

LUG

by Helena Rickman

Sometimes those we think don't love us actually have our best interests in their heart.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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This story was a gift for Droxy for the 2015 LJ sshg_gifffest. Her prompt I chose was "Any SS/HG fic style with Crookshanks in it as a lead character."

Dreamy_Dragon is my amazing Super-Beta in a corset and cape, striking down commas and illicit pronouns everywhere they threaten a peaceful readership.

Be warned - comments on this story on Live Journal reflect many tears and torn emotions.

"Professor Granger, have you taken leave of your senses? Do I look like Hagrid?"

The Charms Mistress stood at the open door to the Potion Master's office. His snide greeting didn't affect her she was already distressed.

Hermione buried her face in the fur of her beloved half-Kneazle. She held him close to her chest and shook slightly as she fought to hold back tears.

"Shut it, Snape. Hagrid's off to France, and you're my only hope." Hermione forced herself past him and stormed into his office.

"Curfew passed two hours ago! Not even hormonal Hufflepuffs are roaming the halls this late! Why are you here to disturb me at this ungodly hour?" Snape followed Granger with a menace as she made herself at home in his domain.

"Snape, Crookshanks is dying!"

SSHG

Lug cracked his eyes open. Smells assaulted him, and the air felt so much heavier than the rest of his lair. There were dead reptiles in here somewhere and maybe some catswort? His female had brought him to a place he had not used for hunting before.

Why the woman insisted upon calling him a strange name had always been a mystery. Humans didn't listen or pay attention to felines. He had told her time and time again, *Lug! My name is Lug!*, but she continued with her insistence of using a name that was harsh to his ears. When it came to listening, the Wild-Haired female was not much different from the other humans he had shared his life with.

Didn't they understand? He could smell their magic. At times it all but reeked from their skin. It was the same scent he remembered from his mother's tongue. She had licked him and imbued her magic on him and his litter mates before they could even see.

Lug, she would purr.

My strong and brave warrior, his mother would whisper.

SSHG

Crookshanks was lying on an empty potions table while Professor Snape observed his shallow breathing. Professor Granger leaned over the other side of the table, her face close to the muzzle of her beloved pet, slowly stroking his thinning coat.

"I'm not really certain, Severus. He was fully-grown when I bought him from the Magical Menagerie. The shopkeeper said he had been trying to sell him for seven years already."

"Seven years, Hermione? Why would anyone keep an unsellable beast that long?" Severus' words held no bite. He knew his colleague was distraught, and he would calm her if he could.

"I was told I wouldn't want him. He isn't a full-blooded Kneazle he's half cat, so most witches and wizards just looked past him. Anyway, that was twenty years ago, so he is well past the average age of cats. I read, though, that Kneazles have a forty to fifty year life span, so I'm at a loss as to why he's so weak."

Severus leaned over the feline and placed his large hand next to Hermione's, joining her rhythm as she softly stroked her pet. "You do realize, Hermione, that since he's not full-blooded, he probably won't make it to thirty years."

Hermione sniffed and tried her best to hold back the tears that threatened to come. "I know. I know. But I always thought it would be the two of us."

SSHG

The day had been wet and cold when Lug was born. His mother had made a nest in the crawl space under Borgin and Burkes that provided little warmth and plenty of bugs. It was a startling way to enter the world, expelled from her warm, soft body into a cold dampness. And as soon as he made his way to her teat, other beasts kept appearing, assaulting him with their shrill cries and persistent nudging.

When the time came for him to open his barely developed eyes, Lug was pleased to see he was larger than his littermates by double. He had been sharing his nest with seven female kits. It wasn't difficult to press them to the side when their mother would return, her stomach full of game and the scent of milk heavy on her belly. Within days he was pushing himself up on his feet, taking unsteady steps to the edge of their litter, exploring his small world while his mother was away.

SSHG

Hermione quietly reminisced as she comforted her beloved familiar. "He was aloof when I first saw him in the shop. I think that's what drew me to him. It always seems we're drawn to those who don't want us."

Severus looked up from Crookshanks and studied his colleague's drawn face. "I've experienced that as well."

"I didn't choose him impetuously. I had my lists. If I were to purchase a pet, it would have to meet the needs of both Hogwarts and my parent's home. They would never have allowed a toad, or even an owl. Plus, a feline would be perfect for this castle. There was no problem with allowing a cat the run of the place. The most appealing trait was independence he could keep himself occupied while I went to class or revised."

Hermione's eyes moistened with the trace of tears as she remembered. "You know, he recognized Pettigrew from the start. His animagus form, that is. He knew that rat of Ron's was no good."

Severus stood from his bent position over the table. "How so?"

"The day before we were to catch the train for third year, I met up with the Weasleys at the Leaky Cauldron.

"Percy had given Scabbers to Ron. Being Head Boy, Percy didn't have the time to care for him anymore. The moment Ron approached me with that rat in his hand, Crooks nearly scratched my arm off trying to break free. I've never seen him as determined since to catch a rodent."

Severus cocked an eyebrow and looked back at the Kneazle. He softly scratched Crookshanks behind the ear. "You're a perceptive beast, aren't you?"

SSHG

The Dark Man had always been deferential. Lug would cross paths with him on occasion while hunting at nights. At first, he was concerned The Dark Man was encroaching on his territory to snatch vermin yet there was always a steady diet of mice. One damp night, The Dark Man allowed Lug to enter his den and warm himself by the fire.

Lug didn't find The Dark Man's lair as comfortable as the home he shared with his female. The rug was threadbare. Worse, when he jumped onto the soft chair near the fire, the sting of magic drove him away. At the earliest opening of the door, Lug stalked out into the cold stone cavern.

That was the first night Lug found the strange rat away from the safe embrace of The Fire Boy. He could smell it before he saw it. The tang of metal mixed with a dirty, musky smell, an odor different from the rats he had devoured in Knockturn Alley.

Quietly turning towards the darker recesses of the dungeon, Lug spied his prey in the corner. He assumed his crouch and inched towards the fat rat. Just before he could pounce, the rodent changed before his eyes into what must have been the ugliest human he had ever seen.

Enough was enough. Lug had seen some strange things in the castle before, but this was unsettling. With a turn to the stairs Lug lifted his bottle-brush tail and made his way to the warmth of the kitchen and hospitality of the elves.

SSHG

"There's nothing I can do, Hermione. Any potion I have might prolong his life another day or two, but it won't stop the inevitable. If you wish, I'll administer some Dreamless Sleep, but the Kneazle will probably never reawaken."

Hermione stood straight, her tear-filled eyes looking at her colleague. "Please," she whispered. "I want this to be as easy as possible."

Severus nodded and retreated to his supply closet.

Hermione leant back over the table and rested her elbows close to Crookshanks. The Kneazle's breath was labored, and his ribcage expanded and contracted with his shallow pants. With a soft stroke of his ear and neck she whispered, "You have been my rock, Mister. I am certain you don't understand me, but I love you more than you will ever know."

As her warm, soft tears began to streak her cheeks, The Dark Man reentered the room.

SSHG

There had been more noise, dust and predatory danger that warm spring night than Lug cared for. His swift gait brought him to a massive hole blasted in the side of Hogwarts. Stopping to assess his surroundings, Lug first felt the magic of the Wild-Haired Female, then watched as she and the other two males ran towards The Tree. An angry Acromantula didn't give Lug an opportunity to follow her, and he dashed off towards the path heading to the town.

Strange creatures roamed the road, the woods and the air. Lug's senses were at their peak, and he was drawn to the old house not far from Hogsmeade. The door was ajar. With no threat noticing him, Lug stealthily slipped into the abandoned building.

The smells of magic, blood and dirt hung thick but underneath those odors a trace of his female's scent lingered. Lug had not seen the Wild-Haired Female in many moon cycles, and he was anxious to find her. He followed her trail up the stairs until he reached another open door. His instincts warned him something was amiss, and he crouched to the floor. Inch by inch, Lug worked his way to a point where he could see the expanse of area.

And there he was. The Dark Man. Even though his senses fought him, Lug made his way towards the human. The squashed nose on the feline twitched as a mixture of venom and strange herbs assaulted him as it emanated from the pallid and sweaty skin of the human.

Even though the air was stuffy, The Dark Man lay shivering, so Lug did what he did best. With cautious efficiency he jumped upon the broad chest of the wizard and began kneading his paws in a steady rhythm over a rapidly cooling chest. When the time felt right, Lug curled himself upon the body and settled to maintain a vigilant watch.

SSHG

"You can do this. It should be you who helps her friend in this final act."

Hermione turned her misty eyes to Severus as he opened his palm to reveal a small phial. Her voice a quiver, she whispered, "Help me? Please?"

Severus unstopped the small vial and set the cork on the table. He took her hand and while holding it palm up carefully poured three drops of the purple liquid upon her fingertip. Placing the remaining potion next to the cork, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and turned the bereaved witch towards the table. He bent over and with a gentle touch pulled back the Kneazle's lip to expose its teeth and gums.

"It will be alright, Hermione. I'm right here. There will be no more pain."

As tears began streaming down her cheeks, the Gryffindor whispered, "Oh, Crooks, you have made me the happiest witch ever. I don't know..." As she rubbed the liquid over his gums, her sorrow overtook her, and she lost her voice.

Hermione embraced her familiar to the best of her ability and nuzzled her face to his neck until she felt the end of the shallow breaths.

"It's done. He's gone." Her sobs overtook her and with a heart full of loss, Hermione turned towards Severus to thank him.

He opened his arms, and she flew into his broad chest, weeping uncontrollably. The Dark Man enveloped the Wild-Haired female with protective arms and pressed a hand to her head, holding her damp face against his beating heart. With comforting actions uncharacteristic of the man, he rubbed her back and planted sympathetic kisses to her shaking crown.

SSHG

The wizard and witch remained embraced until they knew the time had passed. Lug had expended his last magic to ensure the Wild-Haired Witch would be safe, even if he wasn't there to watch over her.

A/N according to www.lowchensaustralia.com, Lug is a Celtic god best defined by his formidable war skills.

No felines were harmed in the writing of this story.