back down. "You'd better rest now."

"I'm dizzy," she said, closing her eyes. "I'm so very dizzy."

"Just lie still," he said. It wouldn't be long now. Should he tell her the truth?

"Come closer," she said, crooking a finger at him. "So I can tell you something."

He leaned over her. She flipped the blanket down a little and held up her cup. "My coconut is empty."

He refilled it one last time.

"How's about yourself?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "There'll be plenty of time later...I mean, you go ahead."

She lifted her head and took a sip. "What was she like?"

Severus was puzzled. "She who?"

"The lady who drove you to this."

"Drove me to what?" He was even more confused now.

"Drink."

"Oh. There was no lady," he said and realised it was true.

There was one, in the beginning. And even in the end, or what he'd thought was his end. But she wasn't there now. She had left weeks ago.

"She was your wife," Hermione said and giggled for several minutes.

He failed to see what was so funny. "There was no wife."

"From what are you running from, then, hmmm?" Her eyes gleamed at him in the dim light.

"Oh, I'm not running away from anything."

She nodded her head. "There has to be some-some-something."

"Does there?" he asked rhetorically. "The War was hard on all of us. I just wanted to leave it behind."

"I can understand that," she said, hers eyes soft and knowing. She reached up and traced his jaw line and then his nose. "You remind me of someone I knew long ago."

"You told me already," he replied, leaning into her touch. *What did it matter now?* "Blaise Zabini, my nephew."

"No, not him." She shook her head in denial. "You *look* like him. But you remind me of Snape. Professor Snape."

He sucked in a soundless breath. His mind raced for a plausible answer. "Perhaps because I was a teacher too?"

"You were?" She sounded so surprised. But then he could hardly blame her.

"Yes," he said. "In Italy."

He hated himself for lying to her. She was dying. But he had promised *Potter*. And he was aware of the girls listening just on the other side of the door.

She smiled to herself. "And you let me go on about shaping young minds."

"Yes, that was rather amusing," he said dryly. "It doesn't really matter now."

"It makes me feel better about the girls." She drained her cup and he took it from her, setting it aside. "I wish you would tell me what else you are hiding."

Goosebumps ran up his arm like an electric shock. "What do you mean?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "I can feel it, Walter. There is significant and substantial magic on this island."

"The wards are very strong."

"The wards are only part..." He stood up and walked away from her, giving himself a little distance. She sat up and put her hands on her hips. "Part of. Part of it...Oh dear!" She fell back to the bed, eyes closed.

He rushed to her side and gently pried an eyelid back. White. He crossed her arms, and pulled the blanket over her head, leaving her feet bare.

Outside the hut, Elisabeth returned from her expedition to the lagoon, dragging her feet the whole way. In her left hand, she carried a long thin branch of dark wood. It had lighter ridges every few inches, and thorns as well. There were ragged leaves on the twiggy end, obviously water-logged and dusty, having been left to trail along the path behind her as she walked.

"What's that?" asked Annie.

Elisabeth held the branch up for inspection, even as her head hung lower, avoiding the other girl's eyes. "It's the snake."

"But that's not a snake!" Harry exclaimed.

Elisabeth stamped her foot. "It looks like a snake!"

"You ninny," said Jenny.

Annie put a reassuring arm around Elisabeth's shoulders. "You'd better tell Mr Zabini."

Elisabeth nodded, her demeanour that of a prisoner about to march to her doom. "I want to go home."

"He's going to be furious!" Harry chipped in.

"Why?" asked Jenny.

"Because Miss Granger isn't dead," Harry explained.

They all glared at the "snake" as if the whole ordeal was its fault.

Inside the hut, Severus slumped into the chair at the radio, pedaling listlessly for a few moments.

"Stump, this is Babbity Rabbit calling. She's... It's over."

Seamus heaved a long sigh. "I'm sorry, Babbity."

"I have to tell the girls. Stand by, will you? I might need you soon."

"Will do."

Severus dropped the mic, and passed Hermione's bunk without looking at her. Her toes twitched in reaction to the breeze his movement created.

He opened the door, and walked out to face the girls.

"Mr Zabini..." started Annie.

Severus interrupted her. "Just a minute." He closed the door behind him. "Er, will you all come over here, please?"

He gestured to some empty crates grouped near the wall of the hut.

Annie tried again. "Mr Zabini..."

Severus held up a hand to stop her. "No, no, please. There's something I want to tell you."

"There's something *we* need to tell *you*," Annie said.

"I'll go first, all right?" He cleared his throat. "This is very hard to say..."

"Mr Zabini," said Annie. She was getting a bit frustrated.

Severus patted her shoulder. "Please, there's a good girl." He ran a hand through his hair. It felt odd to have it this short. "Now, Miss Granger, whom I guess we all gave a very difficult time to, when she only wanted... Well. Miss Granger has gone away."

"No, she hasn't," said Jenny, petting him on the arm.

"You tell him, Elisabeth," Harry piped up.

"Why me?" Elisabeth muttered mulishly, hiding the branch behind her back.

"Because it was all your fault!" Harry exclaimed hotly.

Severus was puzzled. "Tell me what?" he asked in a short tone.

"It wasn't a snake. It was this," said Elisabeth, bringing the branch out in front of her.

Severus leaned closer to look at it in astonishment. "Well, that's not a snake."

"It looks like a snake." Elisabeth defended herself, stubborn to the core.

Severus took another long look at the branch. "Well, that's not a snake," he repeated, just as stubborn.

"Here," said Elisabeth, handing it over. Severus took it from her. "Watch out for the thorns."

One of them sank into his hand, and he shook it off. "Thank you," he said wryly. He blinked at it twice. "Not a snake," he muttered to himself.

"It looks like a snake," Elisabeth said. She was getting tired of repeating herself. If she had a list of things she hated, it would hold first position.

"No, it doesn't," He said under his breath, considering it. He stood up, and angled it away from his body into the shade from the hut's roofline.

"This looks like a snake!" he announced, conviction enunciated in every word.

The girls followed him as he marched into the hut to Miss Granger's bunk. He flipped back the blanket, and her eyes popped open.

"Is it morning already?" she said in a slur, drunk as ever.

He flipped the blanket back over her head.

"Babbity, we have a minister here to comfort you all, if there's a need," said Willykins from the radio.

Severus picked up the mic. "Never mind that. Miss Granger is alive," he said. He held the branch up to the mic. "The snake is dead."

"What do you mean, Babbity? What's going on?" Seamus said, clearly confused.

He wasn't the only one. Severus tried to unknot the ravel of thoughts running through his mind, and gave it up as a bad job.

"Over and out," he said, and tossed the mic onto the desktop.

He grabbed a bottle of firewhisky from under the dry sink, and handed the branch back to Elisabeth as he went out the door.

He needed to be alone. With whisky.

~Hangover~

Severus was in such a hurry that he skipped the steps, jumping off the deck. He gave his audience a dismissive salute, and started down the trail the led back to the cove.

Jenny's wee voice stopped him cold. "Were you really a teacher?"

He spun around abruptly to face the girls with a hard stare. "Hold up your right hand."

The girls stared back at him like he had transfigured into a blue caterpillar or sprouted two extra heads.

"Come on, do it," he growled. "Raise your right hand."

They glanced at each other, fidgeted a bit, and finally obeyed.

"Now, place it on your heart and repeat after me," he said. "Cross my heart and hope to...well, just swear you won't tell."

The girls looked at one another again.

Harry spoke up first. "Cross my heart and swear I won't tell." Her actions suited her words. The other girls did it as well.

"Now spit on it." They balked, distaste clear in their expressions. "Come on, spit!" he barked.

Harry spit. The rest of the girls spit too.

"The first one to break the pledge will get warts," Severus said, and stomped off to his boat.

Annie shaded her eyes to watch him go. "Do you really think we will?"

"I wouldn't put it past him," muttered Elisabeth.

They all trudged into the hut to make tea and watch over Miss Granger.

The next day, Severus woke up disgruntled and out of sorts, with his mind still a chaotic whirl. He drank three cups of coffee spiked with whisky in quick succession, and went aboveboard to start his day's work.

He consulted the measurements he'd taken before he was interrupted the previous day, and began constructing a patch for the hole in the hull. He tried to keep his mind a blank and his swirling thoughts at bay, but that proved nearly impossible.

Visions of drunken Granger danced in his head, asking him how her blood tasted and if he'd like to kiss her. She was a fascinating creature when intoxicated. The prudish, uptight spinster bound for horrid pink suits and an office full of painted kittens on china plates disappeared, and a whimsically alluring sprite took her place.

He wondered if he'd ever see that sprite again. Not that he wanted to see her again. What he wanted was for Miss Granger and her impressionable young minds to depart forthwith to their original destination, leaving him the hell alone. He wanted his peace of mind back. And his hut. Not to mention his whisky. His clothes they could keep, since they fit so well. He remembered how Hermione looked, soaking wet in his shirt and trousers.

Very well, indeed.

As if summoned, the lady in question stumbled onto the beach and seems to hunch in on herself in the bright sunshine. She shaded her eyes and made her way slowly to the side of the boat, wading through the calm water of the cove. She was wearing his trousers, cuffed to mid-calf, and one of his shirts, the sleeves rolled up six or seven times so that her forearms showed. She was a tiny little thing, all bushy hair and bravado. He always forgot that. She seemed to loom, ever large, in his mind.

He watched her grasp the rope ladder and hoist herself to the top deck, where he stood, waiting for her.

"Good morning," she said, in a near whisper.

"Good morning," he replied, in his normal voice.

She clutched her head and he repressed a smile.

"You needn't shout," she said, wincing at her own voice. "Do I owe you an apology?"

"For what?" he asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

"For anything I might have done yesterday," she explained. He chuckled and she winced again. "What did I do yesterday?"

"Nothing much," he said. "You told me you know Gobbledegook and that you hold your liquor very well."

He smirked at her.

She cringed at the sight; it didn't bode well for her dignity. "I didn't."

"You did." He nodded.

She played with the hem of her shirt. "I had the oddest dreams."

"You did?" He felt compelled to ask.

"Yes," She wrinkled her forehead in concentration. "Seamus Finnigan was there, but I couldn't see him. I just heard his voice. Then a giant snake was chasing me, asking for soufflé. And you told me you were a teacher. Isn't that preposterous?"

"Extremely."

She folded her arms across her chest. "Except that last part really happened."

"Did it?" he asked, hoping to bluff his way through.

"You know it did," she replied, narrowing her eyes at him. "What else are you keeping to yourself?"

"Not much," he pretended to think. "You asked me to kiss you."

She blushed and ducked her head, wincing as she did so. "I did not!"

He moved closer to her. "I don't kiss like a fish, or Viktor Krum," he whispered.

She covered her face with her hands and groaned. "I'm absolutely mortified."

"Why?" he asked. "You had a bit more than prudent, and made a fool of yourself. You're human, like everyone else."

"I hate feeling foolish," she muttered.

"As do I," he said, and toasted her with his mug of spiked coffee.

"I also loathe being lied to," she said, looking him square in the eye. "I know you're hiding something."

"I'm not hiding it." He leaned against the railing and watched her think.

"What are the wards protecting?"

Excellent question, Miss Granger. Twenty points to Gryffindor.

"An object of Dark Magic," he answered.

"What kind of Dark Magic?" her brow furrowed with worry. "Is that why the Death Eaters came here?"

"Yes, they're looking for it," he said. "I am here to keep them from taking it."

She bit her lip. "You're not going to tell me what it is, are you?"

"No."

Tears welled in her eyes. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

"Not right now." He hated Potter more than ever. He'd have to create a new list, just for him. 'Things he hated about Potter.'

She drew in a breath, and wiped her eyes. "Fine. I'll just be going then." She swung a leg over the rail, and climbed onto the rope ladder. "Heaven help you, Mr Zabini, if it gets us all killed."

He watched her trudge across the sand and past the dock. He rather thought death would be preferable to her fury, should she suss out the whole truth before he had an opportunity to confess it to her.

Hermione was too agitated to go back to hut right away, so she kept to the shoreline, walking under the tall brush and through waist-high grasses, until she came to the cliff wall that bisected the island. Turning west, she followed the wall, supposing that it would lead to the lagoon. Not watching where she was going, she continued her argument with Mr Zabini in her head. She was deeply hurt at the lack of trust he had displayed.

She had thought, foolishly it seemed, that the snake bite incident had achieved something of an understanding between them. She had thought that he might start to open up to her now, as he had when she was drunk. But no, she was entirely wrong, as she often was when it came to men. They were another species altogether, wholly unfathomable. Thank Merlin she had only told him about Krum, and not any of the others. Not that there had been many. Just Ronald, Blaise and one night with Neville.

Hermione stumbled over something in the path, and turned to look down at it. Her bag! Picking it up, she tilted her head back, and traced a line up the cliff wall. It was no good. The cliff was too craggy to get a read on where she stood relative to where they had landed on the island. Hermione placed a hand flat against the rocks, and felt a tinge of magic jolt through her arm like an electrical pulse.

Rubbing her hand on her trouser leg to shake off the buzzy feeling, she cocked her head to one side. If she concentrated, she could barely discern the sound of the falls. The vegetation beneath the cliffs was dense, muffling the sound of the water. She started walking again, counting her steps, and reached the lagoon a few minutes later.

She filed the distance in the back of her mind to be consulted later, when she would have time to evaluate it thoroughly. From the position of the sun in the sky, she estimated that it was close to tea time. And she couldn't wait to show the girls what she'd found.

~Dinner With the Girls~

It was Christmas come early in the Quonset hut that evening. The girls had been gratifyingly enthusiastic to have their cherished belongings at hand. Annie squealed with joy over her expensive perfume. Harry had to be reminded several times that cricket bats belonged outside. Jenny had scooped up her teddy bear with shining eyes. And Elisabeth had actually smiled...*smiled*...at the sight of her chemistry set, not a single test tube or beaker broken in the fall. Hermione understood very well how they felt. She had her lovely books back again.

And their larder was full, to boot.

But best of all, she had her wand, as did Annie and Harry. She had tucked them into the beaded bag for safekeeping before the Portkey trip, and had been too ashamed to admit it to Mr Zabini. It was bad enough, hearing the echo of Alistair Moody in her head, shouting "Constant vigilance" at her morning, noon and night.

She was eager to feel the rush of her magic course through her body, but held back, remembering Mr Zabini's admonishment. It wouldn't do to attract unwanted visitors back, when they seemed to have given up.

Hermione dearly hoped they had given up.

With so much to choose from, the girls helped her to create a veritable feast that night for dinner: watercress soup, roast beef, mixed veg with peas, carrots and new potatoes, and Mcvities ginger nuts for afters.

They were just sitting down to eat, when a knock sounded on the door, and Mr Zabini stuck his head in the hut.

"Do you mind if I join you, ladies?" he asked, unsure of his welcome.

Hermione bit her lip, dismayed that she hadn't thought to invite him, despite their disagreement. "By all means, please do, Mr Zabini."

She dished up an extra serving as he crossed to the table and stood there, blinking at the table in shock. His eyes roamed from the full plates and bowls to the well-stocked larder shelves, then back again.

"Miss Granger found her bag!" Harry announced gleefully.

"So I see," Mr Zabini said, and sat down in the chair at the head of the table, where Her...Miss Granger had placed his meal.

"It smells wonderful," he said, picking up his spoon.

Annie beamed at his compliment. "I heated everything up."

Severus took a bite and chewed it thoughtfully. "It's the perfect temperature."

"I'm glad we have lots of food again," said Elisabeth. "But I'm so tired of tinned meat. I'd love to have fresh fish instead."

Annie wrinkled her nose. "I'm allergic to fish."

"Mr Zabini tried to teach me to fish," Miss Granger said, after swallowing a spoonful of soup. "But he never follows through on anything he starts."

Severus inhaled sharply, nearly sucking a bit of beef into his lung. He coughed violently and Harry jumped up to pound him on the back.

"Oh, Jenny! Go get Mr Zabini something to drink," exclaimed Miss Granger.

Jenny ran off and came back moments later, plunking a bottle of firewhisky on the table in front of Severus.

"Jenny!" Miss Granger yelled.

"Why did you bring that to me, little girl?" Severus tried to push the bottle away, feigning shock. Jenny pushed it back. He started coughing again.

"She always brings it to you," said Harry, trying to be helpful.

Severus gave Harry a hard stare. "She does not," he gritted out.

"She does when we help you with the boat," Harry protested.

Severus glanced up at Miss Granger, who narrowed her eyes. "Shut it, Cheeky. Ixnay on the oatbay."

"Oh," said Harry and shoved a spoonful of mushy peas into her mouth.

Miss Granger cleared her throat, and the meal continued in a somewhat pleasant silence.

Once afters were consumed, and the remnants had been cleared away, Severus suggested that everyone show him what had been in Miss Granger's beaded bag. He wasn't particularly interested, but it did create a distraction that effectively subverted Miss Granger's intent to harangue him again. He could see it brewing in her eyes.

The girls led him to the shelves by their bunks, where their treasures were neatly arranged, and showed them off, one by one.

Many, many, many minutes later, Severus began to wonder if a lecture or another argument...even the dreaded persistent questions...might not be preferable to the endless round of show and tell he had subjected himself to. After petting Jenny's teddy bear and sniffing Annie's perfume, he valiantly held back a yawn and plotted how he would make his escape.

And then Harry dangled a pair of battle-scarred horse chestnuts under his nose by the thirty centimetre long ropes they'd been strung on.

"Conkers!" He almost whooped in delight.

Harry grinned like a loon and handed him a strung chestnut.

Miss Granger cleared her throat and caught his eye. "Outside, please."

Harry pelted through the door onto the deck while Severus followed at a slightly more sedate pace.

They faced each other an arm's length away, and Severus raised his hand, letting his chestnut dangle between them.

"You first," he said.

Harry nodded, wrapping some of the sturdy string around one hand, and holding the nut steady with the other. She closed one eye, taking careful aim, and angled the string up, before releasing the nut and jerking her string-wrapped hand down forcefully. There was a sharp crack as her nut struck Severus's.

"Good shot." He looked his nut over. No fissures marred its pristine surface. Yet.

Harry dangled her conker and Severus took aim. His first shot missed. Harry grinned at him. He took another shot, and the resounding crack echoed through the trees, startling a bird into flight.

Harry looked her nut over. "Not a mark," she said, smirking.

Severus dangled his conker again. "Didn't you say your Uncle has a pig farm, Harry?"

Her smirk widened. "Yes, sir." She aimed, and shot. His conker fell to the deck. "Sta...!"

"No stamps!" Severus bellowed and lunged to grab his conker just before Harry's foot came down on it.

Harry beamed at him. "You're very quick, aren't you?"

It was his turn to smirk at her.

Miss Granger stuck her head out the door of the hut. "It's getting dark, Harry. Time to come in and get ready for bed."

"Awwwww," complained Harry. "I haven't won yet."

"Another time, perhaps," said Severus, raising an eyebrow. His eyes gleamed with the fire of competition.

"I'll hold you to it!" said Harry. "But you should know I'm a fiver, sir."

"I'll keep that in mind," replied Severus, suitably impressed. He was only a three-er. If he counted the palm tree matches.

Back inside, Elisabeth proudly displayed her chemistry set. It was elaborate for a juvenile, but she handled it with reverence and expertise. Severus knew exactly how she felt. He ached to feel the steam from a simmering cauldron undulate in clinging tendrils across his face. To hear the gentle snick of his silver potions knife as it sliced fluxweed into a fine mince.

He patted Elisabeth on the head in an awkward manner and looked up to see Miss Granger observing him. There was something in her expression that made his spine tingle with apprehension. He schooled his features to indifference as he stood up and crossed to the table where she sat.

"Is there anything you'd like to show me?" he murmured, lacing innuendo into every word.

She flushed a becoming shade of pink. "Actually, it's time for the girls to go to bed. But I do have some books to show you."

Miss Granger stood up and called for quiet. "Girls, get into your pyjamas and brush your teeth. I will be right outside with Mr Zabini."

"Will he come back and say good night to us?" asked Elisabeth.

Miss Granger gave him a questioning look. "I will," he replied.

She picked up her beaded bag and led the way outside as the girls gathered their nightclothes. She set the bag on a crate, and turned to face him.

"I've been thinking..." she started.

He held up a hand to silence her. "I still can't tell you anything."

"I realise that," she returned evenly. "I'm not pushing. Or, I'm trying not to," she said, with a wry smile.

"All right, then." He sighed. "You've been thinking."

She took a deep breath. "You are guarding an object of Dark Magic. And the island has very strong wards, designed to protect that object." She paused and looked at him for confirmation.

He nodded. She knew as much already.

"You didn't design those wards, did you?"

He couldn't see the harm in admitting that...it wasn't a secret, after all. "No."

"So, if the Death Eaters come back," she said. "You'll want access to it before them, correct?"

He nodded again, a bit wary now. She was slipping into forbidden territory.

She opened her bag and rummaged in it for a few moments. "I have several volumes on wards and dark magic."

He reached for the books she held out to him.

She didn't let go as he grasped them, looking into his eyes earnestly. "I can help you with this, if you trust me."

I do trust you. But I made a promise.

~Teenage Infatuation~

A reverie descended as they stood, holding the books between them.

"We're ready!" Harry yelled, and it broke.

She let go, and they entered the hut.

"Why don't you sing for Mr Zabini?" Hermione suggested.

Annie began, her voice soft and true,

"There were ten in a bed

And the little one said

'Roll over, roll over'

So they all rolled over

And one fell out.

There were nine in a bed

And the little one said

'Roll over, roll over'

So they all rolled over

And one fell out."

Harry sang next, a tad off-key, in a comical warble,

"There were eight in a bed

And the little one said

'Roll over, roll over'

So they all rolled over

And one fell out.

There were seven in a bed

And the little one said

'Roll over, roll over'

So they all rolled over

And one fell out."

Elisabeth took over, somber and sweet,

"There were six in a bed

And the little one said

'Roll over, roll over'

So they all rolled over

And one fell out.

There were five in a bed

And the little one said

'Roll over, roll over'

So they all rolled over

And one fell out."

The three girls sang together, their individual voices blending together surprisingly well,

"There were four in a bed

And the little one said

'Roll over, roll over'

So they all rolled over

And one fell out.

There were three in a bed

And the little one said

'Roll over, roll over'

So they all rolled over

And one fell out.

There were two in a bed

And the little one said

'Roll over, roll over'

So they all rolled over

And one fell out.

There was one in a bed

And the little one said..."

"Goodnight!" Jenny chirped, and fell back on her pillow, giggling.

Hermione was flabbergasted. "Jenny! You said something!"

"She's been talking for days," blurted Harry.

Annie hurried to add, "We've been saving it for a surprise."

"Well, it certainly is," Hermione said, rushing over to give the little girl a hug.

"It certainly is, young ladies." Severus gave the other girls a warning look while her back was turned. It said, quite clearly, "Don't drag me into this."

They nodded in acknowledgment, even Jenny, as she lay back after Hermione's long squeeze.

"Goodnight, all," he said.

"Goodnight, Mr Zabini," the girls chorused.

"Wait a tick," said Hermione, while rustling in her bag. She handed him a long metal cylinder. "A Muggle torch. There's no moon tonight. It'll be too dark to see your way back to the boat."

"Thanks," he said, letting his hand linger over hers for a few moments before taking his leave.

Four days later, while he was having tea with Hermione and the girls, the wards issued a piercing scream. Jenny's hysterical screech blended with it, and Hermione staggered to the little girl's side while holding her hands over her ears. The rest of the girls followed, digging their nails into their hair, as they crouched over, putting their foreheads on their knees.

Severus's stomach roiled, but he managed to make his way to the deck just outside the doorway, still under the roofline. He looked up and saw three Death Eaters circle overhead, retreating far enough that wards stopped howling. Jenny's screaming was muffled shortly thereafter.

The Lestranges were back, and they'd brought a friend. Severus watched as they circled higher, unable to identify the third man. He kept low, creeping off the deck towards the underbrush, trying to get a better look. He was halfway to the stream, monitoring the invaders' flight path, when he heard footsteps pelt across the deck.

Severus held his breath as the three men hovered, listening for additional sounds. The one he couldn't identify lowered his broom cautiously, halting when a whine seemed to build in the air, pressing against Severus's temples. *Carrow*. He was mean, cunning and observant. He also had a penchant for torturing children. Especially girls.

Buggering Fecking Hell.

A movement in the corner of his eye caught Severus's attention, and he swiveled his head to see Annie step out of the underbrush a few metres to his right, jaw agape, gazing up at the men in black robes hovering overhead.

Stealth abandoned, he dove and tackled her, rolling into the underbrush with the shivering girl perched on his chest. He was almost perfectly certain that Carrow had spotted them.

He pulled Annie to her feet, and looked up, swearing under his breath. The three men were tiny black dots now, zooming toward Australia at breakneck speed. He was entirely certain now.

"Come on, I need to get back to the hut," he said, striding ahead impatiently.

She tried to follow and gasped in pain. "I think something's wrong with my ankle."

He swept her up in his arms, and marched back to the hut, depositing her like a sack of meal on the most convenient bunk. He took a moment to glance at the others...they were huddled at the table around Jenny, calming her down...before crossing to the radio and jabbing at the communication button.

"Babbity to Stump. Are you there, Willykins?" he gripped the mic tightly, his neck tense.

"Yes, Babbity. I'm here. Are you secure?"

"No. Get Sabre or Third Brother. Now," he barked. There was a squeal of feedback that made everyone in the hut jump.

"All right, all right. Don't get your knickers in a twist."

What seemed like eons later, someone picked up the mic. "Third Brother here. What's the problem?" Potter sounded like a toad with a head cold.

"We've been spotted, Brother. Get us out of here. Tonight."

"By who?"

"The Lestranges and Amycus Carrow." Hermione didn't quite muffle a horrified gasp. "Ask Seamus about his favourite hobby."

"Shite." There was a pause, and Severus heard a garbled discussion take place. "We can't get you out of there tonight. There aren't any Portkeys made. Only Luckless has authorisation, and he's out on assignment."

"I don't give a shite about authorisation," Severus gritted out.

"You should," said Potter. "The opposition is intercepting the Portkeys that aren't, if you get my drift."

"Fu..." Severus started. Then Hermione caught his eye. "Udgebucket."

"Our sentiments exactly."

Severus thought furiously. "We have the Bulgarian ship."

"That would be unadvisable. You could only leave under cover of night, and you've never piloted one before. The chances of hitting a reef or an atoll are extremely probable."

"We can't just sit here and do nothing," Severus hissed. "They'll be coming back. Soon."

"Luckless will be back in two days. Sit tight till then."

Severus growled in frustration and threw the mic down, stalking out of the hut. He could hear Jenny sobbing and Hermione crooning comforting words to her. He didn't realise Annie had followed him out of the hut again, until she tapped his shoulder.

He spun around and she took a step back at the look in his eyes.

"I.. I... I just wanted to say I'm sorry," she said, twisting the hem of her shirt. "About before, putting us in danger. It was an incredibly thick thing to do."

He muttered a non-word response, not trusting his very shaky tact at that moment.

"I hope you don't think badly of me," she continued, looking up at him through tear-dampened eyelashes.

He sighed. "No, I don't think badly of you."

She took a step closer to him. "I don't think badly of you, either."

"What happened to your hurt ankle?" he enquired, his eyes narrowing.

"It feels much better now," she said, and pursed her lips as her eyes drifted shut. "You can kiss me if you want."

He stared at her in consternation for a moment, completely flummoxed. What was it with the elder females on this island? He looked down at Annie's hands trembling slightly as they hung loose at her sides. *First time*. He'd stake all his Galleons on it.

"May I?" he asked in a purr, sweeping her into a dip. He gazed at her with fervent intensity. "I've been waiting for this moment since we first met."

Annie cringed back, overwhelmed.

"Leave those children behind," he whispered, laying it on thick. "Come to me on my boat tonight. We will live there together, forever. It will be like camping, with romance."

He leered at her.

She pushed feebly against his chest and he set her upright. "Miss Granger doesn't let us out at night," she squeaked before running back to the hut.

He repressed the urge to guffaw until she was out of earshot. Despite the figurative sword hanging over all their heads, he suddenly felt quite... cheerful.

Part Five

Chapter 5 of 5

Out of the frying pan, into the fire. Sometimes, getting away from it all means there's nowhere to go when it all comes to you.

Babbity Git, Part Five

~Angry Words~

That cheerful mood lasted until approximately noon...the best he could judge without a watch...the next day, when Miss Granger arrived at the boat, looking as if she had a

wand stuffed up her bum.

He was in for it now. *Ah, well.* He shrugged to himself mentally, and carried on fitting the wooden patch he'd constructed to the troll-sized hole in the hull. He'd ignore her for as long as possible in hopes that she would just... go away.

That was bloody likely.

Fortunately, the girls had abstained from visiting him that morning. They were probably busy re-acquainting themselves with their possessions. Which was for the best, given the head of steam Hermione had apparently built up.

"Eh-hem."

Speak of the engine...

He turned around as slowly as possible. "Good afternoon," he drawled and took a sip of tea from his mug.

Her brow furrowed and her lips pursed, but she watched him drink without comment, her arms crossed tightly in front of her. "Good afternoon," she answered a touch of resentment clear in her tone.

"What brings you to my ship today, Miss Granger?"

She shifted to place a hand on her hip. "What did you say to Annie yesterday?"

"What did she tell you I said?" he parried.

"Nothing," Hermione admitted. "But she's more jumpy than a Crup on a sugar high. She startles every time the hut creaks. And it creaks a lot."

"Annie wanted to show her gratitude by inviting me to kiss her," Severus explained. "So I came on strong and scared her off."

"You what?" Hermione's complexion was a mottle of cream and puce. "You what!" she repeated, outraged.

"It worked." He offered calmly, and took another sip of tea.

"Too well!" she yelled. She took a deep breath and started pacing the floor in front of him. "She's scared witless. Walter, she fancied you. Young girls are very sensitive, you know."

Severus scoffed. "*Young* girls are sensitive? She'll be fine as soon as she sees me at dinner and I treat her like the others."

"I hope you are right about that," Hermione replied. "Such incidents can scar a girl for life."

He rolled his eyes at her. "Is that all you wanted to speak with me about?"

"As a matter of fact," she huffed, miffed at being dismissed so abruptly. "No, it isn't."

"Can it wait until later?" he asked, setting down his mug to pick up his tools again. "I am busy, you see."

Her eyes narrowed. "No, it can't. You've been putting me off, Walter Zabini, but no more. Not after the visit we had yesterday."

Thar she blows.

She stamped her foot when he didn't answer her. "You infuriate me, you know that? I couldn't sleep last night for fretting, and here you are, calm as a Kneazle. I hate not knowing what's going on!"

He regarded her with amused detachment. It did not make her feel better.

She clenched her hands into fists and resisted the urge to scream like a banshee. "I am being civil, Walter. You will tell me what's going on, this very second, or I will rip your bollocks from your body! I mean it. No more Miss Nice Witch!"

He looked down at her, his face seemingly carved from ice. "I see no difference," he retorted coldly.

She stumbled back on her feet, gasping in shock. For a moment, she looked as if she would faint, before she collapsed onto a pile of lumber. She put her head between her knees, clutching the wood on either side of her so tightly, her knuckles shown white.

He approached her cautiously, confused. His comment had been snide, yes, but not that upsetting, surely? "Are you quite all right, Miss Granger?"

Severus put a hand out to touch her shoulder, and she jumped as if he had burned her. Her head jerked up, and tears ran down her face. "You're alive!" she accused. "You're *alive* and they knew! They *knew*!"

His confusion served him well. "What are you on about, girl?"

She stood up suddenly, and he stepped back in a hurry. She followed, poking him in the chest with an insistent and painful finger. "That's why they always asked if the radio was secure! That's why they always sounded so odd! Oh, those code names are so clever! I should have guessed sooner. Willykins. Luckless. Third Brother. *Sabre*." She snorted in disgust at her own lack of perception. "I'm the one who read those stories to that... traitor! That specy git!"

Hermione halted briefly, and examined his face with an intensity that shriveled his very soul.

Instead of a Dark Lord, they would have a queen, not dark but beautiful and terrible as the dawn! Tempestuous as the sea, and stronger than the foundations of the earth! All would love her and despair!

"You have another radio, don't you?" she asked, bumping him out of his reverie. "Where is it? On this ship?"

He pointed a shaking finger over her shoulder. "In my room."

She grabbed his collar and pulled him along behind her. "Come along, show me where it is."

They entered his room and she crossed to the radio, pedaling and depressing buttons like a professional. She noticed his jaw hanging open and said, "Brown is very accommodating with information if you ask nicely."

He snapped his mouth shut and raised an eyebrow at her.

"It was the only book I had to read for some time," she added primly and pressed the communication button. "Maiden to Stump. Respond."

Willykins answered immediately. "Are they back? Where's Babbity?"

"Not yet and he's right here," said Hermione. "I want to speak with Third Brother." There was a pause and then she added belatedly, "Please."

"He's busy at the moment." Willykins was a very bad liar. Severus winced for him.

Hermione's hair started to crackle into a corona. "Seamus. Get. Harry. Now."

"Yes, sir. I mean, ma'am. Yes, ma'am." He dropped the mic with a thunk that echoed through the radio and made quite a racket in his haste to put distance between himself and Hermione's displeasure.

Severus envied him, just a little bit.

"Hello, Hermione," said Harry, sounding tentative. "How are you?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" She was still very angry, but there was a thick thread of hurt in her voice, too.

The radio fell silent for a few minutes. "We were trying to protect you."

Severus watched every thought and emotion that crossed Hermione's face. *Bad move, Potter.*

"Protect me?" Hermione's voice climbed to a near shriek by the last syllable. She took a couple of deep breaths to calm down. "From what, may I ask?"

Stubborn and idiotic as ever, Potter replied, "From another breakdown, Hermione."

"It wasn't a breakdown, Harry," Hermione shot back. The hurt in her voice had evaporated. "It was just a crying jag."

"That lasted six months!" Harry answered hotly. "What were we to think? To do? Give you a box of tissue and wait it out? Assume that it was never going to happen again?"

Hermione let the silence stretch, too furious to reply.

Harry began speaking again in a calmer tone. "You were assigned to repairs in the dungeon corridor outside the potions classroom. Ron went looking for you at lunch. And found you sitting at his desk, sobbing over a waistcoat..."

"Shut up, Harry!" barked Hermione, not looking at Severus. Her cheeks were pink.

"No!" Harry said. "You wouldn't stop crying. You wouldn't answer our questions. The only thing that made you feel better was..."

Hermione cut him off, suddenly furious again. "You knew! You knew and you didn't tell me! You knew all along, didn't you? You and Ronald!"

"What?" Harry asked, confused. "What did we know? You wouldn't tell us anything..."

"You knew that Snape was alive!" she shrieked.

A moment of quiet, and then, "Oh... that."

She glared at the radio, vibrating with rage. "I felt responsible for his death! I felt guilty about leaving him there to die, alone! I had dittany in my purse, and phoenix tears, and what did I do?"

"You conjured a flask for his memories," Harry replied gently. "We had a mission to complete."

She scoffed at him. It was a bitter sound that echoed in the small room. "And that's not even done yet, is it? How very comforting you are, Harry."

"What did you tell her, Snape?" It was more an order than a question.

Severus cleared his throat, and reached for the mic. Hermione dropped it into his hand and moved aside, hugging herself.

"Nothing, you idiot."

"Then how does she know there's a Horcrux on the island?"

"She figured it out by herself, you twat," Severus sneered. "She is the most brilliant witch of our age, after all."

Hermione grimaced at him and he handed the mic over. "Severus is telling you the truth. You just confirmed my theory. I do hope this conversation is *secure*."

She passed the mic back to Severus and crossed to stand in the doorway.

"This conversation is over," said Severus and dropped the mic on the top of the radio. He turned to Hermione. "What now, Maiden?"

She wrinkled her nose at the code name. "Now, we plan."

~Unwelcome Visitors~

In Severus's experience, planning went two ways:

He sat or stood in a room filled with wizards in black robes and silver masks, who hung on the boss's every word like it was spun from spider silk, agreeing enthusiastically with whatever he said to avoid being tortured. If the boss asked for suggestions, you volunteered as little as possible or suffered the consequences. The Dark Lord had once *crucioed* Pettigrew for supplying the wrong marmalade at a breakfast meeting.

Or, he sat in a room filled with nebbly portraits who couldn't keep their opinions to themselves and hung on the boss's every word like it was spun from spider silk. If the old gaffer asked for suggestions, you volunteered as little as possible, while avoiding both eye contact and lemon sherbets. Minerva McGonagall had confessed to a liking for nude calisthenics under the influence of a Veritasium-infused sherbet once.

Hermione's idea of planning resembled neither experience. Instead, it consisted of a plethora of itemised lists with colour-coded tasks assigned to each individual involved. And a great deal of reading. If she asked for suggestions, you volunteered everything you could imagine, or you suffered the consequences. Severus was not especially fond of cleaning. It occupied position six on his list, no matter what the season. Which is what made it a favourite detention to bestow. Too bad the girls weren't his students.

In short order, the boat was patched, Horcruxes and wards were researched, and immediately unnecessary supplies were packed in the little beaded bag. Hermione had fully informed the girls of their situation, and Severus's true identity, at a late lunch. Even Jenny had taken it in stride, with Hermione's reassurances. All that remained to be done was an afternoon tea and strategy session. And he was running late for it.

"We need to get the ship off the reef," said Elisabeth, as Severus entered the hut.

Jenny poured him a cup of tea, and placed it next to his Brown biscuits and Marmite. He sat down, after putting the parchment map in the middle of the table. Harry anchored it with coconuts at each corner.

"That'll be a fair trick, even if the reef is outside the wards," Severus said, and popped a biscuit in his mouth.

"The reef is outside the wards?" Hermione's brow wrinkled. "Why didn't you use magic to fix the boat?"

He swallowed before replying, "It helps me think. But I'm not sure it's watertight. We'll need a spell for that."

Hermione made a note on her to-do list.

"I know how to read nautical maps," Harry volunteered.

Another note was made, this time on the skills page. "That's excellent news, Harry."

"I'm not sure my distraction spell will travel with the boat once it moves. I didn't link it." He took a sip of tea.

"We should submerge, until we're out of range," said Elisabeth. Jenny nodded enthusiastically. She approved of hiding.

"That's a very good idea," praised Hermione as she wrote it down on a sheet of parchment entitled 'Master Plan.'

"Harry and I consulted the navigation charts," said Severus. "If you sail around the southern tip of the island, the current will help push the ship up the western coast. Then you can anchor parallel to the Quonset hut and submerge."

"And then what?" asked Hermione, tapping her pen against the table.

"I will radio you when it is safe to surface."

Hermione crossed her arms and glared at him. "Leaving you to deal with the invaders by yourself?"

"Not precisely," replied Severus, crossing his arms as well. "Elisabeth and Jenny will help me rig booby traps while you, Harry and Annie lift the boat off the reef."

"How will we do that? It's very difficult to magically lift an object while standing on it. And the wards won't let us do magic." Sure she was right, Hermione looked a tad smug.

"The Portkey you were using when you ended up here," said Severus. "Was it Ministry-issued?"

"Yes, but what does..." Hermione began. Severus held up a hand to hold her off.

"It was wizard-made, correct?"

Hermione nodded. "As far as I know. There are no female employees in the Department of Transportation except the Head's assistant, and she just handles the paperwork."

"When I *accepted* this assignment," Severus said, grimacing slightly, "Potter told me that the island's wards allowed for the innate magic of two wizards. Your bag, a very powerful piece of active magic, didn't malfunction when it passed through the wards, but the Portkey did."

Hermione had looked disgruntled at the Ministry's institutional inequalities. Now, her expression ranged from disgust to anger to malicious glee and back again. "That sexist bastard."

"Language, Miss Granger," teased Severus. "But, precise, nonetheless."

"I don't understand," said Annie. All of the girls were confused. Sometimes, adults spoke in a code they didn't understand. And *they* thought kids were barmy.

Hermione smiled widely. "Mr Snape believes that Lord Voldemort didn't put much faith in feminine power. Which means, girls, that we can do magic."

"And not set off the wards?" Harry asked. She reached for her wand.

Severus held up a hand to stop her. "We should test my theory in increments. Miss Granger, if you will be so kind?"

"My pleasure," Hermione returned, pointing her wand at the coconut teapot. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

The teapot hovered over the table for a few minutes, and the wards did not twinge.

Hermione sent it to the dry sink with the other dirty dishes, filling it with water and soap. She set the dishes to wash themselves. Then, she went out onto the deck, the girls and Severus following behind. She called up a wind that made the palm trees dance and sent a cloud of tropical birds into the air.

Not even a whine or a hint of pressure from the wards.

The girls all whooped and hollered, doing a joyous jig. Hermione joined in for a bit while Severus watched with amusement.

She broke off from the boisterous group and skipped over to him. "We still have one big problem," Hermione said, shaking the hair out of her eyes.

"And what would that be?" Severus asked, reaching out to tuck a wayward curl behind her ear.

She squeaked when his fingertips brushed her sensitive earlobe, and they both froze for a moment, looking into each other's eyes.

"Um..." Hermione cleared her throat and rocked back on her heels. "The wards inside the cave, protecting the Horcrux."

"Oh, yes." Severus breathed deeply through his nose, in an attempt to find focus. "I can show you what they look like."

Hermione beamed at him, and then turned to face the girls, who had settled down onto the crates, watching the grownups with rapt interest.

"Annie, you are in charge while Severus shows me the wards. Please make sure everyone understands their assignments for tomorrow."

Annie nodded, herding the girls back into the hut to look over task lists. Severus led Hermione across the stream and through the underbrush to the lone flowering jasmine bush on the island. He knelt at its base, and Hermione followed suit, peering down through the roughly carved hole in the ground nearby.

"I know I've seen an aura of magic like this before," said Severus when the silence stretched thin between them. "But I can't place where."

"Not around Lord Voldemort?" Hermione asked. Her voice was strained.

"No. That I'm sure of." Severus thought long and hard. "But it might have been in connection with him. It seems all wrong for Hogwarts or Albus."

"Definitely all wrong, I should hope," said Hermione. She looked up at him anxiously. "I read about this aura in *Moste Dark Spells*. It's an Unbreakable Vow. Adulterated by *Avada Kedavra*."

"Intended to kill all but the most loyal," Severus said.

Hermione nodded. "This changes everything."

"No." Severus shook his head. "It doesn't."

She stared at him fiercely until he looked at her. "We are not leaving you here alone, Severus."

He gave her a bemused half-smile. "You won't have to."

~Running from Danger~

The next day dawned bright and sunny, with a pleasant breeze that kept them from overheating, but the ragtag little troop on the island had barely a moment to enjoy the good weather.

After a breakfast of tinned sausages, brown biscuits and orange marmalade with tea, Hermione split the group in two parts.

"Divide and conquer!" she called cheerfully, leading Annie and Harry down the path to the Bulgarian ship, a copy of the parchment map in hand. Xs marked the spots where Severus, Jenny and Elisabeth intended to lay traps for the anticipated intruders. Though the traps were meant to incapacitate and hold their enemies, rather than maim or kill, time was of the essence and they couldn't afford to lose any of it to "friendly fire."

Severus watched them go, while Jenny and Elisabeth organized lengths of rope and tested slip knots. "Keep your eyes peeled!" he called after them.

"No yelling!" Harry retorted.

He crossed his eyes at Jenny and Elisabeth, before motioning to the path at the rear of the Quonset hut that led to the stream. "We might as well start here."

They only had enough materials for ten traps, so locations had been picked with strategy in mind. The hut, though camouflaged, was not invisible and would likely draw attention when discovered. Traps were set on the path to the stream and the path to the lagoon.

The underbrush near the flowering jasmine bush was another prime spot, due to the escape hatch for the cavern below. It was probable that the Death Eaters would know a detection spell or two. Severus was not one to leave things to chance. They set four traps in various locales near the bush.

They then rigged a trap at the mouth of the Horcrux cave, dropping it over the cliffs, measuring precisely as they lowered it, according to the measurements Severus had scouted in a tense trip to the atoll the previous day.

The last three traps were set back from the dock in the surrounding underbrush, spaced widely apart. Severus shared his assumption that the wards preventing the Death Eaters from invading en masse could only be removed by an individual on the island itself. The girls had unanimously agreed that the dock was the most obvious target.

Done with their duty, they joined the others at the cove. They arrived to see much progress had been made. Hermione had removed the spell from the atoll rowing boat, and Harry had constructed a rigging to hold it to the Bulgarian ship. The rowing boat was tied to the dock, ready to be rowed out to the ship. Annie, Hermione and Harry had also lifted the ship off the reef, using *Wingardium Leviosa*.

"Sometimes, simple is best." Annie explained brightly. It had been her suggestion.

They had anchored the ship just east of the reef and south of the atoll.

Hermione was in the process of casting another watertight spell as Severus's team approached the trio standing ankle deep in water on the cove's shore.

She pointing her wand at the ship, tracing its outline as she chanted, *'Aqua Repellenda! Aqua Repellenda! Aqua Repellenda!'*

"Shouldn't you have done that before lifting the ship off the reef?" Severus enquired, tongue in cheek.

Hermione rolled her eyes and Annie responded for her. "Miss Granger did cast it before. She's just being thorough."

"I see my distraction spell has dissipated," Severus commented, in lieu of remarking on Hermione's thoroughness. Merlin help the Ministry when she became Dark Queen. Accountability was a foreign concept to their government, even under Kingsley Shacklebolt's guidance.

Hermione nodded and bit her lip. "As Annie says, sometimes simple is best. I think we need a secret keeper."

"That doesn't work without a permanent location," Severus stated.

"Yes, well," Hermione said, avoiding Severus's gaze. "Harry and I determined the exact latitude and longitude where we'll drop anchor. That should do the trick."

Severus shook his head emphatically. "The girls' safety is paramount, Granger. You can't be stuck in one place when the invasion happens."

"But we're going to be submerged anyway, sir!" Elisabeth protested.

"It's just so they don't have a target, if they pursue you, sir," added Annie.

"It seems I'm outnumbered," said Severus. Every female head nodded with fierce conviction. "I cede to your solidarity, though I do not agree."

At least they would be moderately safe off the island. He had expected an argument from Granger about staying on the ship.

"I need a volunteer to be secret keeper," said Hermione.

A determined look on her face, Jenny stepped forward first.

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked softly. Jenny nodded her head. "Come with us, then."

Hermione walked to the dock, everyone following in her wake. Part way there, she turned around, her brow furrowed. "Someone needs to stay behind, to check that the Fidelius charm is working."

"As in, go to the hut and wait for a radio call of the location?" asked Severus, turning towards the lagoon path.

"Yes, but also to look west out at the ocean as you hike up the path, to try and see the ship," Hermione answered. "I'll cast Fidelius when we get on board. We will be parallel with the beginning of the cliff path once we arrive on that side of the island."

Severus nodded, heading to the lagoon.

"I'm getting hungry," said Elisabeth. "I'll go with Mr Snape and make lunch." She scampered after him.

"Thank you," called Hermione, leading the rest of the group to the rowing boat. "We should be there in less than an hour."

The girls clambered into the boat, and Annie and Harry each took an oar. They reached the ship in short order, and climbed aboard. Hermione performed the Fidelius charm on Jenny, whispering the boat's intended location in her ear.

She also put a charm on Harry's wand to buzz a warning as they approached their destination. Then Harry took the helm, while Annie weighed anchor. They set sail for the west side of the island, Hermione encouraging the breeze magically to hurry them along.

A short time later, Harry's wand vibrated on a pile of nautical maps, sounding like an angry honeybee. "Drop anchor in three," she called.

Annie and Hermione lowered the anchor on Harry's count, turning the bolt of chain wound on a handled spool over smoothly, as one.

Then Hermione went below deck to Severus's room to call the hut.

"Hut, this is ship calling," she said, pressing the communication button.

Severus responded immediately. "This is hut. Have you arrived?"

"Yes," Hermione answered. "Could you see us at all?"

"No," he said. "What's your location?"

"Seventeen degrees twenty-five minutes sixty seconds south, and one hundred sixty-eight degrees twenty minutes sixty seconds east."

"Just a moment," he said. Hermione heard him relay the location to Elisabeth in the background. "She's going to check."

A few moments later, Elisabeth ran back into the hut. "I can see them!" she yelled.

"It's a success," said Severus.

Hermione smiled, even if he couldn't see it. "So I heard."

"Yes, well," Severus said, sounding amused. "Lunch is ready, so come and get it."

"We'll be right there," Hermione replied and shut the radio down.

She climbed the stairs to the spar deck and helped Harry lower the rowing boat to the water. Annie threw the rope ladder over the ship's side, and they climbed down it one by one, Harry leaving last.

"You're a good captain," said Jenny, cuddling into her side, as Hermione and Annie rowed them to shore. They tied the boat to a nearby palm tree and raced up the path to lunch.

After lunch, Hermione took one look at the tired faces surrounding her and suggested a nap. Severus studied at the circles under her eyes and volunteered to take first watch with a pair of Muggle binoculars Hermione produced from her beaded bag.

He left the hut to sit on a crate on the front deck, and raised the binoculars to the sky, scanning the horizon over the atoll.

Severus flexed the slits on either side of his throat in concert with his webbed feet and propelled himself across the crystal clear water of the cove towards the coral reef with a silky whoosh. Eddies of water billowed in his wake as he glided through the sunlit shallows.

His little friends the seahorses named Romaine and Dandelion drifted by, followed by Milky Joe, who winked at him and put a tendril of coconut hair to his pursed lips. Severus crossed his heart in response. He hoped to...

Romaine turned to look at him, her green eyes sad, yet kind. Her leafy branches grew into fingertips, then hands and at last, arms. She waved good bye, tickled Milky Joe under the chin, and glided off in a whirl of bubbles.

Where was Dandelion?

A hypnotic silvery voice lilted out a giggle as he caught a glimpse of glittery red scales and long mane-like hair just ahead, darting in and out of the coral. He kicked out again and his reaching fingers brushed against a diaphanous fin. He chuckled with predatory fervour as the fin jumped slightly and then shivered in delight. He swooped suddenly and caught his Piscean nymph by the waist and murmured, "Tag, you're it," in her perfect shell-like ear.

But she wasn't laughing anymore. She turned to face him, concern filling her bright brown eyes and said, "Severus! Severus! It's my turn to keep watch." Hermione was standing over him, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "Are the inside of your eyelids free of enemies?"

He latched onto her ankle and tugged weakly. "Shut it, missy. I had a long day today."

"We all did," she replied, kneeling next to him on the deck. "But we're ready. Go get some real sleep."

He rose, too tired to respond properly. He gave her a lazy wave and entered the hut, falling headfirst into Hermione's bunk. Her bedclothes smelled like jasmine with a hint of green tea.

~Being Followed~

All that remained were the bedclothes on the bunks and the pedal radio. Even the whisky and his coconut friends had been transferred to the ship, along with everything else, after their afternoon nap.

He had smirked at the look on Hermione's face when she discovered the ship's working heads. *Priceless*.

Later, they ate dinner in near silence, the clang of spoons against bowls and cups echoing oddly in the tunnel-like hut. Elisabeth and Severus did the dishes, while the other girls settled into their bunks with books from the beaded bag. Hermione packed the utensils, dinnerware and every bit of food left in the almost bare room.

"I just have a feeling," said Hermione when Severus shot her a questioning look.

Her 'feeling' was spot on.

Under the light of a full moon, Severus watched a sleek ship round the atoll and head for the coral reef, dropping anchor just short of it. Two figures were lowered in a rowing boat, and they made for the dock in a slow pull. He adjusted his binoculars for a better look.

Amycus Carrow jumped to shore and, touching the Mark on his left arm with the wand in his right, uttered a chant that Severus could not hear, as far as he was from them.

He felt a change in the atmosphere, as though an insistent pressure had been lifted, and watched with grim determination as the other figure jumped onto the dock next to Carrow. It was his sister, Alecto.

Not the best choice for testing lowered wards. Severus was gratified to realise the Death Eaters didn't know everything. It evened the playing field. Except that he had home advantage.

Three more rowing boats were lowered from the ship, each with six figures in them. They were using magic now, for Severus could detect no movement on their spar deck.

Twenty in all. Perhaps a few more than expected, but still a manageable sum, with help from the booby traps. He needed to warn the girls. Thinking of Hermione, flat on her bum in the cove, trying to fish, Severus chuckled quietly.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" he said, under his breath. He tilted his head, eyeing the silvery figure waiting for his command. The doe had departed, it seemed, when Lily left his heart. A new creature had taken her place. The weedy sea horse, Dandelion. He whispered instructions, and it glided toward the hut, keeping low to evade detection.

Severus turned back to watch the three boats draw closer to the island. *Hurry, Hermione. Hurry.*

At the hut, the girls and Hermione were reading quietly when the seahorse Patronus glided through the open doorway and floated to her side.

"Leave now," it said with Severus's voice. "They are here. I will call you when it's over. Be safe." The sea horse melted away.

"All right, girls. You heard Mr Snape, it's time to leave. Get your shoes on, quickly," said Hermione.

She thought of Severus's mouth on her leg and summoned her Patronus. It glided around her on its back, waving narrow front paws in her direction. Her otter wasn't the same, but she couldn't put a finger on what was different. She whispered a reply to it for Severus and hustled the girls out of the hut.

Hermione stopped at the top of the trail to the lagoon and followed the girls' worried stares eastward. They were looking at three rowing boats filled with figures, headed for the island.

"Come on," she said. "We don't have much time."

They skidded down the trail as silently as possible to their little boat. Annie untied the moorings while everyone climbed in, jumping in last. Harry and Hermione rowed to the ship, and Annie held the ladder for Jenny.

Hermione gave Jenny and Harry a hard hug. "You know what do, Harry. Radio Stump and have Jenny give them the ship's location. Then get the ship ready to submerge if needed. Keep a close watch, Jenny. If you see a purple flare, that's your signal to radio Stump again and submerge. Got that?"

They both nodded, and climbed the rope, pulling it up behind them. Annie and Hermione sat down again, preparing to row.

"Wait a tick!" called Harry softly. "Catch this!" She dropped her cricket bat into Annie's outstretched hands. "Hit 'em where it hurts, like I showed you, Elisabeth!"

Elisabeth grinned at her as Annie handed her the bat. "I will!"

They returned to the island.

Hermione double-checked for her wand and consulted the parchment map copy. "They've just reached shore. Severus is hiding in the brush above the mouth of the cave."

"That's the trap that needs to be set off by someone," said Elisabeth. She looped her belt around the cricket bat and checked her pockets for her other supplies.

"Still have your stink bombs?" Hermione asked.

Elisabeth nodded, a gleam of malicious intent in her eyes.

"I know a man who will hire you in six or seven years," said Hermione absently. "Are you ready, Annie?"

"As I'll ever be," Annie replied with conviction. She would not let Mr Snape fight alone.

Hermione looked over the map again. "One down. He walked into a trap by the dock. Nice work, keeping them silent. The traps and our prey."

Annie patted Elisabeth on the back.

"We'd better hide further down the beach. Most of them are coming right for us."

They ran for the coconut palms and ducked behind a fallen trunk, lying flat on their bellies. All eyes were glued to the map, watching the dots move.

"Twelve on the lagoon path," whispered Annie.

Elisabeth pointed. "Two watching their ship."

"Five looking for their missing friend," hissed Hermione. "Oops. Four now. Good job again, Elisabeth."

They held their breath, watching as the largest group approached the point where the path became a trail to the hut. Or headed towards them, in the opposite direction.

The Death Eaters were so close now, the girls could hear them discussing their plans.

"Brother," said a female voice. "Cast the detection charms again."

The girls heard someone murmuring spells too low to hear clearly. Carrow probably didn't trust some of his companions.

"It's still not working," he said, speaking up at last.

Another man spoke. "It's this great ruddy cliff. The rock is blocking your magic. We have to go higher."

Several of the group made sounds of agreement.

"Shouldn't we check the beach?" A lone dissenter called out.

Hermione, Annie and Elisabeth froze in place. *No, no, no, no you shouldn't.*

The female voice spoke again. "What for, coconuts?"

The group surrounding her guffawed loudly. Hermione saw Severus's dot shift out of hiding suddenly. He must've checked the map.

"Plenty of time for that later, Smith," the female said dismissively.

The group trudged up the trail under the girls' watchful eyes and Severus settled back into his hiding spot. One of the group lagged behind the rest. Hermione wondered if it was Smith, turning to look at the beach or if it was another Death Eater, apparently out of shape. Either way, it didn't matter anymore.

"Third one down," Hermione whispered. She pointed to the group of dots that milled about for a moment near the Quonset hut. "I think they're calling for him."

They eased to sitting positions, looking between the map and the cliffs, where the Quonset hut was located.

"Did you see that?" hissed Annie.

Hermione had been watching the map. "No. What was it?"

"A ball of glittering smoke above the cliffs. It stayed still for a minute and then moved towards Mr Snape, fast," answered Elisabeth.

"The detection spell is working. The whole group is following it. We'd better get up there."

They kept low and scaled the trail. At the top, Hermione drew her wand, and Elisabeth led her to the trapped invader. It was Smith after all. Zacharias Smith, to be precise. The arrogant prick. Hermione took a great deal of pleasure in Stupefying him. Just to be safe.

The dots were congregated on the tableland now, all eleven left of the mission team. There were two dots still guarding the ship, and three searching for their missing companions.

"Four down," Hermione whispered as she and the girls crossed the stream near the base of the crater and hid in the overgrown brush nearby. They watched the map as some of the main team dots moved toward Severus. One froze suddenly.

Elisabeth grinned. "Five down," she whispered.

"Five down," Severus echoed to himself unknowingly, watching four dots creep closer to his position. He glanced at the three dots situated near the base of the crater *Stay there. Please stay there.*

The Carrow siblings and their two sidekicks stopped not ten metres from him. Amycus cast another detection spell. The ball of glittering smoke rose in the air and split in two, one half diving over the cliff very near Severus, and the other soared back across the brush to the flowering jasmine bush. Or Severus assumed it did, since he could not see that far through the underbrush.

"Which way, Brother?" asked Alecto.

The cliff, you lazy sod. It's closer.

"The cliff," said Amycus, parroting Severus's thoughts. "It's closer."

~Safe at Last~

"They're at the cliff!" said Annie. She held up the map for Hermione to see.

Elisabeth thought for a moment. "That booby trap should slow them down for at least twenty minutes. We used the magically reinforced rope on it."

"All right," said Hermione, letting her binoculars hang at her neck. "We have about five minutes to do some damage. How good are you at defensive spells, Annie?"

"Top in my class," Annie replied, dropping into a defensive stance.

"Brilliant," said Hermione. "I knew there was a reason I brought you along."

Severus Disillusioned himself, the cold, slimy feeling creeping over his body as he watched the Carrows walk closer to the cliff.

"The detection spell is hovering midway down the cliff face, Brother," Alecto said, her voice triumphant. "Jump, and I will halt your momentum as you fall to the mouth of the cave."

"Why me? Why don't we send one of them?" Amycus asked, pointing at their companions.

"Because, dear Brother, they are new recruits and do not bear the Mark as we do. The Dark Lord's wards will kill them instantly. Now, don't be such a ninny."

Amycus approached the edge of the cliff, looking extremely dubious.

"Go on," Alecto urged. "Remember, the Dark Lord will reward you for your valour."

He crept silently behind them and waited for Amycus to jump. Once he did, screaming girlishly as he fell, Severus picked up the trip wire. The trio at cliff's edge weren't going to look his way.

"*Arresto Momentum!*" cried Alecto, twirling an extra flourish with her wand. "Stop crying, you ponce. Have a little faith in your sister."

Amycus realised he wasn't falling anymore and ceased blubbing.

"You should be even with the cave opening, now!" she shouted. "Can you see it?"

"Yes!" Amycus yelled back. "It's very narrow. I'm on the ledge..."

Severus pulled the trip wire sharply. It made a zipping noise that caught one of the Goon's attention. Severus wordlessly Stupefied him before the goon could open his mouth. He dropped like a rock.

"Hey," said the other goon, pointing to his friend. "Martin just fainted!"

"What," Alecto asked icily, turning to look, "kind of incompetents are you?"

Her brother gave another girlish scream that drew Alecto's attention away before the goon could give her an answer.

"My foot is stuck! My foot is stuck!" Amycus yelled.

Alecto was hacked off. Could these minions do nothing right? "Get it unstuck, then!" she screamed.

"I caaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan't." Amycus whinged.

"You," Alecto said, pointing her wand at the gaping goon. "Get over here."

"My name is Benedict," he mumbled, shuffling over to her side.

Alecto rolled her eyes at him. "All right. Benedict." She gestured at the cliff's edge. "Jump."

"Er..." Benedict said, looking over the edge. "Why?"

"Wrong answer," said Alecto, and she pushed him. Benedict screamed girlishly as he fell, and Alecto muttered something to herself about a lack of qualified help and the good old days. "*Arresto Momentum!*"

Hermione Disillusioned the girls and herself, and they sneaked up on the six goons loitering on the tableland. She and Annie neatly Stunned five goons in a matter of seconds, but the sixth one kept running at them, despite being hit several times. He was quite a bit bigger than his downed companions, and it dawned on Hermione, almost too late, why the Stunning curse didn't affect him.

Annie stumbled back quickly to avoid his grabbing hands, and just before he managed to catch the tail of her shirt, Elisabeth cracked him over the head with Harry's cricket bat. He dropped like a sack of potatoes. She followed up with a blow to his stomach that had him gasping for air.

"*Incarcerous*," said Hermione. Ropes flew out of her wand and bound the winded man tightly.

"Why...?" began Annie.

Hermione cut her off. "He's half-giant, probably. Magic doesn't work as well on them."

"Cricket bats work just fine, though," said Elisabeth.

"Thank Merlin for that," Hermione answered. She cast a Tempus charm. "Come on, we need to disable the Death Eater ship."

They raced across the tableland, crossing the stream in record time, before pelting down the trail to the lagoon. Checking the guards' positions on the map...and noting that another of the search party had fallen victim to a trap, leaving two recruits wandering aimlessly...they crept down the path toward the dock as quietly as possible.

Annie pointed her wand at the smaller guard. "*Stupefy!*" she whispered.

"*Stupefy!*" hissed Hermione a millisecond later, and the guards slumped against each other, falling prostrate on the dock.

They stood on the water's edge and pointed their wands at the Death Eater ship. "*Reducto!*" they cried together.

Meanwhile, Severus was listening to poor Benedict as he tried to free a petulant Amycus from the booby trap at the mouth of the Horcrux cave. It was a variation of a Chinese finger puzzle that Elisabeth had packed with her chemistry set. Amycus, struggling to get out of it, bound his foot more tightly. Only by relaxing his foot, and pushing inward, would he free himself.

"Hey!" Amycus cried with surprise. "If I kick, my foot isn't caught anymore." He kicked again. "It's working!" he crowed.

Unfortunately, Benedict's hand was gripping Amycus's foot, and as he swung it into the cave, he brought Benedict's hand with it, through the loyalty wards, incinerating the poor sod instantly.

Or Severus assumed as much, from Amycus's prolonged "Eeeeeeeeeeeew!" followed by a dozen sneezes.

"Are you free?" called Alecto impatiently, tapping her wand on a nearby rock.

Amycus's voice echoed distantly. "Yes! I'm going in!" Severus could barely hear him now. "It's amazing in here!"

"I want to see!" shrieked Alecto. "I'm going in the other way!" She raced for the blooming jasmine bush, where the detecting spell she'd just cast was hovering. Severus followed her very carefully after wordlessly casting a spell to seal the entrance behind her brother.

Alecto dropped to her knees and peered into the cave. "Where are you, Amycus?"

She failed to notice that her entourage had been Stupefied. It did not escape Severus's attention. He relaxed his guard a little.

"I'm getting closer, Alecto!"

"I can't see past the wards," she yelled. "Is it very far down?"

"Why don't you find out?" asked Severus, and he pushed her into the hole. She screamed girlishly as she fell.

"*Arresto Momentum!*" Amycus cried, in what sounded like the nick of time.

Severus was slightly annoyed. The lazy arse had ruined a perfectly good exit line.

"*Finite Incantantum!*" exclaimed Alecto. "There's someone up there! He pushed me!"

"Do you think it was Martin?" asked Amycus.

Alecto growled in irritation. "No. Martin is far too stupid. Besides, I left him out cold by the cliff's edge. Never mind that. Just grab the Horcrux, and let's get out of here."

Not so fast, thought Severus. He conjured Fiendfyre into the cave and sealed the hole shut with a charm. *That was for* Crucioing *children*. He stood up, dusting off his hands, just as a massive crack of splintering wood echoed across the island. Severus consulted the parchment map, taking in the situation in an instant.

Hermione, Annie and Elisabeth were racing along the lagoon path, two Death Eaters in hot pursuit. Severus let out an angry bellow and sped across the tableland to the waterfall. A running leap hurtled him into the air, and he flailed for a moment before he remembered how to fly. It was a little awkward without his customary robes, but he reached the path head which led to where the rowing boat was moored to a palm tree just before the Lestrage brothers did. He removed the Disillusionment charm and the St. Anthony's medal and spun to face them, wand out in a duelling stance.

"Snape!" cried Rodolphus, hurling a Rotting Hex at him.

Severus dodged to the left and riposted with *Sectumsempra*, producing a shallow cut in Rodolphus's thigh.

Rabastan threw a *Reducto* at him and attempted to run by him toward the beach.

Snape stopped him in his tracks with a *Petrificus Totalus*. He could hear the girls clamber into the boat and the splash of the oars as they rowed away from shore.

Rodolphus grinned evilly and turned on his heel to Disapparate. Severus caught the corner of his cloak in a desperate lunge. When they popped back into the air moments later, Severus looked down and saw Hermione commanding the rowing boat magically, while the Elisabeth and Annie huddled on the opposite bench.

He looked up to see Rodolphus's boot hurtling at him in extreme close up. It caught him on the chin, and he lost his grip on the bastard's cloak. He started to fall, and Rodolphus laughed triumphantly, hovering above him on a broom. Rodolphus dismissed him with a sneer and turned to aim a curse at the rowing boat. Severus caught himself, soaring to intercept the curse with a *Protego*.

Rodolphus howled in disappointment and came at him viciously, throwing curses as fast as Severus could deflect them. This went on for several long minutes before they both began to tire.

Severus saw his chance when Rodolphus paused to wipe the sweat from his eyes. "*Sectumsemptra!*"

The spell slashed across Rodolphus's chest, and blood welled in its wake. Rodolphus stared at Severus in amazement as his broom faltered beneath him. Severus watched the wounded man fall into the ocean. Rodolphus did not surface.

Then he floated wearily to the spar deck of the Bulgarian ship and landed face to face with Neville Longbottom.

"Sir Luckless, I presume," he muttered, wavering on his feet.

Neville glowed with admiration. "Blimey, sir. That was brilliant!"

"Do you have an authorised Portkey on you, Luckless?" Severus asked as Hermione rushed to his side. He slung an arm around her shoulders and drew her in close.

"Yes, sir, I do," Neville answered. The girls surrounded them.

He looked Longbottom straight in the eye. "Set it for England and get off this ship."

"But, sir!" Neville protested. "We were hoping you would..."

"No," said Severus. "I am going to Australia."

The girls cheered, and Hermione hugged him tightly.

"Australia?" Neville asked, dumbfounded.

Severus thumbed his nose at him. "If you don't happen to like it, piss off."

"Severus!" Hermione scolded. "Language."

He tilted her head back gently and kissed her, while Harry wolf-whistled and the rest of the girls giggled madly.

Her eyes were glazed when he drew back several minutes later. "Wow!" she murmured dreamily, "You really *don't* kiss like a fish."

Severus couldn't help but laugh and hug her closer.

~Several Months Later~

They sat alone at the kitchen table, blissfully quiet in the early morning sunshine. The much cherished calm before the gaggle of their girls descended. He took a bite of Marmite-slawed toast and dropped his paper to contemplate her as she stirred sugar into her tea.

"What?" she asked, suppressing a yawn.

"What," he parroted teasingly, "made you feel better during your crying jag?"

She blushed a lovely pale shade of pink. "Oh, no. It's too embarrassing."

Severus just looked at her.

"Oh, all right," Hermione said, rolling her eyes at him. "I would smell your waistcoat."

He smirked at her and brought her hand to his lips for a kiss.

~Author Notes for Babbity Git~

(For all links, remove all spaces before and after slashes [/] and periods [.])

Babbity Git is re-hash of Father Goose, a movie set in the South Pacific during World War II.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father_Goose_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father_Goose_(film))

S.H. Barnett, Peter Stone and Frank Tarloff wrote the screenplay and the original story the screenplay was based upon.

The section titles of Babbity Git were borrowed from the chapter titles of the 2000 dvd edition produced by Republic Entertainment, Inc.

Some dialogue is quoted verbatim or slightly modified from the following scenes: Fishing Lesson, Snake Bite, Drinking Partners, Not a Snake.

Severus's cobbled-together false identity is a partial nod to the main character, Walter Eckland, played by Cary Grant.

"... containing a really rather magnificent collection of chamber pots" GoF, ch. 20 p. 417 (US hrdcvr)

Gryffindor's mace was most likely flanged.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mace_\(club\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mace_(club))

Saint Anthony is the patron saint of lost souls in the Catholic faith. Zabini has an interesting sense of humour. The link is an example of a St Anthony's medal. (I like to think this is the one Severus wears.)

<http://www.sistersofcarmel.com/pics/st-anthony-of-padua-medal-s1566-tn.jpg>

I owe thanks to Mollyssister (for demanding Mermaid fic) and Somigliana (for writing The Silvering Divide) - where I derived the inspiration for Mermaid Lily/Hermione.

All code names were borrowed from The Tales of Beedle the Bard by JK Rowling.

Jackson Pollock was a mid-century abstract artist. He occasionally used bodily fluids to "enhance" his work.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jackson_Pollock

Father Goose is set in the New Hebrides, now known as Vanuatu - Severus's island is a figment of my imagination, but consider it part of this group - an uncharted high island. At approximately 16° 0' S and 167° 0' E.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific_Islands

Information about Quonset Huts.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quonset_hut

Weather information for the South Pacific: The cyclone season took place from Nov 2002 - April 2003 during Babbity Git's timeframe. You'll notice I fudged the dates, location and category strength of Tropical Cyclone Cilla - but really, who could pass up that name? Not me. (Love you, Cilla! You are an awesome cyclone.)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2002%E2%80%9303_South_Pacific_cyclone_season

<http://www.mysailing.com.au/news/weathering-the-south-pacific>

The invention of pedal radios is a fascinating read. I love research.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pedal_radio

http://www.antiqueradio.com/traeger_pedal_07-99.html

<http://tomahawksadventuretravel.blogspot.com/2010/08/aussie-coast-watchers-in-ww2.html>

Talking Radio Manual Brown's lines are quoted directly from Fm 24-6 - Radio Operator's Manual Army Ground Forces - 1945.

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/37287262/Fm-24-6-Radio-Operator-s-Manual-Army-Ground-Forces-1945>

Information about UK Field Rations and Hexamine stoves (Tommy Cookers).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Field_ration

<http://www.mreinfo.com/images/gallery-uk/brat-24-orp-menu.jpg>

<http://www.mreinfo.com/international/great-britain/british-24-hour-ration-packs.html>

History of Scouts in the UK

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Scout_Association

The coconut named Milky Joe was borrowed from The Mighty Boosh (Season 2, episode 6 "The Nightmare of Milky Joe")

http://mightyboosh.wikia.com/wiki/The_Nightmare_of_Milky_Joe

The Palm Court in the Langham Hotel has been serving afternoon tea since 1865.

http://London.langhamhotels.co.uk/restaurants/palm_court.htm

"Who was that lady I saw you with last night?"

"That was no lady; that was my wife." - Joke attributed to Lew Fields & Joe Weber, a vaudeville comedy team of the early twentieth century (not verified).

"Instead of a Dark Lord, you would have a queen, not dark but beautiful and terrible as the dawn! Tempestuous as the sea, and stronger than the foundations of the earth! All shall love me and despair!" - From The Lord of the Rings, Part One: The Fellowship of the Ring, Book Two: Chapter VII, The Mirror of Galadriel (Thanks to Juno_Magic).

"I see no difference." - GoF, ch. 18 p. 300 (US hrdcvr.)

Aqua Repellenda - To make water-tight. Many thanks to Juniperus for the Latin help.

The differences between river otters and sea otters are detailed in this link.

<http://riverotters.tribe.net/thread/cb6affb4-3ab6-4349-9525-45215a57bc24>

Songs included in Babbity Git:

Show Me the Way to Go Home

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Show_Me_the_Way_to_Go_Home

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mw0XSkpHvBE>

Show me the way to go home, I'm tired and I want to go to bed.

Oh, I had a little drink about an hour ago, and it went right to my head.

Wherever I may roam, on land or sea or foam.

You will always hear me singing this song: Show me the way to go home.

Fancy word version of Show Me the Way to Go Home:

Indicate the way to my habitual abode, I'm fatigued and I want to retire.

Oh, I had a little liquid sixty minutes ago, and it went right to my cerebellum.

Wherever I may perambulate, on land or sea or atmospheric bubbles.

You will always hear me humming this melody: Indicate the way to my habitual abode.

Seven Drunken Nights

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Drunken_Nights

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4aRHHw6Sma0>

(thanks to Mundungus42, who mentioned this song in a buzz)

Pass Me By (The theme song for Father Goose)

Lyrics by Carolyn Leigh, Music by Cy Coleman, Sung by Digby Wolfe

YouTube link #1 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-F3vSrJIUQ>

YouTube link #2 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgJccx2i0ho>

British schoolyard songs:

Ten In A Bed

There were ten in a bed

And the little one said

'Roll over, roll over'

So they all rolled over

And one fell out

This continues with:

There were nine in a bed

And the little one said...etc

And finishes with:

There was one in a bed

And the little one said

'Good night!'

Schoolyard games included in Babbity Git:

Conkers - <http://www.videojug.com/film/how-to-win-at-conkers>

One traditional method of cheating at Conkers is to feed the chestnut to a pig. The nut will harden in the pig's stomach juices, and the hardened nut can then be found in the pig's waste.

Foxy - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A707870>

I'd LOVE LOVE LOVE (AND HUGS) to thank Annietalbot. She's an awesome friend, and an awesome Slytherin and I can't tell you how glad I am that she loves Father Goose as much as I do.

I am really, really, really glad.

Last, but not least: a virtual mega ton of thanks and hugs to my betas, Scatteredlogic & Bluestocking79. And to my britpicker, Dickgloucester. You ladies rock for all the right reasons. And probably some of the wrong ones, too. ~winks~

Map of Island

□

Blueprint of Quonset Hut (Not to Scale)

□