

Ghouls and Bollywoggles

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~ Ghouls and Bollywoggles ~

Hermione drew up the blankets to her chin and stared at the poster of Joey Jenkins affixed to the ceiling directly over Ginny's bed. The renowned Beater for the Chudley Cannons was holding a Bludger in his left hand and appeared to be beaming at Hermione, though she was in no mood to return his toothy grin.

She didn't feel much like smiling at all, in fact. Here she was at the Burrow, lying in Ginny's bed late at night, lamenting the fact she'd been thoroughly duped by her friend and youngest member of the Weasley clan.

Hermione recalled all too vividly the not-quite-concealed mischievous expression on Ginny's face when the latter informed her she'd be sleeping on the couch downstairs, leaving Hermione to spend the night up in her room.

That wouldn't have been so bad in and of itself, Hermione mused. But the knowledge that she had to share the room with Luna Lovegood, of all people, had sent her blood pressure on an abrupt rise.

Hermione sighed. At least she had the bed to herself for now – Luna, as usual, was off on one of her strolls somewhere, and with any luck she'd be asleep by the time the Ravenclaw returned.

As well, Harry's dour demeanour had been troubling her greatly of late; indeed, so far as she knew, he hadn't even bothered to check his OWL scores they'd just received the previous day. Clearly Harry was in dire spirits if he didn't even take an interest in his school grades. Not that Hermione was obsessed with grades, of course. Ron's little comments to the contrary notwithstanding. Besides, there was nothing wrong with taking pride in one's scholastic accomplishments!

Hermione decided to concentrate her mental energies on the coming school year. The studies, the traditional exams, the familiar leathery aromas in the library, replete with its myriad ancient tomes...these were her sanctuaries from the stresses which occasionally threatened to overwhelm her.

It took a while, but the graceful embrace of slumber finally welcomed her. She found herself walking along Hogwarts' main hall, a dozen perfectly excellent quills in hand, each one made of the finest feathers from around the world. She was searching for something, that she knew. But, what exactly?

She spied a small crowd gathered near a bulletin board and drifted over, curious. All were staring at a long parchment pinned up denoting the final year end results.

"Oh, let me through please," said Hermione eagerly as she squeezed past a few unfamiliar students. She scanned the list until she came down to her name.

She squealed in delight. Outstandings all across the board!

"Not too bad," commented Ernie McMillan next to her.

She rounded on him sharply. "Not *bad*?! I've got 'O's in every single subject!"

"So did I," answered Ernie.

Hermione gaped at him in disbelief. "*What?*"

"I did too," echoed Susan Bones just to her left. Several others in the crowd also voiced own perfect marks. Hermione felt her face drain of colour.

"Same here," said a first year Hufflepuff wearing a glowing yellow and pink propellor-topped beanie, to Hermione's horror.

"Is that the best you could do, Miss Granger?" sneered Professor Snape from behind her.

She whirled around to face the black-clad Potions Master.

"What...but...*best*?!"

Snape's pasty features twisted into a smirk.

"Yes, I suppose it is an adequate score," he said dryly, "for a Gryffindor."

Time came to a stop, and Hermione's surroundings blurred. She couldn't believe her ears.

'Adequate??'

She was just about to let go a scream of frustration when her dream world suddenly erupted into a frenzy of sound and motion. Her sight abruptly left her. In the darkness she could feel herself lying on her back, shaking violently, though not by her own motion; something was trying to attack her!

Suddenly realizing she was still in Ginny's room, she quickly kicked at the blankets and scampered back to the headboard with a squeak. The entire bed was shaking wildly. In a near panic, she fumbled through her belongings on the nightstand, sending something clattering to the floor.

Her shaking fingers finally wrapped themselves around the familiar smooth wooden shaft of her wand.

"*Lumos!*" she squealed, preparing to cast an Impediment jinx the moment her attacker was revealed.

Ginny's room was instantly bathed in a soft light. Shadows danced madly along the wall and ceiling.

Hermione sat there atop her pillow, knees drawn up and staring wide-eyed at the bouncing figure of Luna Lovegood as she jumped up and down at the foot of the bed, her long disheveled hair flouncing uncontrollably with every leap.

"Hello," said Luna serenely in between bounces on the creaking mattress.

Hermione could only stare in shock.

Bounce. Bounce. Bounce.

Oh that's it!

"What are you DOING?" demanded Hermione snappily, her patience quickly ebbing.

"I'm...bouncing," said Luna, dividing her response over two leaps.

"Really, I'd never have guessed," commented Hermione irritably. "What in Godric's name – "

"...nine...ten...eleven. There," said Luna, finally bringing her maddening bounding to a halt and dropping down to the floor. "That should do it."

She moved off to the door and removed a plate from atop the dresser. Hermione hadn't noticed it before; Luna must have brought it with her and left it there while she conducted her bizarre routine.

"Are you going to tell me what that was all about?" asked Hermione as she slowly eased herself back down, her pulse slowly starting to reduce to a more reasonable rate. If this was something Luna did at random intervals at night she was determined to put her foot down here and now.

"I was shaking the Nargles off," said Luna vaguely as she carefully put the plate of strange concoctions on the bedside table and picked up the book Hermione had knocked to the floor.

Hermione blinked. "The Nar – the *what??*?"

"Nargles," said Luna, putting the book away and dropping her wand into the top drawer of the night stand before hopping into bed, pushing herself to a sitting position against the headboard. "They don't like shaking beds very much."

"They're not the only ones!"

Luna shrugged and brought her plate over onto her lap, snatching up what looked to be thin banana slices topped with – *something*.

"We're safe for the night though," she said serenely as she deftly popped one of the strange concoction into her mouth. "If there were any, they won't be back for several hours."

"Uh-huh," said Hermione with a raised eyebrow. She sighed and slid further down until she lay flat on her back, pulling the covers up to her chin and trying her best to unwind, a decidedly daunting task given Luna's presence.

In the silence that followed she actually found herself wondering what Nargles were. Or rather, what Luna imagined them to be – there was no question they were one of her seemingly endless collection of ludicrous beliefs. Hermione concluded they must be small creatures, whatever they were, if Luna thought they could somehow concealed themselves within a bed.

Luna took another banana slice. The curiosity was slowly eating at Hermione. She had to know.

"What are you eating?" she finally asked in a monotone.

"Hmm? Oh, I'm being rude," said Luna, proffering her plate down to Hermione's level. "Here you are, help yourself."

"Ah, no thanks," said Hermione hurriedly. "I was just...never mind."

"All right," said Luna with annoying calmness as she proceeded to finish off a few more of the small concoctions on her plate.

They were quiet for a time, though Hermione found she was no closer to nodding off. Though Luna had certainly proved to be a trustworthy companion, there was something decidedly disconcerting about the girl that Hermione couldn't quite put her finger on.

It likely had to do with the girl's general thinking, she mused. Logic did appear to be a very abstract science where the Ravenclaw was concerned, after all.

Even so, Hermione's initial assessment of Luna the previous year had been of a girl given to wild exaggerations and outright fabrications, but she'd gradually come to realize that Luna actually *believed* in everything she said. Which, in many ways, made Hermione wonder if she didn't prefer her earlier (though erroneous) impression. After all, extreme gullibility of the sort Luna displayed could be dangerous...

She decided to test her theory. She needed to concoct some tale, so absurd as to be pointedly ludicrous –

A suitable story quickly came to mind, something that Ron had joked about earlier in the day. It would do nicely, she concluded – Luna hadn't been there to hear it.

"Did you hear," she said, measuring her tone carefully, "they're going to hold an open house at the Ministry next month? Anyone can go tour the Department of Mysteries."

Silence. The only sound in the room was Luna's quiet nibbling on one of her banana treats. Hermione waited for the inevitable excited comment.

But for once, the Ravenclaw kept a suddenly frustrating silence. Hermione chanced a glance up at the girl out of the corner of her eye. She was still nibbling away, and staring curiously at the various Quidditch posters affixed to the ceiling over the bed.

Come on, thought Hermione forcefully. Say something! Do you believe it or don't you?

Luna started humming softly as she gazed up at the Chudley Cannons Beater. It was too much.

"Luna," said Hermione a bit more brusquely than she'd intended, "did you hear what I just said?"

"Yes," came the simple reply, followed immediately by a resumption of melodic humming.

Hermione chewed her bottom lip. She ventured once more.

"Are you going to go?"

"No."

More humming.

Hermione sighed. Such answers were not providing her with the answers she required to form a concise opinion. Why was Luna being so reticent all of a sudden?

Hermione was brought back to the moment at hand when Luna suddenly slipped off the bed and placed her plate atop Ginny's dresser. She took the last few treats in to her hand, but instead of eating them, she went to the window and opened the shutters, carefully placing the banana slices on the window's narrow ledge outside.

She drew back and gazed at the treats for a moment in apparent satisfaction.

Hermione pushed herself up on one elbow to better see what was going on.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving a few treats out for the brownies," said Luna. She turned and hopped back into bed, this time adopting a more traditional bedtime posture and drawing the sheets up to her shoulders.

Hermione gazed over at the now open window. "Brownies?"

"Mm-hmm," confirmed Luna, twisting her neck back and forth before sitting back up and fluffing her pillow.

"What, just plain old Brownies? No Blibbering Something-or-others?" mocked Hermione dryly.

Luna looked at her. "You know, you're being a tad boorish."

"*Me??*" exclaimed Hermione incredulously as Luna flopped down on her back, staring once more at the ceiling.

Hermione gazed down at her in disbelief. "How can you say such thing? Luna, I don't know about you, but in civilized society one doesn't go around insulting others."

"And one doesn't go around telling fibs in order to trick people," retorted Luna surprisingly firmly, her voice losing its familiar dreamy tone. "So I imagine that makes us both uncivilized."

Hermione bit her lip. So Luna *had* seen through her attempted deception, after all. She suddenly felt very embarrassed.

"I...Luna, I'm sorry," she said after several moments of silence. "You're right, I shouldn't have said that."

"All is forgiven," said Luna, the melodic quality of her voice suddenly returning as quickly as it had left.

Hermione reflected quietly on everything she'd said. Difficult as it was to admit, she *had* been a bit snarky. But something about Luna just seemed to bring out her confrontational side. Why was she always trying to pick the girl apart?

Hermione looked at Luna for a moment and shook her head. The Ravenclaw had her dreamy countenance firmly in place, staring up at the ceiling as though their conversation had been simply polite pleasantries.

"How can you just...*do* that?"

Luna turned her head to look at her.

"Do what?"

"Well, just...change directions like that. Aren't you upset?"

Luna stared at her with huge unblinking eyes. "No," she answered. "Not any longer."

Hermione slowly dropped onto her back, her eyes gazing up at the ceiling.

"You have a decided knack for simplifying things," said Hermione quietly.

There was a gentle rustle of hair on linen as Luna turned her own gaze upwards once more.

"I've found that things are only as complicated as you let them be," she said serenely. "So I just don't let them get complicated."

Hermione mulled over that for a moment. "Life is rarely simple," she whispered.

"It's rarely complex," pronounced Luna, though without a trace of argumentativeness.

Well, there you have it, thought Hermione. While she'd spent all her life putting her considerable brain power to work solving the most complex dilemmas, Luna had evidently thought it better to take an entirely different route, simplyfying the problem in order to more easily resolve it. Hermione wasn't sure which method has more merit; perhaps they were both equally valid.

Through the silence she could hear the crickets chirping in the cool night air outside. Even though they were up on the fifth floor of the Burrow and well out of reach of the garden gnomes, she felt a bit uncomfortable with having the window wide open only a few feet away.

"Um...aren't you going to get the window?"

"No, we're quite safe," said Luna. "If there are brownies about, they'll take the treats and leave without prowling into the room."

"Oh...well if you're sure..."

"Yes," said Luna. "And I put some marmalade on top in case there happen to be Leprechauns. There shouldn't be, of course, but they have been known to visit these parts on occasion. Anyway, they're quite fond of the gold colouration."

"You thought of everything, haven't you?" said Hermione, feeling just a bit reassured at Luna's evident lack of concern.

"Well, I usually leave my window open at home, so you get to know these things," said Luna softly.

All was quiet for a time, until a disturbing thought suddenly occurred to Hermione.

"Luna," she said, "did you eat bananas with...*marmalade*?"

There was a soft rustle next to her. "Yes, would you like some? I can go –"

"No! No, that's quite all right, thanks."

Hermione tried her best to block out of her mind the undoubtedly unsavoury taste that two such divergent foods would germinate.

"Well, goodnight, Luna," she said as she prepared to extinguish her wand.

Luna suddenly sat bolt upright.

"May I borrow that for a moment?"

"Er...well, all right..."

Luna took the wand and leaned over the edge of the bed, so far that her long hair covered her carpet slippers and much of the floor around them. She waved the wand back and forth under the bed for a few moments, the moving light casting strange shadows all around the room.

She drew back up, apparently satisfied. "Here you are," she said, handing back the wand and brushing many long locks clear of her eyes.

Hermione arched an eyebrow, hardly daring to believe what she'd just witnessed. "Luna...did you just look for monsters under the bed?"

Luna smiled dreamily. "Not monsters," she said, "just Bollywoggles. There aren't any, though, I'm pleased to say."

"What a pity," said Hermione sarcastically.

Luna caught sight of her shadow on the wall and took an immediate interest in her two-dimensional counterpart.

"Not really," she said, moving her hands together and making various shapes. "They're actually quite unpleasant little creatures. Much like Grillyweegs in their temperament really, though not as bold. Anyway – " she was now projecting an image high up on the wall using her two intertwined hands, " – I'm rather good at this sort of thing. What do you think it is?"

Hermione slowly drew her gaze from Luna to the shadow on the wall. She wasn't much interested in shadow games, but it was certainly better than listening to Luna go on about her various fictitious creatures.

"Um...it's a rabbit."

"Oh, come on," said Luna in disbelief. "Look again. See?"

Hermione did so, though nothing had changed. "It looks like a rabbit to me, Luna – "

Luna sighed. "No, it's an Egyptian hydra," she stated knowingly. "See the heads? Some species have up to twelve, you know. The Manchurian Hydra has eight heads, each with a single eye that shoots out jets of flame."

Hermione looked once again at the decidedly un-hydra-like figure on the wall.

"Fine," she said dryly. "It's a one-headed hydra with a rabbit ears. I'm sure they must exist somewhere in Sweden or some such place."

Luna dropped her hands into her lap. "Well, if you're not even going to try – "

"Honestly, Luna, I just want to get some sleep," said Hermione in exasperation. "That's what I was doing before you woke me up, if you recall."

"Oh...well, all right then," said Luna casually before flopping down on her back, staring once more at the ceiling.

Hermione sighed in relief. She extinguished her wand and tucked it underneath her pillow. She drew up the blanket and rolled over onto her side, facing the wall.

Minutes passed in the darkness. Despite the prevailing silence in the room, only slightly punctuated by the crickets' chatter outside, Hermione found her slumber was being highly elusive. She wondered if it had to do

with a slight twang of guilt she felt at having to put Luna off like that, but goodness, if she didn't know any better, the girl never slept!

But...still...

She took a deep breath.

"Luna?"

"Yes?" a voice answered softly from the darkness.

"I didn't mean to snap at you," said Hermione. "Actually, you woke me up right in the middle of a bad dream, so I suppose I really should be grateful."

Silence.

"Luna?"

"Nightmares are interesting, aren't they?" intoned Luna beside her.

Hermione stared at the blank moonlit wall before her, her grip on her pillow tightening unconsciously. "I don't think so. I'd just as soon do without them."

"I wouldn't," said Luna confidently. "If you can't have nightmares, you wouldn't have dreams either, would you? The good with the bad."

"I can never remember the good ones," said Hermione quietly.

"That's because you worry too much," declared Luna.

Hermione frowned, even though there was no one on her side of the bed to witness her expression. "No I don't," she said defensively.

"Well, Ginny thinks you do," said Luna. "I think she's right, actually."

Hermione's eyes widened as her stomach suddenly lurched. Ginny had been the one person she'd always confided in, and the thought of her talking of such things with Luna Lovegood was altogether discomfiting.

"Really..." said Hermione in a very carefully measured neutral tone, though her insides were churning. She tried her best to avoid letting the concern she suddenly felt show in her voice. "So...what else did she say about me?"

She heard the soft rustle of hair on bedsheets again. Though she faced the wall, Hermione could feel Luna's eyes on her.

"She wasn't speaking of you behind your back, if that's what you mean," said Luna.

A faint, brief creaking sound emanated from the ceiling above them, and Hermione felt Luna's gaze lift from her.

Hermione was quiet, though she itched to know more of what Ginny had said. But she was even more loathe to display such concern to Luna. She waited long moments in silence, hoping, for once, that Luna would elaborate. The Ravenclaw, however, seemed to have frustratingly adopted a vow of silence.

Another low creak, barely audible, drifted down to her ears.

Luna threw the covers off her and jumped down to the floor.

Hermione rolled over quickly, concerned that something might have just entered the room through the open window. Luna, however, was standing next to the bed, looking up.

"What's going on?" whispered Hermione.

"It's up there, isn't it?" asked Luna in a manner that did not suggest a doubt of the answer. "In the attic..."

Hermione suddenly realized what had captivated Luna's attention. The ghoul in the Burrow's attic was right above them, although Hermione had long since become used to the sounds of its nocturnal meanderings in the rickety old attic.

"The ghoul? Well, yes, but there's no danger, Luna," said Hermione, assuming that Luna's reaction had been an indication of uneasiness. "It's perfectly content to stay up there. Mrs. Weasley says it's never come down - "

What Luna did next completely dispelled any lingering impression of nervousness Hermione might have gleaned from the Ravenclaw. Without even waiting for Hermione to finish, Luna slipped into her carpet slippers, retrieved her wand from the nightstand and made a beeline for the door.

"Luna!" whispered Hermione as loudly as she dared. "Where are you going?"

Luna paused at the door and pointed her wand at the ceiling.

"Up there," she said simply.

Hermione gaped at her. There was no way she'd heard correctly...had she?

"Wha – Luna, are you insane? The attic's strictly off-limits, Mrs. Weasley said – *hey!*"

Luna was out in the hall.

"*Lumos*," Hermione heard the Ravenclaw whisper, shortly followed by a pale, yellowish glow from just beyond the doorway.

"Luna Lovegood, you come back here this instant!" whispered Hermione shrilly.

The glow moved off, leaving the room in dark shadows.

"LUNA!"

No response.

"Oh...cricket!" muttered Hermione in exasperation, throwing her feet over the side of the bed. She took a step towards the door and quickly doubled back, reaching under her pillow in a frantic grab for her wand.

In the darkness, she heard the clatter of her wand falling between the mattress and headboard to the floor. She suppressed a curse and dropped down to her hands and knees, groping around blindly until her outstretched hand bumped the shaft, sending her wand rolling further under the bed.

"Blast it!"

There was no time for that now. She jumped up and ran out into the hall.

Luna was there, wand held aloft and staring up at the trapdoor in the ceiling. Hermione was intensely thankful that the ring dangling from the door was well out of arm's reach.

"Luna!" she whispered through clenched teeth, well aware that Fred and George were bunked together with Charlie in the room just below theirs.

The Ravenclaw dropped her gaze to Hermione. "Yes?"

Hermione vigorously waved her to the doorway. "Get back in here!"

Luna shrugged and gazed back up to the trapdoor. "No," she said serenely, "I think I'd rather have a look. I've never seen a ghoul before..."

Hermione was ready to rip her hair out as she made her way down the short, crooked hallway to where Luna stood, steaming all the way. She made a grab for the wand, but Luna was too quick for her, holding it high up over her head. Hermione made another attempt, lunging upwards in desperation, but Luna just managed to keep it beyond her reach, standing on tiptoes.

Hermione drew back a step and glared at Luna. If the Ravenclaw had been just two inches shorter, the wand would be hers by now and this display of insanity would be at an end. But instead, she was faced with an infuriating standoff.

It was high time to end it. She held out her hand.

"Give me the wand, Luna," she said in her most authoritative tone.

"No," said Luna with infuriating calmness. "I'll need it, just in case. Anyway," she continued, looking up once again to the ceiling, "haven't you ever wondered what it looks like?"

Hermione was severely tempted to stomp her foot on the floor, such was her frustration.

"Luna, give me the wand. I'm not asking."

But Luna seemed not to have heard, her gaze still fixed upwards.

"They're becoming quite scarce, you know. Some academics have said they might even disappear entirely in a few generations. Just like the Moops."

"Luna, I'm not going to a – the *what??*"

Luna looked at her. "The Moops."

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "The Moops."

"That's right."

"What in Merlin's beard is a – no, forget I asked," corrected Hermione. She held out her hand once more, emphatically.

"Give me the wand, Luna. I'm not joking. You're not going up there and that's final."

"I am," corrected Luna, "just as soon as I can figure out a way up there without using magic."

Hermione took a deep breath and drew herself up to her full height. "Luna, If you don't give me your wand this instant I'll – I'll..."

She broke off, thinking furiously. Only one viable deterrent came to mind in the short time available.

"...I'll expell you from the DA," she finished. She hated using such strongarmed methods against Luna, but the girl was positively infuriating!

Luna looked at her for a moment and tilted her head.

"That's not very nice, you know," she said calmly. "And besides, you won't."

"I Will!" said Hermione. her ire growing even further now that Luna could see right through her idle threat.

"Well, you're a terrible fibber," said Luna serenely.

They stood there, looking at each other. Hermione's shoulders sagged. Despite all her efforts, she realized there was clearly no way she was going to be able to impose her will on the Ravenclaw.

"Luna, please," she said weakly, "don't do this..."

Luna smiled, her eyes brightening. "You do worry too much, you know," she said. "Besides, ghouls aren't as nasty as most people think. You just have to know how to approach them. Anyway..."

With that, she gazed for a moment at the bannister, then up at the trapdoor, then back to the bannister once more.

Before Hermione realized what she was doing, Luna clambered up atop the wooden railing, her arms swinging about on either side of the bannister as she struggled to maintain her balance.

Hermione gasped. A slip from there on the wrong side would mean falling through the opening in the hackneyed and skewed staircase all the way down to the ground floor.

She took a step forward reflexively. "Luna, get down from there!"

"All right," said Luna. She leaned forward and jumped, just managing to snag the dangling ring beneath the trapdoor with one outstretched hand.

The old trapdoor creaked open, its dry hinges slowing Luna's descent enough so that she landed on the floor with surprising grace, all things considered.

As the door dropped to its most oblique position, Hermione could see it was held in its position by a long chain. A dusty old ladder covered in cobwebs slid down its frame to within a foot of the floor. Hermione shuddered.

"Luna, no!" she pleaded, desperation re-energizing her efforts to dissuade the Ravenclaw from this most foolhardy pursuit.

"Not to worry," said Luna melodically as she tapped her head with the tip of her wand. "You just have to know how to approach a ghoul, that's all. And there are plenty of tricks..."

She put a foot on the bottom rung of the ladder, testing its strength. Though Luna was far from a heavyweight, being a decidedly thin and willowy girl, the ladder had clearly not been used in ages, cracked and splintered by age.

Satisfied they would hold up, Luna turned back to Hermione.

"Are you sure you won't have a look?"

Hermione's eyes were wide as saucers, her face as pale as Luna's.

"You're not g-getting me up there," she stammered.

Luna shrugged. Turning, she proceeded slowly up the ladder.

Hermione swallowed hard and moved closer.

"Oh, this is insanity..."

Luna paused for a moment atop the ladder before disappearing into the attic.

"*Lumos*," Hermione heard from the darkness above her, as Luna's wand came to life. From her vantage point below, all Hermione could see were the crooked and aged rafters, lined with dusty grey cobwebs.

"Luna, good lord, be careful," she whispered.

She heard the Ravenclaw move off slightly from the edge of the trapdoor.

"It's quite cluttered up here," said Luna, her voice barely audible, though giving no sign of nervousness.

"Can you see it?" Hermione called up, straining to see at an angle.

"No," came Luna's response. "There are a few bats up here, though. But it's hard to see with all these cobwebs hanging about. I should have brought a broom – oh, hello."

Hermione's blood grew cold. She put her hand on one of the ladder's rungs.

"Sorry about that, I didn't see you standing there," intoned Luna. "My name is Luna. I was curious to see what a – excuse me, that's my wand –"

Hermione gasped. "Luna???"

"I'll have it back, if you don't mind," said the Ravenclaw. "No, you mustn't gnaw on it, it'll – *hey!*"

The sounds of feet scuffling along the floor drifted down to Hermione. She could see rapidly shifting shadows up among the rafters, mere moments before something came hurtling down the ladder at her.

She jumped back with a squeak. Luna tumbled down the ladder end over end, her long hair flying wildly. She landed hard on her backside with an ignominious *thud!*

"Hmph," said a highly disheveled Luna, brushing her face clear of a myriad roaming strands.

"L-Luna?"

A wand dropped down from above, striking the Ravenclaw squarely on the head, tip first.

"*Ouch!*"

Hermione looked up just as something yanked the chain back up with authority, the ladder sliding back just before the trapdoor slammed back against the ceiling with a resounding bang. A trickle of dust came floating down to the floor.

Hermione crouched down next to the Ravenclaw. "Luna, are you all right?" inquired Hermione with genuine concern. There were no obvious injuries, but –

Luna rubbed the top of her head. "It wasn't very hospitable, was it?" she said, glancing up at the trapdoor.

Hermione took some relief at Luna's reaction. Aside from a bump on the head courtesy of her wand, she seemed to be physically fine, at least.

She heard something – the creak of a door opening! Surely someone must have heard all that racket!

Just then the glow from a wand filled the stairwell from below them. A shadow loomed on the far wall, drawing nearer –

Hermione grabbed Luna's hand and helped her to her feet. "Come on!" she whispered urgently, quickly scurrying back to Ginny's room, Luna in tow. The last thing she wanted to do was be caught just beneath the trapdoor – surely whomever happened to discover them would realize what had happened. How would she explain it??

She closed the door when Luna turned to her.

"My wand's still out there," she announced serenely.

"Ack!"

Hermione opened the door and peeked. The shadow was slowly drawing closer up the staircase – she had only seconds!

She scurried out as quickly and quietly as she could, grabbed Luna's wand and immediately extinguished it before scampering back to the bedroom, closing the door carefully behind her.

"Bed!" she said breathlessly. She was certain anyone coming up the staircase had noticed the glow from Luna's wand.

Both she and Luna jumped into bed, scurrying under the covers into proper sleeping positions. Hermione turned a half-closed eye to the door just as the door handle did a half turn.

"Shh!" she whispered, her heart racing.

The door opened slightly, revealing Molly Weasley in her flowery sleeping bonnet, wand in hand. She froze in the doorway, clearly expecting to see something other than two quietly sleeping girls in Ginny's room. She frowned in evident confusion, slowly panning her wand from one side of the room to another, finally returning her perplexed gaze to the bed. She stared at them for what seemed like minutes.

Hermione stifled a sigh of relief as Mrs. Weasley finally drew back and quietly closed the door.

She couldn't believe her luck. She stirred slightly, and immediately froze as the door re-opened sharply. Mrs. Weasley quickly re-appeared in the doorway, shining her wand directly at the bed. Luna's hand grabbed Hermione's under the sheets.

Hermione almost choked as she swallowed a squeak of surprise. She desperately hoped that her slight movement hadn't been detected.

Mrs. Weasley looked almost dissatisfied that her ruse had apparently failed. Giving one last glance around the room, she closed the door once more. This time Hermione waited to hear the telltale creaking of the floorboards as the Weasley matriarch slowly made her way back down the stairs. Only then did she slowly raise her head.

"I think she's gone," she whispered.

She felt Luna's shoulders shake slightly.

"It's not funny!"

A giggle was produced from the Ravenclaw.

"Oh...just stuff it!" blurted Hermione, flipping over onto her back and staring up into the darkness. To her shock, she found herself starting to giggle right along with Luna.

"All that," twittered Luna, "and you never got to see the ghoul."

"I didn't...*want* to see it!" countered Hermione in between shaking chortles.

"Want to go back?" suggested Luna airily.

"Don't you dare!" said Hermione sharply. "I've had...enough excitement...for one night!"

They both giggled in the darkness.

"Well," said Luna, her voice tinged with merriment, "there's always tomorrow night..."

Hermione pressed her hands to her forehead and groaned.

"Oh, Merlin," she said with false plaintiveness.

As she lay there, Hermione did not feel at all tired.

"So tell me," she said conversationally, "about these Bollywoggles..."