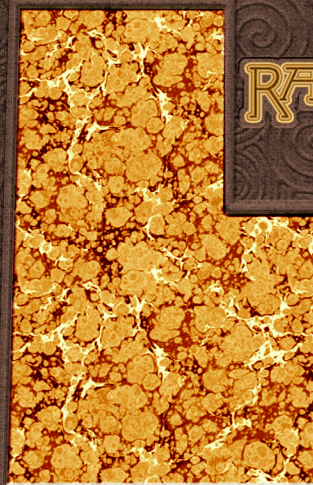


AN ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION EDITION

YET ANOTHER SNAPE MEETS THE DURSLEYS STORY

BY
RABBIT



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THE OWL

SUMMARY: Snape gets a desperate summons to Privet Drive, but he doesn't find what he's expecting to find.

THE MOUNTAINTOP was meant to be desolate.

It had been desolate in February, when he'd first found this place. But now the snow and ice had melted away, revealing wind-flattened trees, scrubby grass, and obstinately blossoming flowers. The wind wasn't nearly as brisk as it had been, and in February he hadn't been treated to the contented grunting of a marmot, grubbing for whatever food it could find so high above tree line.

The man in the black cloak stood on the narrow ledge above the steepest drop on the mountain and wished that he'd stayed down among the thunderstorms in the south of the country. At least in Wales there hadn't been any Muggles coming up the mountainside bedecked in anoraks and clatterboots and hauling more equipment than they'd need for an afternoon in the Himalayas. By the sound of it, they'd be coming around the shoulder of the mountain in five minutes more, and he'd have to decide whether to bespell himself not to be noticed or find somewhere bleaker.

It would have to be the Orkneys.

He grimaced. He hated the Orkneys. Too much salt spray, leaving his cloak sodden and rimed with white stains. And it was too close to Azkaban for comfort.

The spell, then. He pulled out his wand, preparing to cast the spell that would make the Muggles look right past him, when he noticed a small gray patch of feathers laboring its way up the mountain.

He froze. No one knew he was here. Not even Albus Dumbledore. And as many places as he'd Apparated over the last three days, it would take a very powerful wizard to direct an owl to find him. Powerful...

...or desperate.

The tiny owl pumped its wings all the harder when it realized that he was waiting for it, and came to the hand he reluctantly extended, depositing a twist of paper into it before clutching gratefully onto his sleeve and panting. He untwisted the paper.

It was the title page of a book: PUCK OF POOK'S HILL inscribed to "Our precious Duddykins." He remembered reading the book as a child, but it had no significance for him now. Confused, he turned the page over.

The message was in faint pencil, written with an unsteady hand.

"Professor Snape, please send a poison antidote with this owl. Urgent. And a bezoar. Please. I can pay when I get to Hogwarts. Harry Potter."

When the Muggles came around the mountain, the marmot was the only one to see them.



Vernon Dursley sat in his most comfortable chair, ignoring the pattering of the rain outside, and perused the security

catalog again, toying with a large golden coin. Window bars, alarm systems; it had everything he needed to keep Potter in and the rest of the freaks out. And the best thing about it was that Potter would have to pay for it — just as soon as he figured out where the infuriating boy was keeping the rest of the gold. High time he were compensated for all the work and money he'd put into raising his wife's nephew.

A brilliant flash of lightning, followed by a loud thunder-clap interrupted his ruminations. Vernon frowned when the table lamp flickered uncertainly. "Petunia, love, go and check the fuse box."

"I'm sure it's all right, dear," his wife answered from over her needlework.

"Dudley, go and fetch a flashlight in case the lights go out."

"Do I have to?" Dudley grumbled, not wanting to move from his place playing video games on his little gameboy. He wasn't happy anyway, since neither of his parents would let him use the expensive game console on the telly during a thunderstorm.

"I'll fetch it," Petunia said, and Vernon nodded approval. He could always depend on Petunia to take care of the things that would inconvenience Dudley.

Just then a fusillade of knocking came at the front door.

"Places!" Vernon ordered, superfluously, tucking the coin into his vest pocket. Dudley had already abandoned his game and was running for the kitchen, his mother in close pursuit. Vernon took a deep breath and went to the chiferebe, where he had a shotgun waiting. The knocking came again, impatient and angry sounding. It was horribly nervous-making, and Vernon fumbled putting shells into his gun. "I'm coming! I'm coming!"

He was almost to the door, intending to look out through the peep hole, when he heard a cry of "Alohamora" through the grumble of thunder and the door burst open. He barely had enough time to get a good look at the tall black-cloaked man with the pale face and black, angry eyes when the lights flickered and died.

"Where... is... Potter?" The voice was exaggeratedly patient, and cold with distaste. For the first time, Vernon Dursley lent some credence to the wild stories that Harry told about the man who had killed his parents coming back to kill Harry.

To his astonishment, it cost him a pang to give the boy away. But he had his wife and child to think of, and the shadowed figure was already starting to raise a wand. "Upstairs," Vernon squeaked. "Upstairs, second door on the left."

"Thank you," the figure growled and swept past him up the stairs.

4 Grateful to be let off, Vernon Dursley scuttled back to the kitchen and waited with Petunia and Dudley, listening for an explosion upstairs.



Severus Snape's temper was fraying badly. He'd Apparated under a tree that had been struck by lightning moments after he'd walked out from under it. Dursley had met him with a shotgun in his hand. Now Potter had locked the door. If he'd come all this way because Potter had messed up a Potions assignment and was trying to hide it from the very family that was protecting him, Gryffindor was going to be at negative points until Christmas.

"Alohamora," he growled again, and the lock clicked over. He turned the knob and opened the door. The room was dark, and he paused in the doorway, wishing that the storm hadn't

knocked out all the Muggles' lights. It was a small room, lit only by the street lamp outside the single, barred window. He could make out a bed, and shelves piled with oddments. And in the corner... "Potter."

"Professor Snape." Potter stepped out of the shadowed corner, wearing nothing more than his underwear, and holding a length of what looked like bent pipe. "Did you bring the antidote?"

"You wrote it was urgent, Potter. But you don't look much like you're dying," Snape said drily.

"It's not for me." Harry tossed the piece of pipe under the bed — it was bicycle handlebars, Snape decided as it went past the light from the window. "It's for Hedwig. My owl." He went over to the corner closest to the door, and crouched next to a blanket draped cage. Snape stepped into the room to keep an eye on him. This didn't make sense yet, and he waited to see if Potter could possibly explain. "I bought her some mice in Hogsmeade before I came here. She hates the frozen mice in Muggle pet shops, and sausage and things aren't good for her. But somehow they got poisoned. I didn't realize it until after Hedwig had eaten two of them. I've managed to keep her alive so far, but..." the even, neutral tone cracked and Harry looked up at Snape with green eyes that were brimming with tears. "You did bring the antidote, didn't you, sir?"

5 *Damn the boy for having his mother's eyes!* Snape bit down on a sigh of exasperation. To have risked coming here for a mismanaged pet was infuriating, but he was here now and if he didn't take care of it, Potter would only interrupt the work of another wizard — probably Dumbledore. "I am the antidote, Potter. Move aside," he ordered gruffly. Harry scrambled back and stood back to let Snape sweep in and settle himself down by the cage. The cage was much too small for a snowy for a

start. And wasn't it just like the boy to think that the floor was a convenient place to tend a sick animal! "What have you been doing to take care of her?"

"Trying to keep her warm, making her drink a lot of water. The mice sort of... dried up..." Harry's voice was still a little unsteady, but Snape could hear the boy taking himself in hand now that he had a question to answer. "I've fed her bread, mostly. Aunt Petunia opened a tin of cat food and gave it me when she first got sick, but Hedwig couldn't eat much of it, and after a day it started to go off."

"How long ago was that?" Snape asked, listening with one ear while he waved his wand carefully over the bird. The owl, a snowy, was at least all right enough to clutch her perch, although she'd settled down over her feet as if it were mid-winter instead of a warm July night. Her eyes were pinning in a way that bespoke illness, but they were focussing, too, and when he reached a tentative hand out to run along her feathered body he found only slight sensitivity, and only over the area of the liver.

"Uhm. I think...about six days?" Harry answered. "It was at three before Pigwidgeon showed up and I sent him off with the message to you. And it's been two nights since then, and we're coming up on the third. Why did it take so long for you to come?"

"I wasn't at Hogwarts," Snape said. He glanced over his shoulder. Harry had wrapped his arms around his thin torso and he was shivering. "For heaven's sake put on some clothes, Potter." He snapped. He had enough to think about with the owl for the moment. Six days... Well, the owl certainly *had* been poisoned, but...

"Aunt Petunia's got them," Harry said as Snape tried to think through the owl's symptoms. "I'm confined to my room

until school starts for punching Dudley. He laughed when he heard that Hedwig was sick. So Aunt Petunia's taken my clothes so I won't bother to try to figure out how to get out the window." He sighed, and fell silent. Snape was grateful for the reprieve. Why did all fifteen-year-olds have to be such whiners? But then he sighed again and went on. "Not that there's any point in going out the window. I heard Voldemort say he can't attack me here, but if I went to Ron or Hermione's houses he'd find out and then they'd get killed just like Cedric was. I wouldn't care if it weren't that Hedwig's been so ill. Oh, I wish it were me that had been poisoned instead!"

Suddenly the bird's symptoms made sense. Snape jumped up and turned in a single motion, catching Potter by the chin. "Lumos!" he ordered, and his wand cast a bright light throughout the room as he ran a quick, diagnostic hand over the boy.

Eyes dilated...skin clammy and cold... sensitivity of the liver and kidneys... pulse slow...

"Idiot boy!" Snape came as close to shouting as he dared. "You've magicked the poison into yourself!"



THE CONFESSION

SUMMARY: Snape has to deal with Potter AND deal with the Dursleys. (Let's hope he has a headache potion in his pocket.)

“**HAVEN'T!**” Harry protested, trying to pull away. “I haven't! Don't get me expelled, please, Professor. I haven't done any magic outside of term. I can't! My uncle's got all my Hogwarts things locked away. Even my wand. Honestly! I haven't!” For all of the protests, Harry didn't raise a hand to strike back, and Snape's logical mind went into high gear.

“Hold still,” he commanded, releasing Harry's chin to step back and get a better look in the light. The boy had started a growth spurt last term, finally beginning to catch up to the others his age, and he'd put on another inch since terms end, but it was clear he'd done so on short rations. Snape could make out every rib, and the underwear had been knotted at the waist to keep them from falling down. His glasses were broken, and no longer quite fit his face, and he had a bruise on his forehead and a cut on one cheek that was almost healed. Both arms had fading bruises. Snape stalked around to take a look, but the boy's back was unblemished except for two or three small, insignificant scars and a fading bruise or two. The arm bruises were the right shape to be the grip of adult hands, though. “What happened here?” he asked, pointing to

the cut on Harry's face.

“Dudley hit me back,” Harry had swallowed his panic, but there was still fear and confusion in his eyes.

“Was he punished?”

“No.” The confusion began to overcome the fear, but Harry didn't volunteer any more information.

“And here?” Snape pointed to the arm.

Harry had to look at it and think for a moment to identify the cause. “I wasn't cooperating. Uncle Vernon had to bring me to my room.”

“You didn't lock the door then?” It wasn't as if he had to ask, but he felt that the confirmation was important.

“No,” Harry was very confused now, and the green eyes were giving Snape the look of someone who'd been hit by a bludger. “Uncle Vernon has the key.” Harry's head tipped a little to one side, as if he were trying to work something out. “He lets me out twice a day to use the bathroom.”

“And do they feed you bread and water, as well?” Snape asked drily, beginning to be very angry.

“He gets exactly what our Dudley gets!” came a shrill voice from the hall.

Snape turned. The Dursleys hadn't been able to resist their curiosity and had made their way up into the hallway to peek into the room. Lily's sister — Mrs. Dursley — had been the one to speak, defiant in the shelter of her husband's shoulder and shotgun.

“Is that true?” Snape checked quietly with Harry.

“I think so, sir,” Harry said, going still and wary in the presence of his relations in much the same way that he did when Snape was questioning his performance in Potions class. But the tiny flicker of Gryffindor boldness wasn't entirely

quenched. "Mind you, Dudley's on a diet. He's meant to lose at least one stone this summer."

The hall lights flickered back on, giving Snape rather a better view of Dudley Dursley than he actually wanted as the three Dursleys panicked and fled. He was a great pudding of a boy, and if he'd been deprived of food he certainly wasn't suffering for it. The overhead light in the room failed to come on, but Snape could see the glow of the table lamp under the blanket which was draped over the owl's cage. Harry flinched a little from the brightness of the artificial light and wrapped his arms around his chest again. Snape could see the gooseflesh on him. "Get into bed, Potter," he ordered brusquely. Best to get the boy warmed up first.

But when Harry retreated to the bed, he had only a sheet to pull up to his chin. Snape opened his mouth to ask where the blankets were, and realized they were all on the owl's cage. *Damn self-sacrificing Gryffindors!* He pulled off his cloak, dried it with a word, and spread it out over Harry. It would do for the moment, and he didn't want the boy getting agitated and aggravating the damage. He laid his hand on Harry's forehead and cast a simple sleep spell.

To his surprise, Harry fought the spell. "But, sir... What about Hedwig?" he asked around a yawn.

"Your bird is recovering nicely, Potter. She'll be fine. You, on the other hand, need rest."

"Yes, sir." At last the green eyes drifted closed and Harry's breathing slowed into the evenness of sleep.

Now to deal with the Dursleys.

They'd retreated in a clump to the end of the hall; Dudley and Petunia at the back, and Vernon trying to bring up the shotgun and shrink back protectively at the same time.

Snape flipped out his wand and transformed the firearm into an umbrella to prevent accidents. Dursley didn't seem to notice, though. "I demand you leave at once, sir!" he ordered, with only a mild stammer as he flourished the bumbershoot.

"No."

The flat refusal made Dursley's chins quiver, but after a moment he persisted. "If you don't leave, I shall summon the police, and have you arrested for trespassing," he threatened.

"Do so, and I shall have you brought up on charges of attempted murder."

"Murder?" Dursley blanched and let the umbrella fall. "What murder?"

"Even a Muggle physician could tell that the Potter boy has been poisoned. And as you are in charge of him..." Snape had no intention of depriving Potter of the protection he got from being with his blood relations, but Dursley didn't need to know that. And a decent threat would keep Snape from having to cast memory charms on dozens of Muggle policemen.

"I... I..." Vernon Dursley was plainly appalled at the very notion.

"In fact," Snape added salt to the wound. "I may call them myself. And the newspapers."

Vernon and Petunia both made incoherent noises of terror, but Dudley began to babble. "No, no! It was just a joke. We didn't poison Harry. Just the mice! He was going to kill them anyway."

"We?" Snape pounced on the word.

"Me...and Piers...and Dennis...and Malcolm... uh...uh... Gordon didn't want to do it. I don't know why. It was Piers' idea. He brought over the poison and everything. Mum and Dad didn't know anything about it. Really. Don't have them arrested. It was a joke!" It was remarkable, really, the way the boy managed to combine a defense of his parents with a whine and the

utter betrayal of his non-present friend. It might even be the truth, judging from the look on his mother's face.

"A joke? Do you have the box which the poison came in, then?" Snape asked.

"It's in my room," Dudley admitted quickly. Snape didn't miss the frustrated look on Vernon's face when the boy confessed it.

"Fortunately," Snape said, "for you..." he met each of their eyes in turn, gauging the level of terror and hope, "I have the...ability...to correct your little 'joke' without involving the authorities." *Stick first, then carrot.* It was easy to manipulate the Dursleys after years of getting young Slytherins to behave. The spark of interest in Vernon's eyes was unmistakable.

"What is it you want?" the man squeaked.

"Cooperation," Snape answered drily. "You," he pointed at Dudley. "Fetch the box." Dudley nodded, but didn't move out from behind his parents, so Snape held up his wand. "Now," he growled.

"Right." Dudley squeaked and moved quickly and ever so carefully past his father and Snape to vanish through the door next to Harry's. They could hear him bumping about and gabbling, "Oh, where is it? Where did I put it?"

"You," Snape went on, turning his gaze onto Vernon. "Fetch up the boy's school trunk."

"Well...er...it's at my office."

"You took it out of the house?" Snape's voice went cold. How stupid was the man?!

"It's locked away. No one knows it's there. I wouldn't want them knowing it was there," Dursley protested. "No one's touched it!"

"You'd better hope not. Go and fetch it then," Snape ordered, and then paused, considering. Since the man would have to

go out anyway, he might as well have him do more than one errand. "While you're at it, go to the nearest pet store and fetch back six *healthy* mice. In a proper cage, with appropriate food."

"Mice?"

"For the owl. Proper bedding for its cage would be good as well." Snape had noticed that Harry had been trying to make dirt from the garden do, but even healthy owls could begin to add a 'flavor' to a room, and the bird would do better with a cleaned litter tray. "And a proper perch."

"Are you sure it's necessary?" Vernon protested, although he put aside the umbrella and started going through his pockets for something. "It's just an owl."

"Completely sure," Snape said. "And, by the way," he added, "if I were you, I'd be quick about it. No unnecessary conversations along the way."

"Right." Vernon was pulling oddments from his pockets now. "Just as soon as I find my keys."

He was sufficiently terrified. Snape turned his attention to the woman. Hard to believe that this scrawny, hatchet-faced harridan was Lily's sister, but yes, somehow she bore the traces which marked one who had had the love — however unrequited — of a powerful witch. She was frightened of him, but secure enough in herself to remain not entirely cowed.

"You," Snape said, "will fetch Potter's clothes, and clean bedding. A hot water bottle, if you have one, as well. Then you will prepare beef tea, and toast, rice pudding, and mashed potatoes. If you are unable to find the directions in your cookbooks, you will consult me. If you lack the ingredients, you will consult me. You will also prepare a dinner for the rest of us. Am I understood?"

"Perfectly," she said, her tones rich with distaste. But he

could see in her eyes that she would obey.

Dudley returned with a triangular box and handed it at arms length to Snape. "Here. Now what?"

Snape gave him the almost smile that he knew frightened students more than any scowl. "Now, you join me. In there." He pointed to Harry's room. Dudley obeyed quickly and Snape turned the smile on his two suddenly alarmed parents. "Go on, then," he said. "The last thing you want to waste is time."



THE COUSIN

SUMMARY: *Dudley's having a bad day.*

DUDLEY DURSLEY had seldom been so frightened in his life. He had far too much reason to believe that the magical freaks who hung around his cousin were as vicious and treacherous as they came, but this man was even worse than the bear man who had given him a pig's tail on Harry's eleventh birthday. He rubbed furtively at the old scar as he backed into the farthest corner of the room. His first term at Smeltings had been made a lot less comfortable than it could have been because of the place where the surgeon had snipped it off; it had stayed tender for weeks. He'd been forced to invent an accident stunt riding on his bicycle to explain why he needed cushions to sit on. Luckily, he'd been bigger than the rest of the first years, and Piers had backed him up.

He stood as still as he could, watching wide eyed when the stranger remade the bed with the bedclothes and hot water bottle his mother had brought up without ever waking Harry up or even touching the blankets. Then he stood there, wrapped again in his cloak, running his stick thing...his wand... about a foot over the bed, down the entire length the sleeping boy's quiet form, muttering in what sounded like the drivel the Latin master at school was always trying to make them

learn. It took a long time, and Dudley's feet began to hurt. When the man finally finished playing mumbo-jumbo by the bed, he went over to the doorway, giving a careful study to the box the mouse poison had been in by the hall light. He even sniffed at the residue of the poison, and much to Dudley's disgust, touched a bit of it to his tongue with one finger. After all that, he started to prowl around the room, looking at things. Ignoring Dudley. Dudley had never been ignored so long in his life, and when the man began to flip through some of the books on the shelf he decided that he couldn't make things any worse by talking. "What do you want with my books?"

"Your books?" The dark eyes swivelled to meet his, but the room was dim enough that Dudley could pretend to himself that they were only shadowed.

"Of course they're mine. All those things you've been meddling with are mine." Dudley said, trying to remember to keep his chin high. "And I think you ought to ask before you go poking through them."

The man cocked an incredulous eyebrow. "Hard on your toys, aren't you, 'Duddykins'?" he said in a voice like the Sahara.

Dudley flushed scarlet at having a stranger knowing the pet name he'd finally convinced his mum not to use in public only this summer. "My name's Dudley. You should call me by right name."

"Mine is Snape. Professor Snape. You will call me, 'sir'." He waited for Dudley's frantic nod before turning back to the shelves. "Now that you've found your tongue, you can make yourself useful. What's in this room that *does* belong to Potter?"

Dudley looked around, trying to think. "Well, the owl," he offered, and then added, "sir," hastily in case Snape noticed the omission.

"I need an *inanimate* object, boy," Snape glared at him and signalled him peremptorily to come over to the shelves.

"Well, it would be easier if you turned on the light," Dudley whined, sidling forward reluctantly.

"Lumos," Snape said, and again that weird light filled the room. Dudley swallowed hard and started looking carefully at the stuff on the shelves.

"That's mine. *That's mine.* That's mine. Oh, I'd forgotten about those. That's mine. That's mine. That never worked in the first place. That was the cheapest plastic ever. That's mine. I think..." At the very end of the of the lowest shelf, near the bed he finally found something he didn't recognise. "I think that tin box must be Potter's. It isn't mine, anyway."

Snape took the box and went to the desk with the mended leg that was stored in the room to sort through the contents. Dudley drifted over to watch over his shoulder, curious about what it was that Potter had hidden in the tin. It wasn't much. Seven Legos, four filthy tarnished pence, a piece of quartz, a plastic comb with the barber's name and address embossed on it, a headless plastic knight on a three legged horse, two rubbishy plastic medals, of the kind that the grammar school teachers handed out to reward little kids, and a picture cut out of a newspaper.

"Who is this?" Snape asked, showing the picture to Dudley.

To his surprise, Dudley knew the answer. "That's old Fergusson." Snape waited impatiently and Dudley expanded a little. "Miss Fergusson. She was the school nurse at our grammar school. A real nosey parker, too. Always sending notes home about vaccinations and glasses and diets and things. I can't imagine why Potter would bother having her picture. She got killed in a car accident donkey's-years ago."

"It might do," Snape said thoughtfully, looking at the picture. Then he frowned a little, as if he'd had an idea. "We could do better though. Are there any pictures of your aunt in this house?"

"Pictures?" *Of Aunt Marge?* Dudley couldn't imagine what Snape would want with them, but at least he could answer yes. "Of course. I think there's one in my parent's room."

"And which room would that be?" Snape said, indicating with a slant of his head that Dudley should proceed him into the hallway.

Dudley bounced forward feeling curiously relieved. Snape reminded him all too much of the Maths professor at Smelt-ings, who could come up with much worse things than detention if you didn't keep him mollified or amused. But at least now he wasn't ignoring Dudley. "It's this way. Over here." Dudley kept on talking, as much to have something to listen to as to try keeping Snape from getting bored. "My parents have the biggest bedroom, of course, because there are two of them. And it's got its own bath. I have to share the one over here with the guest room and Potter for now, but Daddy says that he's going to fix it I won't have to by next summer. I think he should use the downstairs lav the way he used to, but Mummy says that gets him too close to the front door." He pushed open his parents door and went to the nightstand to find the picture he wanted. Snape was following a few paces behind, watching with interest as Dudley flipped on the lightswitch by the bed. "Here. Here it is."

Snape looked at the picture and frowned. "I assume," he said softly, "that this woman is your father's sister. Yes?"

"Yes. Aunt Marge." Dudley realized slowly that he hadn't gotten it right. He bit his lip. "Or did you mean... you want a

picture of my mum's sister — Potter's mother. Is that it?"

Snape seemed to grow taller, and the look he gave Dudley was the look you'd give a moron who'd accidentally stumbled on the right answer. But he nodded. "Five points, Mr. Dursley," he said, sounding more like a schoolmaster in that moment than he had in all the time he'd been there. "And now that you know the correct question, perhaps you could supply us with the correct answer."

Dudley wished he had his mum or his dad with him. There was no place to hide, though, so he just pulled his head down between his shoulders. "Well... yes... I suppose. But I don't know if there are any pictures of her."

Snape drew a long breath through his nose. "A picture would work, but I could also use something that she had owned. Would there be anything like that in this house?"

"I don't know." Dudley had a sudden thought. "But if there was, it would be in Potter's cupboard."

"Show me."



Snape followed the Dursley boy down the stairs into the front hallway, and around to where a small door was bolted shut. At least Potter had a place to store his belongings, even if it wasn't in his own room. Snape was beginning to think that there wasn't anything he could use for a *Extractus Toxinus* spell in this entire house, and it was going to be difficult to get his hands on the right sort of ingredients to make a proper potion without taking the chance of apparating to Diagon Alley to fetch them himself. He didn't think he had the Dursleys cowed enough for that to be safe. Harry might have been able to take a few bruises a week gone by, but with his liver in

its present condition, even an accidental blow might kill him. He watched as Dudley unbolted the door of the cupboard and hauled out the vacuum cleaner and a pile of boots.

"I thought you said this was Potter's cupboard," Snape said, looking at the debris.

"It is," Dudley grunted as he pulled out his father's toolbox. "The room upstairs is my second best room. He's just been let sleep in it ever since he started getting those letters when we were eleven."

"And before that, he slept in this cupboard." Snape didn't know which was harder to believe; that Potter had spent most of his young life being forced to sleep in a boot cupboard, or that his cousin was fool enough to admit it to a total stranger.

But Dudley just nodded. "That's right. So if he's hidden anything, you see, it's bound to be in here." He opened up the tool kit and pulled out a chisel. "Just you wait. All I've got to do is pry up some of these boards..."

"Come. Out." Snape said between his teeth, forcing himself to remember that Dudley was no older than Harry was, and couldn't have been the one who had decided to put Harry in the closet.

Dudley came out quickly, recognizing the anger in Snape's tones, and stood by, fiddling with the end of his shirt while Snape bent to the closet and cast a spell to discover hidden places. There were three. Two were empty, and one held the remains of a chain of daisies that went to dust when Snape touched it.

Damn. Now he'd have to go and fetch those ingredients. Maybe if he put all the Dursleys to sleep he could...

"Uh..Mister... I mean, Professor Snape?" Dudley stammered, nervously. "I think I might know where else there might be a picture of Potter's mum."

THE AUNT

SUMMARY: *Snape finds what he's looking for.*

PETUNIA DURSLEY heard the voices as she came through door from the laundry with a stack of Vernon's clean underthings. She had Harry's clothes into the dryer now, although she'd like to have shredded them with a scissors to vent her feelings, and had had to start a fresh load of washing with towels and fold all of the things in the earlier load from the dryer in order to calm herself down. But now, hearing that man's voice in her front hallway with Dudley's she felt the rage swirl back up and tasted acid at the back of her throat.

Carefully, she closed the door, trying not to make any sound. She put the laundry on the kitchen table and crossed over to the stove quietly, stirring what needed stirring and checking the heat under the double boiler. Beef tea, indeed! A ruin of a good piece of meat unless that owl could eat it. She'd been lucky that she'd saved a steak with freezer burn to feed to Harry on Sunday, when Dudley was allowed his one big meal of the week.

Once she was certain that she wouldn't burn anything if she took her eyes off it for a few minutes, she flipped off the kitchen light and went over to the door, easing it open just a bit to see if she could see anything.

The stranger was bent down, looking for something in the cupboard under the stairs. Dudley was standing by, looking frightened poor dear, and she willed him to think of running for the front door, but it was too late. The stranger backed out, looking angry.

"Uh..Mister... I mean, Professor Snape?" Dudley stammered, nervously. "I think I might know where there might be a picture of Potter's mum."

A picture of Lily? What in heaven's name could he want that for?

"Where? Timbuctu?" The man, Professor Snape was it now, growled sarcastically.

"Well, in that box of Potter's. The one Daddy went to get." Petunia didn't know whether to be proud of Dudley for suggesting it or angry for not thinking of the possibility earlier. She should have gone through the trunk before it left the house.

Snape straightened and shook his greasy haired head. "While you are probably correct, it won't do. Since the trunk has been out of this house I shall have to go over it very carefully for boobytraps, an effort which will probably take several hours."

"B-b-boobytraps?" Dudley stammered. "Do you think it might blow up? Shouldn't we warn Daddy?"

"That's the least of what I think it might do, but your father's not in any danger unless he's foolish enough to try to open it," Snape turned, looking at the doorway suddenly with eyes as black as coal. Petunia didn't move, uncertain of whether he saw her or not, and after a long stare he turned back just as suddenly on Dudley. "Can you think of anywhere else?"

Dudley bit his lip, and then brightened a little, "There are a lot of old photograph albums in the bookcase by the fireplace," he offered. "There might be something in the oldest ones."

Snape seemed to go a little more alert, like a cat on the trail of a mouse. "Photo albums."

"Yes," Dudley straightened his shoulders manfully. "This way," he said, and led Snape around the corner.

Petunia flipped on the light and went back to the stove, smiling with satisfaction as she poured the water off the potatoes. Let Snape look through the albums. The only picture of Lily he'd find was the one of the back of her head showing through the space under Petunia's arm when she'd been dressed up as a fairy princess for Halloween the year she was seven. She'd gone through the picture albums her mother had left her with scissors the year after Lily had married that freak, Potter, but she couldn't figure out how to cut out Lily from that one picture without cutting across the image of her own wrist so she'd left it. No one knew it was Lily anyway now, since their parents had died.

She mashed the potatoes and set them in the oven to stay warm. Then she picked up the frying pan, to make some chicken, and the weight of the cast iron gave her an idea. If Snape was so involved in looking at pictures, maybe she could catch him off guard. Quickly she slipped out into the hallway and around the corner to look and see if it were going to be possible, the pan held close behind her.

Dudley was sitting on one of the pouffes, turning pages slowly through an album, while Snape stood by the bookcase and flipped through another. "I don't understand. There ought to be some pictures of Aunt Lily. There are lots of mum," he said.

It cost her a pang to hear her precious son refer to her sister as Aunt Lily, but she supposed that it was the polite way to do so, and she knew how wonderfully polite Dudley was, so she resolutely ignored it. Now if only Dudley would

stay absorbed long enough for her to...

Snape turned and transfixed her with a glare. "Mrs. Dursley."

"I heard voices," she said, defensively, hoping that the frying pan didn't show. "What are you doing down here?"

"Looking for a picture of your sister," Snape said. "Or something else that belonged to her."

She hadn't expected that, and Petunia felt her glance flicker to the end of the mantelpiece. Only for a fraction of a second, but it was a fraction of a second too long. Snape followed her gaze and took three long strides over to the shelf. She watched, breathing hard through her nose as he examined each of the little souvenirs Marge had sent them from abroad. It was impossible. He'd never be able to tell which of them was...

"This." He picked up the snowglobe, and his voice went quieter. "This will do."

"That's mine," Petunia said, furious with him for finding it.

"Then you stole it," Snape accused, twisting to face her, matching her fury with an anger so deep she stepped back and raised the frying pan, knowing that her cheeks were burning. How could he know?

It was the truth though. Their Uncle Michael, long ago, had given two nearly identical snowglobes to his small nieces, and they'd lived on either end of the mantelpiece in her childhood home. They hadn't been allowed to play with them often, and then only under the eyes of her mother, since Uncle Michael had bought them in Vienna, and spent far more money than was proper for a childhood toy. It had been decreed that when they were old enough to take care of them properly, they would be able to take them up to their own rooms, and on Petunia's fourteenth Christmas, she'd been proud to be allowed to take hers upstairs, while Lily had

to wait another two years. And then Petunia had dropped the thing playing with it in the bath on the very first night and put a crack in it. She'd snuck downstairs and switched them off after Lily had gone back to that school of hers, and it had been a week before anyone had realized that all the water had run out of the snowglobe on the mantelpiece. Petunia had caught Lily looking at the globe in her room once, but Lily had never accused her of making the switch, and she'd gotten away with it.

Until now.

"It's not like she needs it anymore," Petunia sneered, livid with fright, but still careful not to admit the truth. Dudley had gone as still as a mouse on the footstool, his eyes flashing wildly from one of them to the other, and Petunia willed him to stay out of the way, safe from whatever this freak might do to her.

He raised his wand as if it were a gun, and his grip on the snowglobe in his other hand tightened so that she could see the knuckles whiten. "There is so *VERY* little stopping me from demonstrating to you *exactly* how your sister died," he said in a hollow voice.

She waited, tense, but still defiant, and to her horror he whipped the wand around, pointing it at Dudley. "No!" she cried, immediately dropping the frying pan. "Not my son!"

Snape was breathing heavily, the way Vernon did when he was holding himself back from a fit of temper. "See to your cooking, then," he ordered. He put away the wand and reached over to grab a handful of Dudley's shirt at the shoulder, hauling the boy to his feet with ease.

"Right. Yes." She *had* to do it. Dudley's only safety lay in obedience, and as much as she hated conceding to Snape's bidding, she couldn't see another way out. Petunia shook

with frustration and rage as she stood aside to let Snape haul Dudley past her on the way to the stairs. She caught Dudley's hand and gave it a squeeze as he went by, trying to smile reassuringly into his frightened eyes.

"And bring up the boy's clothes!" Snape roared back at her as she heard them starting up the stairs.

"I will as soon as they're dry!" she called back, hoping that he'd comprehend the delay. As she bent to pick up the frying pan, she felt the hot tears begin, and she dashed them away with the back of one hand. Why did this have to happen? Why did this have to happen to her perfect family?

Reluctantly, tiredly, she went to the kitchen and started making the chicken.



THE CURE

SUMMARY: *Snape gets to work on saving Harry.*

HARRY COULDN'T MOVE. He wanted to move, but none of his muscles seemed to be able to respond. He watched with horror as Voldemort raised his wand, ready to kill him, and he tried to make his arm move, tried to move wooden lips to call out "Expelliarmus," and he couldn't... he couldn't...

Abruptly, he was awake, lying on the bed in the room he used at the Dursley's, his blood loud in his ears. He waited for the fear to fade. And waited. Gradually, he realized that something was wrong. Hedwig's perch was on the desk. Aunt Petunia wouldn't allow that. And besides, he had to use a cage here. Hedwig's perch was still at Hogwarts. And why did Dudley's bike still have handlebars? Harry tried to sit up, to get up and see why nothing was the way it should be, and found that he couldn't move.

Not again!

It had to be a dream. A nightmare! If only Harry could move he could wake up. He *had* to move, had to wake up before the shadows in the corner of the room could coalesce into black robes. If only he could move!

He wanted to weep with frustration, but that didn't seem

to work either. He couldn't even cry out. He knew he was sleeping, knew he needed to wake, and somehow knew that if he could just somehow twist himself out of this horrible paralysis he would be free.

The bang of the door flung his eyes open at last, but he tested the new awakening warily. The pressure on his chest was still there, but this time it was the weight of blankets, curiously taut against his body. The sheet near his nose smelt of the dryer softener sheets, like it had come clean from the linen closet. The overhead light came on, and to Harry's relief, his hand could move, coming up to shield his eyes from the glare of the overhead light. But when he looked to see who had come in he wondered afresh if the dream had just taken a new turn as he watched Professor Snape shove Dudley over into the corner and start to pace the room. What was Snape doing here? And why did he have so many blankets, and fresh linens? It wasn't Sunday night yet, was it? And weren't the blankets with Hedwig?

Hedwig!

Abruptly, Harry came completely awake, remembering Hedwig's poisoning, his letter, and Snape's arrival in response to it. He didn't remember clean sheets or blankets, but he knew Snape had put a sleep spell on him, and Madame Pomfrey always managed to refresh the bedding without waking him. That's why the sheets were so taut. He'd been tucked in. Harry had never been tucked in that he could remember before he'd spent a night in the infirmary at Hogwarts, but Madame Pomfrey always did it, and he kind of liked the feeling that he couldn't easily fall out of the bed. Maybe it was part of the bedding spell, after all. Harry wasn't sure whether to be glad that Madam Pomfrey hadn't been fussing over him or sorry, but he was sure that Snape hadn't

tucked him out of tenderness.

He pushed against the blankets cautiously, and to his relief they weren't bound to the bed. At least Snape hadn't strapped him down. Carefully, trying not to come to Snape's notice, he sat up far enough to check on Hedwig. To his relief, she seemed no worse than she'd been before — maybe even a bit better — as she watched the Potions Master pace up and down the room. Dudley was trying to fit himself into the smallest space he could, staring wide-eyed at Snape. And Snape...

Harry bit his lip and eased himself back down onto the pillow, trying to look like he was just part of the furniture. Snape was furious. The only time he'd seen him angrier was when Sirius Black had escaped the clutches of the Dementors, and that time Snape hadn't been holding his left arm tight against his chest like it hurt. He had something clutched in that hand which Harry couldn't quite make out. In his right hand he held his wand reversed, as if it were a stake to be pounded into someone's heart, the gripping so tight that his knuckles had gone chalky. Whenever his path led him near the shelves, the things on them rattled like there was an earthquake, but it wasn't something he was *doing*, Harry thought. Snape didn't even seem to see the room at all, except enough to avoid running into the walls.

What have I done now? Harry thought. He still didn't understand why Snape thought he'd done magic, but the horrid way he'd felt might mean it was true. And he'd been asleep, so he couldn't have done anything more. *Maybe it was Dudley who's set him off. He looks like he's working up to kill someone.*

Snape turned back toward Harry again and Harry saw that the object in his left hand had started to glow with a blue-white light. It gained brightness rapidly, showing red and shadow

through the thickness of Snape's palm. And Snape didn't seem to notice. Harry swallowed hard. Much as he was afraid of Snape, he was more afraid that if Snape did kill Dudley, it would somehow resonate through the dark mark on his arm and summon Voldemort. He took a breath. "Professor?" he said, trying to sound calm and failing. "What's glowing?"

Snape stopped and turned his head sharply to glare at Harry, nostrils pinched white with fury and his black eyes hot with anger, but the question was enough to bring him out of the center of his fury, and he blinked suddenly and held up the object in his left hand to look at it.

It was so bright Harry flinched, but the brightness faded as fast as it had come, and once he'd blinked away the green spot, he recognized the thing for what it was. "Isn't that Aunt Petunia's?" he asked.

30 "No." Snape didn't hit that deep note often, and it never boded well, but for once Harry wasn't sure that he was the object of the anger. The potions professor stepped closer to the bed and held out the knickknack so that Harry could see it without sitting up. "Look at it with a wizard's eye, boy," he said roughly.

Harry wasn't sure exactly what Snape meant, but he was willing to try just about anything to keep Snape from going off. He concentrated on the globe, trying to look at it as if it were an object in Transformations class, that had to be understood before it could be persuaded to change. Then he gasped. "That's Hogwarts!" The rough modelled castle inside the glass sphere had suddenly gone sharper and clearer, and when he looked even closer he could see that the chips of fake snow weren't snow at all, but owls in flight. He stared at it for a long moment before managing to bring himself to look at Snape instead. "I don't understand. It's been on the

mantelpiece ever since I can remember."

"Haven't you ever looked into it, then?" If it hadn't been Snape, Harry would have sworn the man's voice had softened a bit.

"I used to, when I was little," Harry said, looking back into the glass longingly. "I've always wanted to see what it looked like with the snow swirling."

Snape turned his wrist around, to set the little bits of white in motion again. "I assume," he said, with a little more academic dryness creeping into his voice, "by that that statement that you've never touched this?"

"We're not allowed," Dudley said from his corner. *Just like Dudley to butt into a private conversation*, Harry thought, but he was surprised a little to find that even Dudley had had some kind of restriction put on him. Dudley, seeing both of them looking at him, expanded a little. "Mum said that I should have it for my own when I was old enough to take care of it properly," Then he faltered, and looked, to Harry's surprise, genuinely disappointed. "But I guess I won't now. Not if you're right about it being Aunt Lily's," he said, addressing Snape.

It was my mother's? Harry wanted to touch it more than ever now, but he held himself still. He couldn't read Snape's expression, and he didn't dare start something that might end up with the snowglobe smashed into a wall.

31 "No, you shan't," Snape told Dudley. "Now, sit in that chair," he added, pointing with his wand to the one chair in the room. Dudley obeyed quickly. The chair creaked under his weight. As soon as he was settled, Snape said, "Petrificus."

Immediately, Dudley flashed blue and then froze into stillness on the chair from the neck down. His eyes bugged out of their sockets. "I can't move," he cried. "Harry, help me!"

"It's just a spell!" Harry told his cousin, pushing up onto one

elbow to get a better look. Half of him wanted to laugh, and the other half was waiting for Snape to do something worse to him. "You'll be all right as soon as he takes it off," he told Dudley, and then added, "if he takes off," just to see the fat lump want to squirm and not be able to.

"Don't interrupt me, and I'll think about it," Snape told Dudley. Dudley's face went white and then pink as he desperately bit back whatever it was he wanted to say, and Harry couldn't help but laugh.

But laughing hurt his stomach and chest, and he slumped back, closing his eyes while he tried not to breathe too fast or hard. He felt Snape's hand on his forehead. "What is it about poisoned that you've failed to understand, Potter? Try not to move around so much."

"Yes, sir," Harry got out. When he finally felt secure enough to open his eyes again he saw Snape using his wand to transform Dudley's bike into a tall stool and float it into place near the bed.

Snape took a seat on it, wearing his lecturing face. "Very well. Now, we are almost ready to deal with the poison, Mr. Potter, but first I must ask you whether or not, in your studies, you have come across mention of the *Extractus Toxinus* spell.

Harry wished he had, but it wasn't true. "No, sir," he admitted, hoping that Snape would somehow keep on working his way toward calmness from his earlier state of fury.

"I thought not," Snape said becoming more and more the teacher as Harry listened. "It is one of three methods by which poisons of a certain type may be thoroughly removed from a living creature safely. The other two are potions, both of which act most effectively when freshly made, require rather expensive ingredients, and take several hours to be properly prepared; and neither of which would act as quickly

as the spell. It is possible to have a basic cleansing potion ready, and then add the final ingredients at the last minute, but there are practical considerations in this case."

Harry nodded, not wanting to interrupt.

"The first disadvantage of the spell is that it requires a component. An inanimate object which has a strong positive association with the victim. Often, the object is a childhood toy, but it can be a photograph of someone who cared strongly for the victim, or an object with a strong positive association to the caring person." Snape held up the snowglobe, looking at it for a moment with thoughtful eyes before looking back at Harry more neutrally. "Frequently, the component is destroyed in the process. But not always."

That was hard. Harry wanted the snowglobe to keep. He had so little of his mother's to remember her by! But he nodded again, "I see," he said reluctantly.

"The second disadvantage of the spell is that it is painful." Snape stopped. Took a breath. Went on. "It works by pulling the toxins out physically, directly past muscles, nerves, and skin. The particles are small, but they tend to clump as they rise, and they can do damage. The spell should never be employed unless the poison is doing more damage where it is than it would as it was removed." He stared into Harry's eyes as he said that, and Harry wished that he were invisible, so that he could think about what Snape meant without letting Snape see how suddenly frightened he was. He wasn't sure when his stomach had started hurting because of the poison and not because he was worried about Hedwig. He couldn't tell if he'd been cold because he had nothing to wrap himself in or because of the poison. He didn't know if he was weak because he was hungry or if it were something worse. He'd wanted to die, if it meant saving Hedwig,

but if Snape were right, then Hedwig was saved and now the cost of the bargain seemed very high.

"And if you don't use the spell?" he asked, not letting his voice shake.

"The poison will continue to destroy your liver, sending your blood and bile out of balance, making you weaker, more vulnerable to damage. You might see Hogwarts again, but only if you were very very careful. And by then you'd be in such poor condition you wouldn't be allowed out of the hospital wing until spring."

"Oh," Harry didn't even want to think about what would happen if he met up with Voldemort again before the poison was gone.

"There is this," Snape said slowly, sounding reluctant. "The spell, I'm told, hurts less if the person being spelled trusts the caster."

Trust Snape? The incredulous voice in Harry's head sounded like it was only eleven years old, suddenly. Harry held his breath, trying to weigh what he'd always thought about Snape against what he'd found out to be true. Slowly, reluctantly, he said, "Dumbledore trusts you."

"Dumbledore is powerful enough to take certain risks," Snape said, bringing his left arm up and cupping his right hand around it between elbow and wrist for a moment, frowning. "I'm not sure that you should."

Not with the Imperius Curse out there and Voldemort more than willing to use it. Harry nodded slowly. "I understand." He tried to smile a little, to show that he wasn't too frightened for this. "It can't hurt worse than a Cruciatus Curse."

Snape's eyes went distant, like he was comparing two far too recent experiences. "No," he said. "It can't."

"Then let's get it over with," Harry said, and closed his eyes to wait for it.

THE UNCLE

SUMMARY: Vernon returns to find that things have gotten even stranger in his absence.

BY THE TIME the car hydroplaned for the sixth time, Vernon Dursley had run out of bad language. He just waited for the world to stop sliding by sideways and hoped that traction would return before he slid into a ditch. Fortunately, almost no one else was foolish enough to be driving in these wretched conditions, and no one had seen him clip off the side mirrors of a row of parked cars the last time he'd fishtailed, and this time there was no one to watch as the back wheels went onto the verge by the church and slowed the car to a muddy, grass-destroying stop just short of the stone wall. Cautiously, he stepped on the gas, and to his relief the car crept forward, back onto the road. He drove on, tapping the brakes now and then to dry them. He'd just have to take the chance of going more slowly. Even one of those people had to comprehend how difficult it was to travel in this kind of storm. Surely, Dudley would be safe with Petunia in the house; at least safe for long enough to Vernon to get there.

He groaned and pounded one hand on the steering wheel. Three bloody pet shops he'd gone to! The first one turned out to only sell fish, and while the second one had had the bird

bedding, they'd only had two tiny piebald mice. The proprietor had offered gerbils, but Vernon wasn't going to take any chances with confusing this order. There were customers who'd take permanent offense if you offered them a drill bit of the wrong pitch, even if the diameter was correct, and Vernon had a feeling that the freak who held his son hostage was one of them. He'd wasted five minutes in the last shop, dithering, because the mice *there* were all white instead of spotted like the first two, and he wasn't sure if mismatched mice would be acceptable. In the end he'd bought two extra white mice, just in case, and be damned to the expense.

Stopping at his office for the trunk had been more complicated than it needed to be as well. He'd needed a hand truck from the warehouse to bring the trunk down from the management floors, and the security guard had been bored and wanting to chat at first, and then suspicious and wanting to look into the trunk when Vernon tried to brush him off. Vernon had been too flustered to remember the combinations of the bicycle locks he'd strapped around the trunk to prevent Harry from being able to get into it even if he'd found it, and the security guard had taken that to mean that the trunk wasn't really his. He'd threatened to fire the fellow, who'd threatened right back to call the police, and in the end he'd had to bribe him with the promise of a pay raise and all the cash he'd had left in his pockets to hold him. Not that he wouldn't fire the man for being bribable anyway, once the freak was gone and Dudley was safe, but it galled him to have had to concede even temporarily.

He turned another corner carefully, thinking about the day in spring when he'd received the package of new extra-strong window bars for Harry's room. It had been warm

enough, so he'd gone up and started installing them — meaning to prevent Harry from letting anyone, like that Weasley boy, in to the house without Vernon knowing. It would keep him from running off, too, the way he had two summers back, leaving Vernon to concoct explanations for the nosiest neighbors. Fancy old Figg noticing that the light was never on in Harry's room night after night! He'd gotten the bars nearly installed when he was called to the telephone, and as a result, the window had stood open all night. In the morning, when he'd gotten back to it, a line of ants had gotten in, and were trailing down through a gap between two of the floorboards where the bed normally stood. Naturally, Vernon had investigated, and when he'd pried up the board he had found the stash of rock cakes Harry had left behind. He couldn't blame Potter for hoarding food — he'd already told Petunia that there would not be a repeat of last summer's "everyone's on Dudley's diet" experiment — but he'd promised himself to give the boy grief for leaving any of it behind to attract insects. Then, while he was clearing out the cakes, and a petrified corn beef sandwich, he'd noticed something glinting in the plaster dust by one of the joists. And when he'd pried it out it had turned out to be a golden coin.

He hadn't known what to do about it then, except keep it in his pocket and try to monitor all of Harry's contacts with his strange friends, hoping for a clue to where Harry had gotten the gold. That's why he'd taken the writing things from Harry's room — so Harry would have to come down and ask for paper and pen if he wanted to write someone. And that's why he'd insisted on locking Harry's school trunk closed with the bicycle locks — in case Harry had pen or paper in there. He'd deliberately left the mail slot open this summer, so that even

the mails delivered by owls would come to the front door, just so that he could steam the envelopes open and read the contents before he passed the letters to Harry. And then, on the second morning, just after he'd sent Harry off to the barber for a haircut, the letter from Sirius Black had come, and Vernon had begun to see the outline of a possible plan.

Vernon's conscience didn't often bother him, but it was having a noisy day today, and now it reminded him that opening other people's mail was probably a legal offense. "Nonsense," he blustered back at himself. "That only applies to Her Majesties mails. Not to things delivered by birds." Especially not to things delivered by birds. The letter had been brief and to the point. Sirius was going to be out of the country, probably until the next school term, but he'd see Harry then.

Without the threat of a murderous godfather hanging over him all summer, Vernon thought that he could push Harry hard enough to find out where the gold was. Or at least enough to insist that Harry bring him along to his school in the fall. There had to be magical lawyers — it was human nature to need lawyers after all — and surely he could find one who would support his right to compensation. It was just a matter of retraining Harry into the proper obedient mindset that they'd worked on until his eleventh birthday.

Vernon had waited for an opportunity. Sooner or later, he knew, Harry was bound to be openly defiant and deserve being punished. A week or two of isolation had always worked wonders before, and he had no doubt it would again. Unfortunately, Harry had spent the first three weeks of summer moping but obedient. It had gotten the lawn mowed, but it hadn't furthered Vernon's plan. And then he'd come down to the sitting room and punched Dudley. Vernon had

almost cheered. It was the perfect opportunity.

Petunia had been a little puzzled as to why he wanted her to take all of Harry's clothes, but she'd done it, and that — and the removal of the trunk — had been the last two pieces he'd needed to make sure that Harry'd be where he wanted him. The window could be opened an inch for fresh air — he had to go in that room after all, to escort Harry to the necessary — but he'd put in locks to keep it from opening more, and the glass was still intact. Surely no owl could squeeze through the bars and the narrow gap as well, and with the mail slot open, none of them would bother.

He turned on to Privet Drive and chewed on the mystery.

What could that horrid man in black want? It couldn't be coincidence that he was there, but Vernon was sure that he'd cleared every possible writing tool out of Harry's room before he'd locked the boy in. And, to tell the truth, those deep black eyes hadn't looked much like the eyes of a hero rescuing a prisoner in a tale. They were more the eyes of a madman, or a man pushed beyond endurance. Maybe he was Black, come back to England from wherever he'd gone. But in the letter, Sirius had called the boy "Harry" not "Potter." Perhaps there was some way for the mumbo jumbo merchants to tell that Harry was sick. Though heavens only knew how that had happened.

Maybe he was so hungry he ate one of the mice himself, offered his conscience, and Vernon sat on it quickly. Hadn't he insisted that Harry get the same diet as Dudley, just in case Black did turn up and ask? And if the boy had lost a pound or two, well... No time to think about that sort of thing, he was at the house now. Best to get everything inside and hope for the best. The trunk first, and then the wretched mice. He thought better of dragging the heavy, awkward thing

to the door, but he had to put it down to get out his house key. Once he got the door open, he grunted as he picked up the trunk again and moved it into the hall. He was trying to decide whether or not to just carry it upstairs now and then fetch the mice, or go back out into the rain to fetch the mice and then bring up the trunk, when Petunia came out of the kitchen, looking worried, and glad to see him. Vernon put the trunk down in the hallway and went to give his wife a kiss. She smelled lovely and reassuring, of flour dust and cooking chicken. "Everything all right, dear?" he asked.

"How could it be?" she said, miserably, leaning against him for a hug. The poor dear was trembling, and Vernon held her closer, hoping that she would know that he meant to be her bulwark against the evils of the day, if only he could figure out how to do it.

"Dudley's all right, though, isn't he?" Vernon checked with her.

"He's frightened," Petunia said. "But he hadn't been hurt, last I saw him." She didn't sound as if she were certain that would continue. But at least it was something.

"There, there," he murmured against her hair, surprising himself with a sudden memory of doing much the same many years ago, when she'd first confessed the shame of having a freakish sister to him. She'd dreaded his reaction, feared that he'd turn away from her, but Vernon had promised her then that he'd love her no matter the consequences, and even now, with the consequences in one of his upstairs bedrooms, he knew the he always meant to keep that promise. "We'll get through this, love. We've always found a way before."

She turned her face to look up at him and started to say something, but just then came the scream.

"Dudley!" they both cried, and disentangled themselves to run up the stairs.

They reached the door to the smallest bedroom together and stopped, stunned for a moment by the strange tableau. Dudley was sitting in a chair, looking frightened. The man in black was sitting on a high, unfamiliar stool next the bed, holding out his left arm at shoulder height, waving a wand with his right, and chanting something in Latin. And Harry...

Harry was screaming. He'd pause now and then to gasp for air, but then he'd scream again. And his body was floating, arched backwards like a bow, so that the highest point was the hollow just below his ribs that came up and met something glowing like a firebrand in the stranger's left hand.

Not in my home, Goddammit! Vernon reached for the nearest heavy thing he could find and headed into the room to smash the back of the stranger's head in. He'd said he would cure the boy, not torture him!

"No!" Dudley shouted. "No, Daddy! Don't interrupt him!" Vernon hesitated, and looked at his son. "I'll never be able to move again if you interrupt him. It's some kind of spell. Professor Snape's taking the poison out of Harry. He said it would hurt and Harry said yes, but if you interrupt them, he won't be able to take the spell off of me and I can't move, Daddy, I can't."

Vernon dropped the computer keyboard he'd picked up and stumbled over it as he went to Dudley. Petunia beat him there, of course, and they discovered quickly that they couldn't move Dudley either. Or rather, they could, but all of a piece. He wasn't limp, he was frozen. Vernon let the boy's mother reassure him endlessly while he turned to look at their tormentor.

Snape (so that was his name) was still chanting, his face whiter than before and his expression blank with the kind of concentration Vernon associated with doing something as difficult as surgery. Harry'd stopped screaming at least,

though the tears were falling to the pillow. It took a lot to make Harry cry. Vernon had seen signs of the aftermath of tears now and then, but he hadn't seen actual tears since Harry was very small. What was Snape doing, draining the life out of the boy? Whatever it was, it was hard work to do it. Vernon had thought that all this magic business was some kind of an illicit shortcut. That wizards waved their wands and abracadabrad themselves to rewards that an honest man worked hard to achieve. He'd never thought of it as an *effort*.

Then the spell ended and Harry drifted back down to the bed as Snape suddenly relaxed and closed his eyes for a moment. Vernon felt Petunia going quiet and still beside him as they all three waited to see what the result of the spell would be. And then Harry moved and reached out a hand to touch Snape's. "Professor?" he said, "Are you all right?"

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THE MISUNDERSTANDING

SUMMARY: Snape's cleared Harry system of poison, but that's only the beginning of what needs to be done.

DARKNESS.

Weariness.

This time he'd do it. He'd let himself fall all the way to the rocks instead of invoking a levitation spell at the last moment. And if no one ever found him it would serve the ends of both sides to pretend that he was working somewhere, hidden away, blending the acids and metals and harsh alkalines into potions of power. Let them. He would be at peace at least, beyond caring which side won. And all he had to do was let himself lean forward.

"Professor Snape?" a young voice. How had a student followed him here? And then, impossibly, the touch of a hand resting against his own. His eyes flew open and found themselves ensnared by eyes of green that could not, could never be, looking back at him again. "Are you all right?"

And then his vision widened, and he saw the tangle of black hair, the crooked scar dark against the pallor of illness. *Harry*. Snape blinked, and then blinked again, bringing himself back to the present. *I'm needed*. He swallowed and forced his shoulders to straighten, his face to align itself into the familiar mask before checking on Dudley. Vernon had come back, and Petu-

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nia was with him, but they didn't look like they were going to interfere just yet. He turned back to Harry and bent his head forward, letting the hair fall to shade him from the glares of the Dursleys. "Are you?" he asked Harry, certain that he could not answer Harry's question in the presence of such company.

Harry glanced towards his relations and didn't press, "I feel a lot better. Hungry, though. Does this mean I'm cured?"

"It means that the fatigue poisons have also left your system," Snape said carefully, setting the snowglobe, still faintly glowing, onto the shelf near the bed, and then pulling the blankets back up to cover the boy. "Temporarily at least, you should feel much improved, but I doubt it will last long. The damage has your humors too far out of balance to let them realign without any side effects." He checked Harry's forehead. Warmer, already, but not feverish yet. "Some food will help, of course. And you may wish to take the opportunity to bathe."

That distraction was shiny enough. Harry's expression went from concerned to somewhere between relieved and pleading. "Really? Can I have a bath instead of a shower?"

Snape felt his eyebrow go up. He much preferred showers, on the whole, except when he wanted to soak out an ache. Ah. "We'll arrange to keep you from drowning," he said, feeling himself make the final lock back into control. Now he could deal with the Muggles. He turned on his heel, letting the cloak swirl dramatically for effect, and was pleased when Vernon and Petunia shrank in on themselves like first years. "And are the boy's clothes ready, yet?" he asked Petunia, his voice dripping with impatience.

"Nearly," she said. And then she colored with anger. "What have you done to Dudley?"

"Nothing that I cannot undo," Snape told her. "Unlike poi-

soning defenseless creatures." He turned his focus on Dudley. "Are you in pain, Mr. Dursley?" he asked, pointedly.

Dudley gulped, large eyed, and made a visible decision to tell the truth. "No. I mean, no, sir."

"Let's keep it that way," Snape said. He looked back at Petunia. "Dinner. In twenty minutes?" He made it a question, although by the smells coming up from the downstairs she would have no difficulty, even working under the threat against her son.

She nodded, tight lipped, and stamped out of the room.

That left Vernon. Snape looked him up and down, noting the soggy condition of his shoes. "You brought the trunk, and the mice?"

Vernon straightened nervously. "Of course I did. They're downstairs. When I heard the screaming..."

Snape waved a hand to hush him. He didn't need to hear about the screaming just now. "Put the trunk in the guest room until I can make sure it hasn't been tampered with," he ordered.

"Tampered with?" Dursley stammered. "Impossible. It's still got the locks I put on it."

"Muggle locks?" Snape dismissed them. "When you've done that, bring up the things for the bird and clean out the cage. By that time, I shall have gotten Potter fit for the clean clothes which your wife should at long last have ready. Bring up his pajamas at the very least."

Dursley colored strangely and he looked at Snape as if he had just revealed some kind of hideous growth. "Pervert," he muttered, edging closer to Dudley protectively.

It took Snape twenty seconds to work out what he meant. It was very nearly the last straw.

Somehow, through the scarlet mist, he managed to haul Vernon down the hallway, away from the children's hearing, before he pinned the grotesque fat fool against the wall. "You accuse me of

abusing the boy!" he hissed. "If it weren't that you had locked him in and tried to starve him half to death he wouldn't be in danger of fainting and cracking his skull in the bath!"

"I...I..." Vernon stammered, but Snape was in no mood to listen to him.

"And as for your vile assumption about my motives," Snape went on. "I work with teenagers. They are, as a class, unkempt, uncouth, ungraceful, unfinished, and entirely unattractive! I'd sooner bed a dryad, leaves, bark, and all! At least she might have more to bring to the equation than mindless hormones!"



Harry sat up in the bed, wondering how on earth Professor Snape had managed to pick up his uncle and haul him out of the room. As pallid as Snape had gone after finishing that antidote spell, Harry wouldn't have thought he had the strength, and he hadn't noticed him using any kind of a spell. "What did Uncle Vernon say?" he asked Dudley.

Dudley flushed, and lied. "I didn't hear." He swiveled his eyes toward the door to the hall. "What do you think he's doing to Daddy?"

"I don't know," Harry said, but he wanted to find out. He pushed off the blankets and swung his legs around to get up, and then paused to let the room stop swaying. "Ooh."

"Did he hurt you?" Dudley asked. Harry nearly laughed. It had to be the first time he'd ever heard Dudley sound like he cared what had happened to him. Probably he was worried about whether or not he came next.

"Yes," he said. "But it helped. I felt worse before." Except that he hadn't been quite so light headed. But the pain from this spell didn't linger the way that pain did from a cruciatus

spell. It was already taking on a distance, like something that had happened years before. Harry stood up. The wave of dizziness wasn't as bad because he was expecting it, and after a few deep breaths he felt certain enough of his legs to cross lightfooted to the doorway and sneak a look.

"What's happening?" Dudley was frantic.

"Shh," Harry told him. "I can't hear." But he still couldn't hear. Snape had Uncle Vernon pinned against the farthest bit of wall, and seemed to be telling him off fiercely, but his voice was too soft to make out through the increasingly loud pounding of Harry's heart in his ears. He gave up and let his knees fold so that he ended up sitting by Hedwig's cage. She blinked at him and made a noise in her throat.

"Sorry, Hedwig," he told her, remembering the night she had been so ill he had thought she would die. She had cried out in pain as he held her in her arms until finally they had both fallen asleep with exhaustion, and Harry was beginning to think that if Snape were right, that might have been when he had transferred the poison over to his own body.

"What about Daddy?" Dudley interrupted. Harry sighed and took pity on the lump, just to shut him up.

"He's not turning him into a toad, if that's what you're worried about," he said. "Just giving him a piece of his mind. He'll only *feel* like he's been skinned. What *did* Uncle Vernon say?"

"Nothing intelligent," came Snape's voice from the door. "What are you doing out of bed, Potter?"

"I thought I should get Hedwig out of her cage if Uncle Vernon's going to clean it, sir" Harry said, not wanting to put another match to Snape's sputtering fuse. "She doesn't like him much." Beyond Snape he could see Uncle Vernon, scuttling off downstairs like a frightened crab. Snape's eyes were

even more like tunnels than usual, and Harry had never seen him looking quite so ragged around the edges. "Are you sure you're all right, Professor?"

Snape closed his eyes, and when he opened them again they were a little saner. "I'm tired, Potter," he said gruffly. He almost looked as if he were going to say more, but if so he changed his mind, and changed the topic. "Let's get you cleaned up, and fed, and then I think we can all take a chance to rest."



THE CLEANING

SUMMARY: *Cleaning up goes so much faster if everyone is doing their share.*

VERNON ESCAPED down the stairs, cheeks still flaming. He hadn't been dressed down so viciously since old Grunnings had retired. And Grunnings had never had bored into him with eyes so strange. But Grunnings had been just as frighteningly able to switch from anger to contempt.

"What filthy ideas you Muggles have," He could still hear Snape's cold growl. "Even if I were twisted enough to consider the possibility, I have responsibilities. What you suggest would be a betrayal of trust nearly as foul as leaving a five year old child to sleep in a boot cupboard — or was he younger?"

"...." Vernon had felt the blood go to his feet. How could Snape have known about Harry's cupboard?

"Answer me!" Snape had hissed, and Vernon found himself answering in spite of knowing that the truth was the wrong answer.

"He was three! It was plenty of room then!" He'd crawled in himself with a hammer, to bend down the nails that stuck down from the stairs. Harry's cot fit beautifully, really it had. *And Harry had cried every night for a month when he was locked in.* Vernon's conscience reminded him now.

"I see." Snape had cocked his head, studying Vernon like a lizard watching a grasshopper, growing colder and more remote all the while. Vernon shuddered thinking of it. And then Snape had released him, as if he were something disgusting. "Fetch the trunk," he'd ordered dismissively, and Vernon had been grateful for the chance to get away.

He heard Petunia clattering pans angrily in the kitchen and he was glad that she wasn't in the hallway to witness his clumsiness in collecting the trunk. He didn't want to go upstairs and face Snape again, truly he didn't. Not with his conscience pointing out how quickly he and Petunia had been to move Harry upstairs when that first letter addressed to his cupboard had arrived. He'd known all along that it wasn't just a matter of being practical, wanting to keep the extra room for Dudley's play area. Even at three Harry had been uncanny sometimes — seeing things that shouldn't be. They'd had to at least try to train him out of it! He'd have been shirking his duty to let the boy grow up into a freak! *It was a matter of discipline*, he told himself. *It wasn't abuse*.

But he wasn't going to try to explain that to Snape.

He finally got a decent grip on the heavy trunk and started carrying it upstairs. When he got high enough to look into the hallway he paused to watch as Dudley came out of the bathroom and went to the linen closet to collect towels. He could hear water running in the tub. Snape was standing in the hall near the guest room door, waving his wand. As Vernon watched, Harry came floating out of the bedroom, wrapped in one of the blankets.

"Really, Professor," Harry said. "I think I could manage."

"Don't argue with me, Potter," Snape said. "I've put too much work into you to let you drown in the bath."

"But, Dudley..." Harry said, his cheeks pink.

"Your cousin owes you something more concrete than a mere apology," Snape said, looking along to Dudley. "Isn't that so, Mr. Dursley?"

Dudley blushed and nodded frantically. "Yes, sir." He looked at Harry uncertainly, though, and Vernon wondered what on earth Snape wanted him to do. "Don't worry, Harry. He's done something weird to the tub. It's not like I'm going to have to hold your head out of the water or anything. Just ... hand you the shampoo, or fetch towels or things like that."

"You'll do," said Snape severely, "whatever young Potter requires you to do. And gently." He steered both boys into the bathroom, where Vernon couldn't see them anymore, but he could hear water splashing, and an odd clanging noise that he didn't recognize.

He reestablished his grip on the trunk and went on upstairs. As his foot reached the hallway, Snape appeared and propped himself like a guardian against the bathroom doorjamb, facing toward the stairs. Vernon felt his shoulders shrink in on themselves, and he didn't ask any questions, but moved quickly to put the trunk into the guest room. Every time he saw Snape, he had a feeling that the man was re-evaluating Vernon's place on the evolutionary scale. Lower.

He went back out to the car to fetch the mice and the bird's things. The bedding took a trip all by itself, and he felt Snape glaring at him from the bathroom doorway the whole time as he put it into Harry's room and started back down for the rest of it. From the bathroom he could hear the boys' voices.

"Hey! Try not to get the shampoo in my eyes, Dudley!"

"Sorry! Sorry! It's just I've never done this before."

"It's all right... just give me a towel..."

As Vernon was coming in with the cage of mice in one hand and the owl perch in the other, Petunia opened the door of the kitchen. "Ask *him* if he wants me to set the table for all of us down here, to eat like civilized people, or not."

"Yes, dearest," Vernon said. He talked himself into approaching Snape all the way up the stairs, reminding himself to keep his chin up as he passed along Petunia's question. And then he almost forgot it when he saw Harry's owl perching on the hall table with a small gray owl sitting beside it. Both birds mantled and hissed, watching the mice cage eagerly as Vernon edged past them to talk to Snape.

"What is it?" Snape asked, when Vernon didn't say anything.

"Er... Petunia... my wife... uhm... Did you want us all to eat downstairs like civilized people, then?"

Snape considered it for a moment, and Vernon took the chance to glance into the bathroom past him. He *had* altered the porcelain fixture, blast him, turning it into a kind of a sitting bath, with a lid to keep the heat inside like something from an earlier century. Harry was up to his neck in it. And Dudley was at the other end, adjusting the taps. He looked to be all right, if damp. That was something. Dudley was all right.

"Dinner downstairs will be fine. In the interim, disassemble the bird cage, sanitize the litter tray at one of the downstairs sinks, and bring it back so that you can set up the perch properly."

"But ..." Vernon stammered, looking at the birds, who were eying him still intently. "...the perch... I mean, the one the pet store man gave me... it won't fit in the cage...not with the bird on top of it."

Snape made a noise in his throat. "That cage is only fit for use when travelling. It's much too small for a snowy owl on an every day basis. The perch will do by itself."

"But... but... It will... They will leave droppings! All over!" Petunia would never stand for it!

"These are wizards' birds," Snape said with amused patience. "They are housebroken. If they leave...traces...outside their litter trays it is either because they are sick, or making comments."

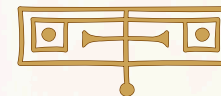
The smaller owl meeped cheerfully, raised its tail, and sent a streak of white down the leg of the table. And Harry's owl opened its beak like it was laughing at Vernon's shock.

"I'd hurry if I were you," Snape said. "They don't like to use dirty litter trays." He took the cage of mice from Vernon's numb fingers, and waved him off to do the cleaning. The owls' attention immediately went from Vernon to Snape. Vernon started towards Harry's room, wondering how he'd get the bird mess cleaned up before Petunia saw it. Behind him he could hear Snape opening the mice cage. "Hungry are you?" he said to the birds and Vernon groaned to himself.

Not on the hallway carpet! he thought, ducking into Harry's room to avoid the swoop of the owls as they dived after the mice that Snape had released. He caught a sickening glimpse of the smaller one plunging its claws into a mouse a third its size and looked back to see how Snape was taking the carnage.

He looked pleased.

Vernon hurried. The sooner he could get Snape appeased and out of his house, the better!



THE DINNER

SUMMARY: *There's nothing like a home-cooked meal...*

PETUNIA DURSLEY jammed some flowers into a vase for a centerpiece and positioned it neatly at the center of the table. Since Snape had called her bluff about a civilized dinner, she was going to make certain that he would see just how *correctly* she could present the meal. Snape would have nothing to sneer at on her table. She'd even risked putting a setting of the good china at Harry's place, not that she expected her nephew to be eating the *real* meal. Beef tea and dry toast for Harry, fried chicken and buttered dinner rolls for the family and the freak. The mashed potatoes, now with a lovely brown crust from being in the oven, would have to be served to everyone, as would the rice pudding for dessert, but Harry could just sit and watch as the rest of them ate their garden salads, summer squash topped with brown sugar, and new peas in butter. The single best thing about Dudley's diet was that it had meant she'd had a good stock of fresh vegetables in the house.

Petunia had no illusions about her culinary skills. They were excellent. In school, the domestic arts teacher had been the only one to give her the marks she deserved, and the praise she'd been given by her parents for her cooking, at least, had never been forced or false. It was her gooseberry

fool that had caught Vernon's attention at that church social when they were young. Her Yorkshire pudding was the best she'd ever tasted; her pot roast a feast fit for a king. There were few delights she loved so much as watching her husband and son clean their plates, and now she filled Dudley's salad bowl, adding croutons and cheese, bacon bits and salad dressing with a generous hand. She was not about to subject her son to the misery of a plain lettuce salad and bare broiled chicken breast tonight. Not when he was under this sort of stress!

She listened for the sound of the others coming down the stairs as she lit the can of fuel for the chafing dish. Vernon had gone upstairs five minutes ago with the basket of Harry's clean clothes, and then come back down to finish scrubbing the birdcage back in the utility sink in the garden shed. Presumably, by the time she had the hot food positioned on the table, Snape and the two boys would be ready to eat, but she had better warn Vernon to clean himself up.

Vernon was washing his hands at the kitchen sink, and she was just setting the chicken into the chafing dish, when she heard Dudley's feet on the stairs and went to check on her son's condition. He'd been splashed with water, and not allowed to change into something dry, and by the way he kept glancing up at Snape, he'd had another fright. Not that it wasn't frightening, in and of itself, watching Snape floating Harry down the staircase like some kind of a distorted helium balloon. Harry was wearing pajamas, heavy socks, and one of Dudley's older dressing gowns — not, she noted, one of the dressing gowns she'd decided to pass along to him yet — and his hair was already springing up into its usual defiant wildness in spite of being wetted down. When he reached the bottom of the steps, Snape nodded a command

to Dudley, who held out a hand to support his cousin while Snape said something to someone in the hall before following the two boys down the stairs.

"Who's up there?" Petunia demanded to know. She had enough freaks in this house already.

"Just the owls, Mummy," Dudley said quickly. "They've already had their suppers."

"And I doubt you'd want them to join us in any case," Snape said staring at her sourly. "I take it that our supper is prepared?"

"Of course it is," Petunia said, giving him glare for glare. "This way." She led the way into the dining area, resenting the fact the Snape had Dudley supporting Harry as he walked. It was undignified, and it didn't look to her like either boy was happy with it. Both of them knew the usual seating arrangement when there was a guest, though, so there was no arguing about it from the boys when they saw that four of the places had filled salad bowls, and Harry's didn't.

Snape was another matter. He sat down in the place she'd pointed out and then looked at the empty bowl in front of Harry and the full bowl where Dudley was pulling out the chair for himself. "I think not," he said, pulling his wand out from some hidden pocket.

"What...?" Petunia started to say, but it was too late. Dudley's salad bowl had already gone empty.

Dudley, who had picked up his fork already, sighed and put it back down. "Aren't I going to get to eat at all?" he asked Snape wistfully.

"You'll get the same thing as your cousin does," Snape said smoothly, and then angled a peculiar, corner-of-the-mouth smile at Petunia. "Just in case."

Harry bit his lip to keep from smiling, and busied himself

with his napkin, but Petunia saw him anyway and wished she dared do something about his impertinence. "There's nothing wrong with the food," she told Snape, almost wishing that she *had* thought of poisoning it somehow. "Dudley, you may serve the beef tea to yourself. It will need some salt."

Dudley brightened and reached for the tureen and ladle. He filled his salad bowl, started to put the ladle back, and then stopped, glancing uncertainly from Snape to Harry to his mother. "Um..." he started, and then frowned at his hands. "Should I serve some to Harry, then?"

Petunia opened her mouth to say that Harry could tend himself, but Snape was faster than she was. "Dish both bowls," he ordered. "And then, to ensure that you have made a fair division, Mr. Potter will choose the one from which he wishes to eat." Snape ate a bite of his salad, unconcerned by the astonished stares he was getting from the rest of the table. Even Harry, Petunia realized, was surprised. He was sneaking looks from under his hair at Snape, warily, as if the man were about to grow an extra head.

Vernon came to the table as Dudley was carefully measuring the level of the tea in both bowls to make sure that it was exactly the same, and she could see that he was ready to make the best of things. Petunia wasn't sure she wanted to make the best of things, except that it would be one in Snape's eye, but she accepted her husband's cheerful, "Dinner looks lovely, my dear," and the peck on the cheek that was her due. Still, as she began to eat her salad, she preferred to chew on the puzzle of Harry and Snape.

There wasn't any question that Snape knew Harry, at least. To the indignity that had been put upon her, she could add the tiny consolation that at least her home wasn't about to be

invaded by every random wizard in the country. But Petunia was beginning to doubt whether Snape *liked* Harry. Granted, the boy was aggravating enough to try the patience of a saint. If anyone knew *that*, it was Petunia. The formal way that the man dealt with both boys might just be because he was a teacher, but it seemed to her that Harry was being as cautious of Snape's temper as Dudley was. And Vernon. *Men!*

She sat up straighter, made herself move the fork more precisely, to show Snape that she was not going to conform her behavior to his anger, and glared at Vernon until he straightened too. They'd keep the Dursley pride intact if she had anything to say about it! "Dudley, sit up straight. And stop fooling with that spoon and eat your beef tea."

"It's gone cold," Dudley complained, but softly, and his eyes looked at her reproachfully, as if she'd hit him or something.

She instantly forgave him for slumping and looking defeated. "Give it here, and I'll reheat it," she said, reaching for the bowl.

"No need," said Snape, raising his wand threateningly and aiming it toward Dudley. Petunia froze, waiting, but Snape only said, "*Thermos*," and the broth in Dudley's bowl began to steam.

Magic again! At my table! It was outrageous! And rude! And...



Vernon Dursley wished he had the temerity to kick his wife under the table. Petunia had been getting visibly angrier ever since the salad course, and it wasn't helping Vernon's attempt to be civil. How on earth was he going to manage to appease Snape at this rate? He hoped to somehow draw Snape out on the subject of where Harry got that gold coin; but he'd never manage it if his wife kept interrupting every attempt at conversation Vernon started with indignant sniffs or dismissive

snorts whenever Snape deigned to reply. The weather had not been a good conversational gambit. Nor had football, or politics. He'd finally gotten something like a real conversation going by pretending interest in the topic of the bird and its care, but Petunia had killed it the moment Harry had started trying to answer Dudley's question about owl pellets. She was right; owl pellets weren't a very appetizing subject, but what the devil were they going to talk about now? The only other common topic he could think of was Harry. Vernon had a feeling that talking about Harry with Snape would be inviting trouble. He checked the solemn face and dark eyes with a glance. Petunia wasn't the only one who'd been getting angrier.

It was uncomfortably like being caught between two volcanoes.

He was proud of Dudley. His son knew enough to keep his head down in a windstorm after all. There had been times when Vernon had wondered how Dudley would survive the first few years of his working life long enough to be promoted to his proper level. But Smeltings had done the trick, it seemed. Defer to a superior force when you had to, and then wait for the chance to be senior so you could turn it around on someone else, that was the road to an easy life.

And, miracle of miracles, Harry was behaving himself. Snape had Dudley serving his cousin... slaving to him hand and foot, really... and Harry wasn't lording it much at all. It was still, "Thank you, Dudley," and "Could you please give me some more potatoes, Dudley." Vernon felt a certain peculiar kind of pleasure in knowing that he'd trained the boy to be polite and remember his proper place even under unusual circumstances. Of course, it might just be that Harry was tired. Vernon hadn't missed the way the boy's spoon trembled as he worked his slow way through the pudding.

Dudley put down his own spoon and looked over to the three adults, still working on their entrees, and sighed. "Do you think you'd like some peas, Harry?" he asked.

Snape glanced up from his plate. "No," he said shortly. "He wouldn't."

Dudley sighed and ran his finger along the plate to get the last bits of pudding. "More potatoes then?" he asked Harry. "I think there's a little left."

"Sorry," Harry said, leaning on one elbow and pushing the pudding on his plate around with his spoon. "It's funny. I thought I was hungry enough to eat everything on the table when we came down, and now I'm not even sure I can finish this much."

Petunia radiated disbelief, but Vernon frowned as Snape reached out a long white hand to rest it against Potter's cheeks and forehead in turn. "He's not still sick, is he? I thought the whole point of that whatyoumaycallit that you did to the boy was to get the poison out of him."

"There's a good bit of damage to be made up," Snape said, quietly. "Try to manage a little more, if you can, Potter. You'll need the strength."

"Yes, sir." Harry scooped up a little more pudding and tasted it unenthusiastically.

"Well, then, could I go and watch television?" Dudley asked. "I mean, while everyone else is finishing? It's not lightning anymore."

Snape shook his head. "No."

Petunia snorted, "There's no need to torment Dudley. Unless it makes you *happy* to torture children."

I should have kicked her! "Now, Petunia," Vernon said hastily. "I don't think..."

But it was too late, Snape was already on his feet, his wand drawn. "I have had enough!"

THE CONFRONTATION

SUMMARY: Snape loses it.

PETUNIA SAT UP straighter, glaring her defiance.

Vernon froze, torn between hiding and somehow defending his wife.

Dudley tried to vanish under the table.

Snape began the slow precise sweep of the wand, watching Petunia's eyes for the delectable moment when the small spark of uncertainty would begin to blossom into fear.

"Accio Wand!" The shrill shout from Harry's end of the table surprised them all, but none more so than Snape, whose wand abruptly twisted out of his fingers and bee-lined to Harry's hand. He snapped his head back to find Harry on his feet, whitefaced and trembling, holding the wand in a deathgrip.

Snape saw green.

Impossible! Nothing less than a Disarming Spell should be able to force a wizard to lose grip of his wand if he was on the point of casting a spell! How could this impertinent, exasperating child have managed to steal his wand with a Summoning Spell? Summoning spells were minor. They were for... for bits of chalk when you wanted to write something on the blackboard, or books you'd left on the far side of the room.

Dumbledore couldn't snatch a wand with a Summoning Spell. Dumbledore wouldn't...

Snape blinked. Stopped. Realized that he had been advancing, reaching for the wand that was *his*, forcing Harry to back away from the table. The boy was babbling something, tears running messily down his face, clutching the wand all the tighter against his chest with one hand while he pressed the heel of the other against the scar on his forehead.

And the Dark Mark was starting to burn on Snape's arm as if he'd seared it against a cauldron.

No! He pulled back, left arm seized to his chest, tangled into his cloak as if swaddling it might somehow stop the burning, right hand pressing it tighter, sealing it there, as if applying pressure might ease the relentless rise of the pain. He *had* to concentrate on calm, on *control*. He kept exquisitely still, held his breath in spite of the darkening of his vision. *There is no Need to kill*. Not a killing rage, then. Rage was not safe. Cold anger was better. He thought of his dungeons, soothing and safe and chill. Locked down. Secure. The Mark quieted a little, and he dared a slow breath. The staccato leaping of blood in his veins skipped and stuttered into a steadier rhythm. The roaring in his ears began to ease. That was better. He could hear Harry now, see the way that Harry slowly brought his hand down from his forehead.

"Please... I can't watch it again... you mustn't... I'm sorry, sir. Please..." Harry was trembling, breathing like he'd been running a race, but he seemed to recognize the glimmer of returning sanity in Snape's eyes. "You told me not to trust you!"

"So I did," Snape admitted icily, stretching for the mask of schoolteacher that had saved him for so long. He gathered his cloak and his dignity, hoping that the Dursleys would stay too stunned to interfere. "Five points to Gryffindor, Mr. Potter,"

he said, through clenched teeth. "Now. Give. Me. My. Wand."

"No," Harry said, but his voice was starting to slide back down to its proper register. "Not until you promise..." he gulped, his eyes darting back and forth across Snape's face as he sought the words he wanted. "Promise... promise not to...to do anything...rash."

"I've had this conversation with Dumbledore," Snape intoned warningly. With one trembling hand he gripped the back of his chair for support, and then hauled it over to make an obstacle between his anger and Harry's obstinacy. Couldn't Potter have saved this wretched display of Gryffindor bravado until *after* they'd all gotten some rest!?

Harry shifted his grip on the wand, holding it properly now, and backed off as far as he could go, bracing himself against the wall. "I want a promise," he repeated, pale and panting, but as determined as ever. "You won't hurt them."

"How can you defend them?" Snape was too tired to comprehend the delay, and it made him peevish. "They've neglected you, confined you, starved you..."

"It's not them I'm defending!" Harry interrupted him. A small, distractible part of Snape's mind noted that anger was darkening the boy's cheeks, and was pleased by it, since it meant that Harry hadn't completely undone the good of eating a meal when he'd cast that wretched spell. "I *need* them! I don't care if you turn them all into toads, so long as it's something you can undo again. But I won't stand for anything Unforgivable!"

Snape didn't miss the noise of sudden comprehension that Vernon made from somewhere behind him and he ground his teeth. If promising the boy that he would not use illegal curses would stop Harry from blurting out things his uncle had no need to know, it was *worth* foregoing the pleasure of making Petunia lick her nephew's boots. "Very well," he said

with exaggerated patience and held out his hand for his wand.

"Promise!" Harry insisted, bright eyes intense.

"What do you want?" Snape roared incredulously, his temper flaring hot again as he flung the chair aside and waved a dramatic arm. "A declaration in letters of flame across the ceiling? 'I Severus Snape vouchsafe that I shall not use any of the Unforgivable Curses on Harry Potter's miserable excuse for relations,' is that it?" He stepped forward. If Harry could use a Summoning Charm to grab the wand then surely *he* was powerful enough to...

"Severus?!" Petunia's voice came like a nail across glass. Snape spun, lizard fast, to meet the new threat. Vernon and Dudley were still cowering, but Petunia Dursley had gotten to her feet and she pointed a long, accusing finger at Snape. "You're the one who sent Lily that horrible Christmas card! All those weird pictures of that horned man and his dreadful hounds, leaping around in the moonlight. It gave me nightmares; and she always would insist on putting it right in the middle of the mantelpiece..."

"She kept it?" The words were out before Snape could stop them, and he knew them for a mistake when he saw the gleam of triumph in Petunia's eyes.

"Of course she *kept* it," Petunia sneered, as Snape began to think lovingly of wrapping his hands around the pale column of her neck. "I had to look at it every Christmas for years until I managed to knock it into the fire. She had a picture of you on her wall — along with all the other freaks from that school. You didn't know how to wash your hair then, either. But then again, Lily never did have very good taste in men..."

"Shut up!" Harry's voice had gone shrill again. "Shutup shutup *shutup!*" Sparks flew past Snape, and as the spell hit Petunia, her lips suddenly sealed to each other and vanished, leaving a smooth space of skin.



It was quite the most beautifully appropriate curse that Snape had ever seen. If he hadn't been so tired he would have laughed out loud. Pity he'd knocked the chair aside. If once he started laughing, he knew that his knees would buckle under him, but it was still fun to watch. Petunia's eyes popped wildly in their sockets as her fingers came up to feel across her face in panicked disbelief. For a long moment the only sound in the room was the weak murmurs of horror from the back of the stricken woman's throat.

Then, from behind him, Snape heard Harry say, "Oh, no," and the sound of something soft hitting the floor.

He's killed himself, Snape thought. He's used up all his strength cursing this wretched woman and Lord Voldemort's won. Somehow he found himself across the room, kneeling by Harry's body, checking for a pulse and breath. He found both, and closed his eyes against the dizzying wave of relief. *Not yet. Not yet, he hasn't. There's still a chance that we'll all survive.* Snape leaned heavily on his arms, waiting for the floor to make up its mind about what angle it wanted to be.

At the table, he could hear the clatter of furniture and crashing of plates as the Dursleys panicked. "Mummy!" "Petunia!" *Stupid Muggles.* Snape opened his eyes and picked up his wand from where it had fallen to the floor; then he checked Harry again and found the boy recovering gradually from his faint, staring with uncomprehending panic at the wand in Snape's hand. *No more spells for you or you'll get that death-wish of yours,* Snape thought, and patted the child's shoulder to keep him from trying to get up. "It's all right, Harry," he mumbled, wishing that the world would stop going gray on him. "I promise."

Harry slumped back against the wallpaper, watching dully as Snape fumbled the vial of Endurance Potion out of his vest pocket. There wasn't much more than half a swallow left.

Still, that would probably work for long enough. Probably. He pulled the cork with his teeth, unwilling to use his wand hand for anything but holding tight to his wand, and let the bittersweet lightning pool onto his tongue, waiting until he'd gotten the last drop before forcing himself to swallow.

He half-expected the potion to make him ill — he'd never taken it on a full stomach before — but the usual painful clench in his middle was actually easier this time, and he made a mental note to recommend food with the dose, even as the flood of power scythed up through the veins near his stomach to his heart, slashed through his lungs, back to his heart and then burst outwards in full flame to every extremity.

Colors returned to his vision. Harry's eyes were green, startled, frightened... looking past Snape. Snape turned, saw Vernon with the carving knife, and shot out his wand. "Obliviate!" he ordered, and all three Dursleys rocked with the power of the spell. Snape got to his feet and plucked the knife from Vernon's loose grasp. "Sit down," he told the man, and Vernon wandered back to his chair and sat, blinking absently until Snape petrified him to keep him out of trouble.

"I thought you could only tell people what to do if you used an Imperius spell," Harry said sounding confused enough to say whatever first came into his head.

"Threats work nicely," Snape purred, rather enjoying the temporary sensation of health that the potion had provided. "But in this instance, it's a matter of people being very suggestible when they've just had their memories erased." He pointed his wand at Petunia, considering whether or not to remove Harry's hex quickly enough that she would have no memory of it. It wasn't that he wanted to. It would be an experiment of interest to discover just how long the curse would last, and Petunia was the best

subject he could think of. But he probably should — even obliterated memories could be recovered if a person had enough cause to worry at them — and he had no desire to have Petunia blindsided him with childhood memories again. “Restorus.” Petunia swayed a little as her mouth re-formed, and felt at her face uncertainly, but she sat when Snape told her to. She seemed to be recovering her wits faster than her husband or her son, so Snape used a binding spell to tie her down with magical ropes and gag her. It wouldn’t be as comfortable for her as the spell he’d used on her husband, but that was no loss. He’d risk the neighbors looking in.

Dudley had ignored the others as he became less dazed and was trying to hide pieces of chicken in his pockets, having crammed the remaining drumstick into his mouth already. Snape snapped his fingers, and then had to snap them again, practically under the boy’s nose, to get his attention. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Uhm...” Dudley removed the chickenleg from his mouth reluctantly and swallowed. “I... I think... hadn’t I just asked Harry if he wanted some peas?” he answered, and then frowned, seeing his cousin sprawled by the door. “Harry, what are you...?”

“Excellent.” Snape froze Dudley too, mid-sentence, with the chicken leg still inches from his opened mouth. The Memory Charm had covered the entire disastrous conversation. Vernon wouldn’t remember that Harry had blurted out his need of his relations and Petunia wouldn’t remember Snape’s first name. “Come along, Mr. Potter,” he told Harry, as he turned to levitate his patient up the stairs.

Harry had curled up, hiding his face in his arms the way that children did when they were crying and trying not to let anyone see. Snape sighed and wished that the potion had restored his patience as well as it did his energy. “Now what?”



THE LETTER

SUMMARY: *Even good deeds have consequences.*

70
“**I’M SORRY,**” Harry mumbled, scrubbing at his face with his sleeve, “I’m sorry, Professor.” He couldn’t stop crying and he had to. It was only making Snape angry again. He uncurled and started trying to pull himself upright against the wall, keeping his face averted. “I’m all right.. It’s just... just... I don’t know... maybe Hagrid will want me...”

“Hagrid? What would Hagrid want with you?” Snape said sharply, reaching out to take hold of Harry’s arm. Harry jerked away from him, trying not to break into fresh sobs at the thought of even Hagrid rejecting him.

“You ought to be happy,” Harry told Snape bitterly. “I mean, you’ve wanted me expelled ever since I got to Hogwarts.” He knew that Snape would never miss an opportunity like this. Harry had used magic twice. No, three times, if you counted poisoning himself. He’d never see Hogwarts again. He’d heard the letter flap clank out in the hallway. Uncle Vernon may not have shown him the warning letter from when he’d did the poison thing, but there was no question of a Muggle postman coming this late of a Saturday. Cornelius Fudge wasn’t going to save him from the consequences of cursing an aunt *this time*.

“We’re not going to discuss it,” Snape snapped. “Not in

front of the Muggles.” He ignored Harry’s attempts to back further off and steered him abruptly into one of the chairs from the dining table’s end. “Animatus,” he cast on the chair, and Harry was startled to feel the wooden legs under him shift position. “Hold on,” Snape went on, and Harry thought it was a command to him until the chairs of the arm pulled free of their supports and wrapped themselves gently, but immovably, around Harry’s upper arms and chest.

“What...?” Harry gasped as the chair changed shape, tilting back like a recliner, so that he was stranded on his back, without leverage to fight free, even if he had the strength. Tears ran back, into his ears, and he closed his eyes, turning his face away from Snape. He hated crying in front of people who didn’t like him.

“Take the boy upstairs to his bed,” Snape commanded.

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The chair began to walk then, awkwardly at first, and then more smoothly as its legs grew out like a Daddy-Long-Legs around Harry. Harry took a last look back to see if Snape was going to do something worse to the Dursleys, but Snape had gone to the windows to pull the curtains to. *Doesn’t want the neighbors to look in and see him kill them, I bet*, Harry thought, too weak to do anything about it but cry. He listened, tensely, as the chair worked its peculiar way up the staircase, extending and collapsing legs as it needed. But Snape followed the chair and Harry almost straight away, eating a roll with some pieces of chicken sticking out the sides. Harry blinked and stared, sniffing to try to clear his stuffed nose, as the chair kept taking him farther away from where Snape was bending to pick up the parchment envelope on the hall floor and looking at it while eating his sandwich for all the world like a normal person trying to catch a snack in the middle of a busy

day. Then the chair reached the top of the stairs, and Harry couldn't see anything but the walls and the ceiling of the upstairs hall. And Hedwig and Pigwidgeon, who appeared in a flutter of feathers and settled on the wooden rails that were holding Harry into the chair.

"At least you still love me," Harry said to Hedwig, wishing he could get one arm free so he could pet her properly. She seemed to understand that he couldn't do more than raise his hands, and she walked down the chair to where she could butt her head up into his hand to get scratched.

Harry stroked Hedwig's feathers, and thought back to the horrible moment when his scar had given a twinge and he'd realized that Snape was about to do something truly dreadful to Aunt Petunia if Harry didn't stop him. He still didn't completely understand how he'd managed to Summon Snape's wand without his own, but the moment it had hit his hand he'd been hit with a horrible wave of weakness and the realization that he'd deliberately broken the laws about underage magic use. And then Snape had gone absolutely dead white with fury, and Harry's scar had hurt so much that all he could do was try to explain. He didn't have the strength to fight back with anything more than words. And he had had to fight back. If he could do magic without a wand, then Snape, who was a fully trained wizard, could too, if he had a chance to think about it. And talking *had* worked, eventually. Snape had started to pull himself back to his usual sarcastic self. At least until Aunt Petunia had started in.

Harry was in two minds about the curse he'd gone and put on Aunt Petunia to stop her from tormenting Snape. Part of him loved it, and thought it perfect. He couldn't get any more expelled anyway, so he might as well go out with a bang. And

part of him was terrified, because he was sure that the Dursleys would never let him stay after a direct attack like that, and because even if the Ministry wasn't noticing magic he'd done without a wand, they were certain to notice magic he did with one. He wasn't sure if Snape's Memory Charm had blocked the Dursleys from remembering the way Aunt Petunia had temporarily lost her mouth, and he wasn't sure why Snape had cast it. Maybe the professor had done it so that Harry wouldn't be thrown into the streets, but Harry wasn't sure three more years of being locked into his room was an improvement.

The chair had maneuvered its way through Harry's door and taken up a position by the bed as he ruminated. Now it waited patiently for further instructions, and Harry was forced to wait too, as Snape came scowling into the room and sat at the desk, laying the opened letter on the top and then rummaging through the drawers. Harry held very still and tried not to breathe too loudly. That was hard, since his nose was still blocked, and he kept having to breathe through his mouth.

"Haven't you got a quill, Potter?" Snape asked, slamming shut the bottom drawer.

"In my trunk," Harry said. There wasn't anything to write with in the desk. He'd had to take a bit of broken pencil lead from a crack in the wood of one of the drawers and put it under a fingernail to write his note to Snape.

"Try again," Snape said, impatiently.

"Dudley's got pens in his room," Harry offered, wondering what Snape wanted one for.

Snape got up and strode off, and Harry couldn't help but notice that he was moving *right* for the first time since he'd arrived. Right for Snape anyway, quickly between places, and deliberately when he was studying something. There

must have been something potent in that vial Snape had drank from, and Harry wished he could have some of it so he'd feel better too. He'd gotten to the point where he desperately needed to blow his nose and wash his face, but he'd settle for being able to curl up in bed on one side.

"Where does he keep his inkwell?" Snape roared from the other room.

"The ink's inside the pens," Harry called back, cheered up a little by the thought of a confused Snape investigating the jumble of pens and pencils in the box on Dudley's desk. Dudley fancied himself an artist, off and on, and destroyed a block of paper every so often tracing repetitious recreations of his favorite videogame characters, or coloring pictures he'd printed from the internet. As a result, he had gotten gifts of all sorts of colored markers, pencils and crayons over time, and given Dudley's reluctance to get rid of anything he considered his own, the collection was considerable. "Most of the pens, anyway," Harry added, remembering that he was in no position to bait Snape. "You had better check."

"Blasted Muggles," Snape said, coming back into Harry's room with an assortment of pens and some paper. He sat at the desk again, trying pen after pen. "How can you get a decent script out of ..." he muttered, discarding one after the other. He finally settled on a felt tip that had been rejected before he got to the end of the handful and took out a pocket-knife to trim the end into the shape he wanted.

"Couldn't you use a pencil?" Harry suggested, when the felt tip died spectacularly, bleeding purple ink all over Snape's hand.

"Not for this," Snape said, and then glanced over at Harry, scowled all the harder, and pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket. "Blow your nose, boy," he ordered, tossing the square

of cloth neatly into Harry's hand before turning back to the problem of the pens.

"I can't reach," Harry muttered as he tried to do as he was told. The chair arms unwound, but as soon as Harry had his arms out of the way, snaked back across to imprison him around the chest. Harry blew his nose and wiped his face, and then tried asking the chair if he could sit up a little straighter. Much to his relief, the chair seemed to listen, and raised itself so that Harry had a better view.

Snape had pulled out his wand to reconfigure one of the pens into an inkwell, and gone over to retrieve a lost feather from where Hedwig's cage had been. Now he was making a proper quill tip with his penknife. Harry watched and scratched Hedwig's chest feathers and the top of Pig's head, wondering what Snape was writing.

Much to his surprise, when Snape was finished, he brought the piece of paper over for Harry to read. Harry gaped at him, and it wasn't until Pigwidgeon fluttered up to rest on Snape's hand and merp quizzically at the paper that Harry realized that he'd better take it and read it before Snape got more annoyed.

It read:

Dear Madam Hopkirk,

Were you to properly investigate the use of magic at 4 Privet Drive rather than issuing warning letters indiscriminately, you would find that the spells cast here involved no wand other than my own. Presumably, the Ministry has failed to notify you that I have been assigned to correct the deficiencies in Mr. Potter's schoolwork, caused by the incessant interruptions to his schedule over the past year. Please refer any questions you may have to Arthur Weasley.

As I shall be here for some time, and the Muggles of this

house are less than pleased by the necessity, I would ask that you not interfere again. Mr. Potter has a great deal of work to do if he is to successfully complete his O.W.L.s.

Severus Snape

Head of Slytherin House

Hogwarts

Harry read the letter three times, trying to make sense of it. Snape always confused him, and today he'd been more confusing than ever. He'd saved Hedwig, and Harry, then gotten angry enough to kill Aunt Petunia and Harry, and now this.

"But I used magic," Harry protested, finally meeting Snape's gaze. "Twice. Three times, really, if you count the poison. I never meant to poison myself. But tonight, I meant it. I deliberately took your wand away."

"Knowing it meant expulsion?" Snape asked, surprised. "I wouldn't have killed her, Potter."

Harry shrugged and bit his lip, "I couldn't just sit there and watch." He ducked his head, looking at Snape's left arm. "And I couldn't take the chance... I mean... someone would have noticed if you'd done anything drastic."

Snape covered the place where the Mark was with his other hand, protectively. "I doubt Lord Voldemort would have disapproved of a Imperius spell," he said carefully.

"An Imperius spell?" Harry echoed. He'd thought Snape was going to use a Cruciatus at the very least. "But that doesn't hurt."

"It does when it's removed and you remember what you did while you were under the curse," Snape pointed out in a tone somewhere between bitter remembrance and satisfaction.

"Still, I wouldn't want to take a chance on Voldemort coming to find out who you'd cast it on," Harry said, rubbing at his forehead thoughtfully. "And if it wasn't him, it would

have been the Aurors, and that would have been bad too." He sighed and slumped against the back of the chair, wishing that he didn't feel so rotten. "I'm sorry. I'm not explaining very well. Have you got any more of that potion you took?"

"No, and even if I had, you couldn't afford to lose the weight," Snape said, stepping forward to gently push Harry's hand aside and check his forehead and cheek again with one long white hand. "I should think you would have been glad to see some Aurors. Someone you could trust."

Harry hadn't realized how much pain there was in Snape's eyes before. He licked his lips, discovering the words as he said them. "I didn't want them to put you in Azkaban. I still don't."

Snape's lips twitched at the edges into an almost smile of resignation. "I might find that restful. No visitors. No responsibilities." For a moment he almost looked friendly.

"But the Dementors," Harry said, shuddering at the memory of how drained and miserable the cloaked guards of Azkaban always made him feel. There'd be no rest for anyone at Azkaban with the Dementors there.

Snape's face closed away again. "I've nothing left for them to take," he said, leaving Harry to go and stare out the window.

It wasn't true, no matter how much Snape might think it. Harry had seen too much to believe that Snape didn't care or feel pity or joy, even if it was only for his Slytherins. "I don't believe that," he said.

Snape didn't answer for a long time. Then he sighed, and quietly said, "Believe what you like," before turning back to look at Harry. "Is there anything in this room that you don't want destroyed?"

THE PLAN

SUMMARY: *Snape has to figure out what to do with the Dursleys.*

78 **HARRY BLINKED**, completely confused, and Snape prayed that he'd managed to distract the boy away from uncomfortable topics for a while. He didn't have all that much longer before the potion would wear off, and he'd have to deal with the Dursleys before then. There wasn't any time for heart-to-heart talks with students or specious bouts of introspection. Not just now.

"I don't understand, sir," the boy said warily, pulling the snowy owl closer to himself. "Are you going to blow it up or something?"

"Or something," Snape said, realizing he'd have to expand on his plans in order to get cooperation. "I need a place to put your Aunt Petunia until I'm ready to deal with her again. This room has bars on the windows, and a flap for food in the door. If necessary, she can be left here for days."

Harry was just staring at him now, the letter in his hand forgotten. "Aunt Petunia? In here?" If it weren't that Snape already knew that the boy's temperature was going up and making him flushed, he would have ascribed the rising color in his cheeks to delight and embarrassment. "What if she needs to ... you know... go to the loo?"

Snape was pleasantly surprised by the practicality of the objection. On second thought, he wasn't. Harry must have had a lot of experience in the matter. As he considered the possibilities, his eye lit on the bag of bird bedding that Vernon had brought for the owls. "I think we can provide her the means to devise a cat box," he said with satisfaction. "A bucket of earth, and a trowel. Still, I shouldn't like to leave anything of value in here with her, so if you would kindly point them out..." Snape folded his arms, radiating impatience.

A gleam of unholy delight began to shine in Potter's eyes, and he tried unsuccessfully to fight down a grin, but at least he started looking around the room. "Well, Hedwig's things, of course. The basket with the clothes. I don't have to worry about school things; my trunk's in the other room. I don't suppose ..." he blushed. "Can we take the Big Bird blanket without letting Aunt Petunia know that I like it? She'll cut it up for the rag bag if she finds out."

"Big bird blanket?" Snape repeated incredulously, leaning down to sort through the blankets that had been on the owl's cage, since that was where Harry was looking. One of them had been imprinted with a fading drawing of a misshapen yellow ostrich, and when he held it up, Harry nodded, fidgeting uncertainly. "It's threadbare, Potter!" Not to mention covered with lumpy knots of fiber that had been pulled half-way free of the warp and woof. "As well as pilled."

"I know," Harry said, looking at his owl to avoid looking at Snape. "But I've had it ever since Dudley decided that he was too old for it. And it was still pretty fuzzy then."

Snape eyed the bedraggled, disgusting thing, wishing he could spare the energy to spell it clean of bird traces and the dirt from the tray. "If I'd known you liked this, I could have

used it for the Extractus Toxinus spell. You'd have had to burn it afterwards, most like, but it would have saved me the trouble of looking for that snowglobe."

"The snowglobe!" Harry sat up straighter and twisted, trying to see it. The chair unlimbered its legs and turned itself to save him the effort. "It's still here!" Harry sighed happily and looked at it sitting on the shelf, then frowned. "We don't have to burn it, do we?"

"No." Snape dropped the blanket gratefully and went to fetch the snowglobe from the shelf, noticing again that Harry didn't reach for it, even when he could. That surprised him. He would have thought that James's son would have been quick to break any rule, and he was certain that Petunia must have indulged in what Albus called regrettable disciplinary tactics to leave Harry afraid even now to touch the ornament. "Had we used the blanket, the toxins would have been able to work back out to the surface. Since we used this, the toxins are safely trapped inside the glass. Here. You can hold onto it," Snape said, swapping the globe for the letter.

Harry stared at it, and then, very carefully, twisted his hand around to make the snow dance, everything else forgotten for the moment as he stared into the glass sphere. Snape rolled the letter up and crooked a finger to the smaller of the two owls, which flew over to him contentedly and took the letter after only a small nibble on his fingers. Snape went to let it out the window, and the window wouldn't open more than an inch. "Blast it."

"Uncle Vernon blocked it," Harry said, pulled out of his reverie. "You'll have to let Pig wiggle out first, and then pass the letter out through the crack."

"Or use another window," Snape said. "Follow me," he told

the chair, and Harry had to let go of the owl to hang on as it obliged him. The owl flew off, to perch on the end of the bed and watch as Snape piled the bag of bedding, the mouse cage and the mouse food in Harry's lap before leading boy and chair down the hall to the master bedroom.

The room, as he had remembered, was large enough for his purposes, and the window slid upwards easily, letting in the rainswept evening breeze. Snape took a deep breath of it, grateful for the coolness of it. The little owl fluffed itself importantly as he turned to give it directions. "Straight to the Ministry, and that letter into no one's hand but Madam Hopkirk's, you understand? It's confidential."

Pigwidgeon merped confidently and took off out the window — it was blown six feet to one side as soon as it hit the breeze, but it righted itself and kept going determinedly until it vanished into the thickening night.

"I still don't understand," Harry said, tugging his bathrobe more closed. "What changed your mind about having me expelled?"

"The circumstances don't warrant it," Snape said, pulling out his wand to split the single large bed into two smaller beds, bedding and all, and shooed one of them against the far wall, and the other under the window before they lost the ability to move. "Magic used to save a life when there is no other recourse should not be grounds for expulsion," he went on, hoping that sounded logical enough to the boy. *And I no longer believe that you would be safer in the arms of your loving relations until you are old enough to battle Voldemort.* He thought of something, and managed to give Harry a wintry smile. "Besides, if you are expelled for what you did to your Aunt, then I shan't be able to claim the credit for developing that lovely new Curse, shall I?"

"Credit for what?" Good, the boy was distracted again.

Snape tapped his wand thoughtfully. "A little study, a suitably Latinate incantation, a reasonable time limit, and I believe that the clamor in the Great Hall will be considerably reduced, don't you?"

"You wouldn't! During meals?" Harry exclaimed, his eyebrows high.

"Why not?" Snape said. "Five minutes of staring at his plate without being able to do anything about it might convince even Mr. Finnegan not to talk with his mouth full." He cocked his head to look down at Harry. "Unless, of course, you want the credit for the spell."

"Not if you're going to use it on Seamus," Harry said hastily.

"Good." Snape took the pile of bird things off of Harry's lap and waved a hand at the master bathroom door. "I suggest you prepare for sleep, now, while I get anything else you want saved from your room and settle your Aunt. The chair will take you where you need to go. When you're ready for bed, take the one by the wall, please."

"Professor," Harry said, as if he'd only just remembered it, "there's a tin box," and then looked surprised at Snape's nod of comprehension. "I think that's all. All that's mine, anyway."

Snape hesitated in the doorway. "And of the things that aren't yours?"

The boy colored again, "Well, I know they're Dudley's really, but... I've been locked in there a lot, and there are some of the books I'd rather not see torn apart."

Snape was surprised. He'd never taken Potter for a reader. Then again, in comparison to Granger, none of that year ever was ever likely to be in the running for most rabid bibliomaniac. He didn't want to waste the little time or energy he had

lugging books, though... Not when Dudley could do it for him. "I'll see to the books, Potter. You see to cleaning your teeth."



The worst part of being frozen was not being able to move, Dudley thought. This was worse than the last time, because at least when Snape had frozen him upstairs he could still talk, and this time all he could do was see what was in front of him, which the boring half of the dining room. And smell things. And think. Only he couldn't think about much except what he was smelling, really.

The chicken was so close! If it weren't that whatever it was Snape had done prevented his mouth from watering, Dudley would have been drooling. It wasn't fair, letting him smell it like this. He could almost taste it, too. Fried chicken, with all the lovely crusty skin still on it instead of peeled away for his diet's sake... Dudley wished he could remember just how he came to be standing up with a piece of chicken in his hand, but it didn't matter nearly so much as wishing he knew how to move his arm, just a little.

He could hear things too, he realized. Someone was mumbling angrily over behind him to the right. It sounded like Mummy did, when you heard her through the bedroom door, sort of, only not so clear. Dudley tried to look sideways, but that didn't work either. At least she wasn't taking the chicken away. It might be easier if she did, in some ways, but if smelling it was all Dudley could do, at least he'd enjoy that much.

It had just occurred to him that he hadn't blinked in an awfully long time when Snape came back into his range of vision, holding his wand ready..

Oh, no, now he'll take away my chicken, Dudley thought, but

instead, Snape said something and waved the wand. Whatever it was that Snape said, it released Dudley from his paralysis, and he took a quick bite of the chicken before anyone could take it away from him.

"Stop stuffing your face and put that down," Snape ordered, scowling.

Dudley didn't want to put it down, but he didn't want to get frozen again, so he tried to swallow unobtrusively and then turned to the table to put down the bone. He blinked. Daddy was sitting unnaturally still, but Mummy... "What happened to Mummy?" Dudley exclaimed, looking at the shadowy black ropes that bound his mother. Her eyes were sparkling furiously over a strange black gag.

"Not enough," Snape said sourly. "Empty your pockets, Mr. Dursley, and come with me. We have work to do."

Dudley was surprised to find more chicken in his pockets. Maybe it had something to do with having been frozen. He must have gotten hungrier when Harry...

"Where'd Harry go?" Dudley asked, looking around. He checked under the table.

Snape sighed and snapped purple stained fingers under Dudley's nose. "Pay attention!" he said, in a voice that had no patience left in it.

Dudley remembered, suddenly, that this man was a wizard, and an angry one, and Possibly Insane, and a surge of fear cleared the foggiest from his thinking all of a sudden. "I'm sorry, sir, I'm sorry," he said, standing very straight. And then, before he could stop himself, he said, "What happened to your hand?" and had to clap his own hands over his mouth to keep from asking why Snape's hair was so greasy.

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. "I should have

realized..." he said to himself, and Dudley wondered what it was he should have realized, but Snape didn't explain. The wizard just readjusted his cloak and looked at Dudley with a jaundiced eye. "Try to keep your mouth closed, Mr. Dursley," Snape said, rubbing his hands together, peeling away the purple stains into a kind of sparkly dust that vanished into the air. "The effects of the Memory Charm should fade shortly, and what little discretion you possess return. In the interim, follow me. I have a task for you."

"Yes, sir," Dudley said, and then bit his tongue to keep quiet. By the feel of it, he had one more piece of chicken, hidden inside his shirt, and if he could just keep from mentioning it, maybe he'd get a chance to eat it without anyone seeing.



THE NIGHT

SUMMARY: Bedtime...

ONCE HE HAD the Dursley boy in motion, carrying books from the smallest bedroom over to the guest room, Snape collected a pillow and a blanket from the guest room bed and brought them downstairs. He left them on the hall table and went into the dining room.

Petunia looked like she had been trying to work free of the ropes. There wasn't much of a chance that she could, but he checked them anyway. Vernon was still sitting, caught mid-blink by the paralysis spell. Snape wondered for a moment whether the fat lout would be as food obsessed as his son. Probably. Snape was hungry himself. In fact, the smell of the food was making him so hungry he started to shake.

Rice pudding. Not a favorite of his. Still, it would probably stay down. Snape picked up the serving bowl and a spoon and took them into the kitchen, where he could down the lot without looking like a fool in front of the Dursleys. As he ate, the shaking eased again, and he felt the faint sizzle of the Endurance potion in his veins. Hopefully that meant he had more time before it wore off, not less. Field experimentation was never as reliable. He wished he had his study notebook, to keep track of the unusual effects. If they proved interesting he could write up a paper for *THE CALIGINOUS CAULDRON*...

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A thump from upstairs reminded him that he had yet to dispose of the Dursleys. The potion wouldn't last forever, and when it did wear off he'd be in worse shape than he'd started.

Vernon first. The Paralysis spell wouldn't last past the middle of the night. He could leave Petunia sitting there if he had to, and the only risk would be if someone looked in and saw her, but Vernon had to be dealt with tonight. Maybe he'd have the man clean off the dining room table first. It couldn't be trusted to Dudley. Snape wondered if the Dursleys had a cold-storage, where he could put the leftover food. There must be something that served the purpose. Perhaps not as large as the one in the castle...

The spoon scraped the bottom of the bowl, and Snape discovered it was empty. *Pay attention!*

He went back into the dining room and dispelled the Petrificus Totalus spell on Vernon. Vernon finished blinking and sat back, putting a hand immediately to his vest pocket. That was interesting. Snape cast a cautionary look at the nervous Muggle.

"You haven't lost it, have you?" he asked.

"No," Vernon said, pulling something small out of the pocket. "Of course not." He extended his hand, showing Snape the golden gleam of a galleon.

You've been careless, Potter, Snape thought, automatically reaching out to take the coin from Dursley. Then he had a happy thought. "Ah," he said in a plummy, pleased tone. "The very thing." The sugar surge of the rice pudding sang in his blood as he concentrated on the coin.

Then, while Dursley watched, he carefully unwrapped the gold foil and ate the chocolate inside.

"But! But!..." Vernon stammered, once he'd managed to close his mouth again. "It was solid!"

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"Of course it was *solid*," Snape said, disdainfully. "The chocolate melts otherwise." He turned to pick up the chair that he'd knocked over earlier, hoping the move would hide the new fit of shakes. That was the problem with doing charms or transfigurations without a wand; you had to use far more energy to spin the magic into coherence. He'd forestalled Vernon from asking about wizard money — and if Harry had any — but if he'd been thinking more clearly he would have done it another way. He pushed the leftover gold foil into his pocket, wishing the chocolate had tasted better. At least he'd managed to move most of the gold into the wrapper...

"Petunia? Darling? Why are you tied up?" Vernon asked querulously.

He had to stop wasting time.

"To guarantee your good behavior," Snape said, pulling his wand out now that he was sure he could hold it steady. He'd have to forget about having Vernon clear the table. "Come along."

The suggestibility from the Memory Charm got Vernon moving, but he was getting more alert now. "Where's Dudley?"

"Upstairs. Getting ready for bed. That way." He pointed Vernon in the direction of the downstairs lavatory.

Vernon stopped at the door. "I don't understand. We've cooperated. That's what you asked for. Why...?"

Snape raised the wand. "This is your one opportunity to relieve yourself before morning, I suggest you make use of it."

Dursley blanched and went into the small room, shutting the door behind him.

Snape waited. He didn't want to use up too much energy casting spells if he could avoid it. Physically, he felt all right, but he was beginning to lose his ability to concentrate. Maybe Potter had hit him with a Memory Charm. No, probably not.

At last Vernon emerged, and Snape escorted him to the small doorway under the stairs. "Get in."

"What?" Vernon stammered.

Snape smiled. "Plenty of room. You said so yourself. *Get. In.*"

Vernon's eyes bulged unattractively in his overpadded face. "But... I..."

Snape raised the wand and Vernon stumbled over the vacuum cleaner in his haste to get down on his hands and knees and crawl into the space under the stairs. He had to push some boots out, and Snape let him, before tossing in the pillow and blanket he'd brought downstairs and closing the door, sealing it with a spell.

There was a small ventilation grille set into the door. Snape opened it. "You know," he said conversationally, "after your disgusting accusation, I suspected you of molesting the boy yourself. You said there was enough room, and I wondered how you knew. But you don't pay him enough attention for that. You don't pay him any mind at all."

He slid the grille shut. Opened it again. "Still. There are other kinds of abuse..." he added. "I suggest that you use your time tonight *hoping* that I have no cause to suspect *them*."

And then he left Vernon in darkness.



When Harry came into the hallway riding some kind of weird wooden insect and asked Dudley to fetch his toothbrush from the upstairs lav, Dudley dropped the books he was carrying on his foot. "Ow!" he exclaimed. "Fetch it yourself, Potter!" he said, and then remembered that Snape was downstairs. "Oh... hell... nevermind. I'll get it."

"Thanks, Dudley," Harry said, when Dudley handed him the

toothbrush, and Dudley stopped and looked around to see if there were any grownups listening to have made Harry so polite.

"You're really sick, aren't you?" he said, taking a good look at his cousin. He'd already seen that Harry was skin and bones earlier, and now Harry had a funny flush that looked wrong on his face. "I thought..." He bit his lip, wondering why his stomach felt all funny at the thought of Harry being truly ill. He couldn't remember a time when Harry hadn't been around. "Maybe you should go to a doctor."

"Are you sure you're not sick?" Harry asked, giving Dudley a look of sheer disbelief.

Dudley shrugged. "I don't think so. I don't feel bad. Just hungry. And I always feel hungry anymore." The whole school year he'd had to eat at a special table, so that he couldn't cheat on his diet. Piers would help him sneak sweets sometimes, but he couldn't remember the last time a grownup had let him eat all he wanted. Not even Mummy. He shrugged again, remembering something. "Mummy's tied up downstairs. Was she bad? Or did I do something to make him mad? I can't remember."

"She started telling Snape, Professor Snape I mean, off. He didn't like it," Harry said. "It wasn't you, Dudley. What are you supposed to be doing now?"

"Moving books." Dudley bent down awkwardly to pick up the books he'd dropped. He hated dropping things and having to pick them up again, but it wasn't as hard as it had been last year. As he stood up, his stomach growled. "Are you hungry, Harry? Maybe he'll give us both more food if you want some."

Harry shook his head. "Sorry. I don't want to risk asking. Snape's not the most patient man even when he's not tired."

Dudley sighed and put the books into the guest bedroom and then went back for another armful while Harry van-

ished back into his parents room.

He was moving the last armload of books when he heard a thump in the master bedroom. Curious, he went to see what had made the noise and found Harry sitting on the floor by a small bed that was pushed against the wall while his owl perched on the dresser and made worried noises and the chair-insect nudged at him. Harry's glasses were on the floor.

"What happened?" Dudley asked.

"Nothing," Harry grumbled. He found his glasses and put them on, and then looked at the bed beside him and sighed before starting to pick himself up. The chair folded itself down and got underneath him, lifting him up to the height of the bed and tipping him into it before settling back to a proper chair shape beside the bed.

Dudley closed his mouth, and then came over to poke at the chair with one finger. It moved out of the way and he backed off hastily. "Do chairs do that all the time at your school?"

"No," Harry said, trying to pull the covers down on the bed without knocking himself off of it again. "Or I'd be better at using it. Give us a hand, Dudley, would you?"

Dudley thought about it for a moment. Snape wasn't there to make him help Harry, but neither was Mum or Dad to look funny at him if he did. He decided that he might as well get his cousin into the bed right. "Are you going to sleep in here?" he asked. "What about Mummy and Daddy? And what happened to the bed?"

"I don't know about Uncle Vernon," Harry said, letting Dudley pull the covers over him with a shaky sigh. "Aunt Petunia's going to sleep in my room. Professor Snape split the bed in half."

"I didn't think he was a pervert," Dudley said, looking over at the other bed by the window and wondering if he was going to have to sleep in here with Harry. "Perverts try to act nice."

Harry stared at him. "Perverts?" he exclaimed. "What would you know about perverts?"

Dudley flushed and bit his lip. "Nothing," he said, wishing he'd had the sense not to mention it. He went over to the dressing table and put his mother's brush and mirror back into the places where they belonged. He was too fat himself to have caught the attention of the History tutor at school, but he'd heard enough to know that the stories were true. Piers had only managed to get away by pretending he'd seen the Headmaster coming once. "Daddy thought he might be one," he said, so that Harry would talk about Snape instead. "Is he your Maths teacher?"

Harry shook his head, still looking at Dudley with narrowed eyes. "Potions," he said. "It's kind of like... oh, chemistry."

Dudley had wondered for years about Harry's school and now he finally had a chance to ask. "What kind of things do you have to learn?"

"Potions, Transfigurations — that's changing one thing into another. Charms — that's spells like... oh, the one that makes the chair move, or making things levitate. Divinations. That's fortune telling. But it doesn't work very well." Harry kept looking at Dudley like his face was dirty or something.

"Do you have to play games?" Dudley asked.

Harry's face lit up. "I play Quidditch. It's the best game in the world."

"What's...Quit Itch? Is it a computer game?" Dudley liked computer games. He couldn't imagine a field game that was better than any of them. Whatever the game was, it made Harry happy to talk about it.

"You play it on brooms. It's a little like basketball, but you're flying. There are three different kinds of balls, you see. One

you score with, two that try to hit you off your broom and the golden snitch, that's worth extra points. The Seekers catch the Snitch to end the game. I'm a Seeker on my house team." Harry's expression darkened suddenly. "Cedric was a Seeker, too."

"I hate to interrupt this," said a dry voice from the doorway and both Harry and Dudley jumped. It was Snape. Dudley backed away from Harry, hoping that the man would see that he hadn't done his cousin any harm. Snape went over and checked, but he seemed satisfied. "I need the chair, Mr. Potter. Are you finished with it for the moment?"

"Yes, sir." Harry submitted to having his forehead checked yet again. Dudley couldn't understand why Snape never used a thermometer.

"The fever's still climbing," he said, with certainty. "But it should peak soon. Try to sleep, if you can."

"What about Uncle Vernon?" Harry asked.

"He's all right," Snape said, taking out his wand. "Sleep now. *Duermos.*"

Harry's eyes closed at once, and he curled to one side, shivering. Snape waved the wand again, over the blankets, and said "*Thermos,*" the way he'd done for Dudley's soup, and Harry sighed and stopped shivering. His breathing went as steady as if he'd been sleeping for hours.

Snape turned to Dudley. "If I locked you in your room, for the night, what would you do?"

Dudley thought about it. "I dunno. Get on the internet. Play some games. Chat with my friends. You know, ordinary things."

Snape considered the answer, nodding as if he'd made a decision. "Go and fetch a bucket of earth and a trowel from the garden. And bring up the bird tray while you're at it," he told Dudley, and then turned his gaze on the chair. "And you... come along..."

THE DESCENT

SUMMARY: Snape reaches the end of his strength

I T WAS GETTING increasingly hard to think. He could have tolerated it if he were trembling from weariness, or even if he were stumbling from dizziness, but the haze in his head was really not to be borne.

Snape stood in the dining room doorway, waiting for Dudley to come back through from the kitchen, and trying to keep his face still as he struggled to recall how to float Petunia from the chair she was in to the chair he had Animated. It was really a *simple Charm*. He'd learnt it as a first year.

And he couldn't remember it.

The food on the table was distracting him. That was the problem. Maybe if he ate something he could think. He went over and put some meat onto a dinner roll, feeling a sense of *déjà vu*.

"Can I have one of those?" Dudley had come back, with a bucket of mud and the bird tray.

Snape swallowed, and felt a few faint sparks of the potion still working. Dudley was a big lad — there had to be some muscles holding up all that weight. "Yes," he said, "if you'll transfer your mother to the *Animate chair*, first."

"Do you mean it to hurt her?" Dudley asked, putting down what he was carrying quickly and coming over to Petunia.

"No. I intend to have it take her upstairs," Snape said.

Dudley looked from the chair to his mother, and then at the sandwich that Snape was eating. He bent down, so that his face was closer to Petunia's. "It's all right, Mum. It didn't hurt Harry," he told her. "I think it just has to do what it's told."

"Five points, Mr. Dursley," Snape said, surprised that the boy had deduced that much. "Although there are limitations to its abilities and definite limitations to its intelligence."

Dudley lifted his mother and moved her over to the waiting chair and then kissed her cheek before looking up at Snape. "How do you mean?"

"It cannot comprehend complex commands," Snape explained, feeling as if he were doing something off without quite being able to figure out why. He explained things to students all the time. "For example, if I were to say, 'Hold on to the woman and take her upstairs...' " The chair shivered and didn't move. "You see? But if I break the commands into simple sentences: 'hold on to the woman' " he waited as the chair's arms encircled Petunia securely, "and now... take her upstairs," the chair began to move off towards the stairs.

Dudley watched her go with alarm. "Why does it have to hold on to her?" he exclaimed.

"So she doesn't fall off," Snape said peevishly, taking up another piece of chicken. "Now are you hungry or aren't you?"

Dudley stared after his mother for another long moment, but then he nodded. "Yes. I guess so." He started to put together a roll sandwich, but he was still distracted. "Excuse me, sir," he finally said. "But where's Daddy?"

Snape chewed faster and swallowed angrily. "He's in the cupboard under the stairs, and if you don't shut up and eat, you'll join him!" he snarled.

Ravenous hunger. Distractibility. Obviously side-effects of the

potion combined with food.

Irritability. Potential homicidal rage. Side effects of the Dursleys.

Dudley, rebuked, sat down and began to nibble at a piece of chicken, steadying into trencherman mode when Snape didn't shout at him. Snape was too busy chewing, half-fascinated by the strange bursts of potion energy making curlicues through his veins. Between them, they were rapidly solving the problem of looking for the cold-storage — there wasn't going to be anything left to put away.

In fact, Dudley was accounting for a proportion of the food that was vaguely alarming. Snape scowled when the boy grabbed the last piece of chicken from the warming pan. *He can't eat and talk at the same time..* "What do you think of your cousin, Dursley?"

Dudley shrugged and swallowed, "Not much," he said disdainfully, and then colored up and backpedalled hastily. "I mean, not really much. As in, not often. Not... not... Well, he's not here very much these days, is he? Just in the summer." Snape dug into the bowl of mashed potatoes and let Dudley keep digging his own grave. "It is strange not having him here at Christmastime, but I like it because he doesn't get in the way. Only... only, if he's not here, then I can't show him what I got, and I don't like that as much. It's not the same if you wait till the summer holidays. And when Harry's not around then Piers and Dennis always want to pick on Gordon and that's no good because Gordon's the only one who knows how to break the copy protection on the good games and hack into things and he won't if he's being picked on." Dudley stopped to reach for the rest of the salad.

"Harry," Snape reminded him curtly, commandeering the peas.

"Harry," Dudley repeated, pouring salad dressing over the bowl. "Well... He's a freak, isn't he? I mean, maybe not to you,

but we're *real* people. I used to have to keep an eye on him all the time in school, to keep him from making any freak friends. Mummy didn't want him trying to bring anyone home, did she? Not that it was all that hard. I mean, you've seen him — his hair's a mess and he never wears decent clothes — who'd want to be friends with that?"

The food was doing some good. Snape could spot the gap in logic there. "Does Potter have decent clothes to wear?" Everything in the laundry basket had looked like it was far too large.

Dudley snorted. "Why would anyone spend good money on clothes for Potter? The ones he gets have plenty of wear in them, and we've got to economize somewhere. Mummy and Daddy didn't plan on having an extra mouth to feed, you know, they just got Harry dumped on them when I was a baby. Besides, he'd only ruin them."

Snape swallowed the last spoonful of peas, and leaned back to see if he could find anything else edible on the table. "Who told you that?" he asked absently, since the list of excuses sounded well-rehearsed to his ear.

"Mummy," Dudley said, through a mouthful of salad.

PETUNIA!

He'd forgotten. He'd sat here, stuffing his face and listening to the Dursley boy maunder on and he'd forgotten all about Petunia.

"Idiot!" Snape stood up abruptly and Dudley nearly fell off his chair going backwards, unaware that the Potions Master was addressing himself. *Pay ATTENTION!*

The potion was going to wear off soon. He'd been wasting time. Wasting it! He'd be lucky now if he managed to get the Dursley boy settled before he fell on his nose. And to make it all the worse, he was suddenly aware that he was going to need to avail himself of the plumbing facilities. Soon. *Another*

side effect, I expect. I was better off taking the doses WITHOUT food.

"Come along," he ordered Dudley "and don't forget the bucket and the bird tray."

"Yes, sir!" Dudley squeaked, scrambling to his feet. He gave the salad he'd spilled a forlorn last look before grabbing the things Snape had sent him for and following along.

The Animated chair was waiting patiently at the top of the stairs. Petunia was fuming. *Good.*

"Second door on the left," Snape told it. "Put her on the bed." He hadn't had to specify earlier. Harry's door had been the only one open, and his bed the only one the chair could reach; but now the guest room and master suite doors were both open, and he couldn't risk confusing the chair. It moved quickly down the hall and into the small bedroom; Snape and Dudley followed.

"Put the bucket in here, and take the bird tray to the master bedroom," Snape told Dudley. "Wait." Bird. *Bird. Oh, yes.* He pointed to the battered blanket on the floor. "Take that rag along to put under it. The bird's not entirely well, yet." He felt pleased with himself for remembering about the blanket. Perhaps the food had helped after all.

There was something else he had to remember. He ignored Petunia's indignant mumbles as the chair dumped her inelastically on the bed. She'd live. Snape prowled around the room, trying to jog his memory. The books were gone. That wasn't it. But there was something.

Dudley came back, and crossed quietly over to help his mother sit up on the bed. He watched Snape for a moment, but it wasn't in him to wait patiently. "Now what happens, sir?" Snape looked at the two of them; Dudley was standing next the bed, one arm across his mother's shoulders, and a look on his face that made Snape think of Lily. "Is mummy going to be tied up all night?"

"No," Snape told him, and then thought to follow it with a threat for Petunia's sake. "Not unless she makes a racket and keeps the rest of us awake."

"She won't," Dudley said, looking down at her. "You'll be good, won't you Mummy? I don't want to think of you being tied up all night. I won't be able to sleep."

Petunia glared at Snape, but then nodded reassurance to Dudley, making it clear without words that she was promising her son and not Snape that she would behave. Snape didn't believe it, not in the long term, but it might be long enough to get them all a few hours rest.

He signalled for Dudley to move aside. "Stay on the bed," he warned Petunia, and dispelled the ropes, leaving the gag. She could work it off herself, later. "Mr. Dursley, go and brush your teeth."

Dudley nodded, starting reluctantly for the door. "Good night, mum," he said, and then paused as he passed the desk. "Do you want me to take Harry his box?"

The box. That was it. "I'll take care of it." Snape waited until he heard the water running down the hall before he moved to the desk to collect the tin box of Harry's small treasures. *Potter will have to hide it after this, I suspect. Perhaps in his school trunk.*

The school trunk. Damn. Another thing to tend to. He couldn't leave it in the guest room. He had to put Dudley in the guest room. He couldn't remember just why... something about... chatting with friends. Maybe the boy had a fireplace.

Petunia shifted position on the bed, attracting his eye as she backed away from the patient chair. The chair. He could move the trunk with the chair. "Go into the hall," he ordered it and faced off with the Dursley woman. "It is going to take proper care for young Potter to recover completely. I wouldn't trust you to provide that to a sawdust-stuffed frog."

He stopped. That hadn't come out the way he wanted it to. He shook his head, trying to clear it. "You'll stay in this room until I think it's safe to let you out again," he told her.

Petunia started forward, as if she were going to get off the bed, and he drew his wand. She stilled, her eyes hard as granite.

He'd had a cutting remark planned.

He couldn't remember it.

From down the hall came the sound of the water closet flushing.

His brain wasn't working, but his kidneys certainly were. *Damn.*

"You can use the bucket," he said bluntly, swept out of the room, and closed the door.

The Dursley boy was just coming back. Snape grabbed him by the shoulder and steered him into the guest room. "Stay here," he ordered. "Sit on the bed. Don't touch anything."



At least Muggle mirrors didn't talk. He'd have to get one, sometime.

Muggle lighting, however, he could forego. It made him look like he'd been trampled by a Pale horse. With any luck the Rider wouldn't show up. At least not until he'd managed to make sure there were Lock spells on the Dursley's doors.

He threw more water on his face; checked the dilation of his pupils. The potion was definitely wearing off now. It should have worn off half an hour since. *Maybe the food's done some good after all.*

The Animate chair was still waiting patiently in the hallway. Snape sat, trying to remember what he had to do.

The trunk. The woman. The boy. The man was already Sealed in. Snape stood, and opened the guest room door.

Dudley leapt back onto the bed, and tried to look as if he'd stayed still.

"Ten points. Off, Mr. Dursley." Snape checked the trunk. It seemed untouched. "Push that out into the hall."

"Are you sure it won't go off?" Dudley asked nervously.

"No." Snape folded his arms and tried to look like he could out wait the boy.

Dudley got off the bed. After a moment of dithering, he took hold of the rug under the trunk and pulled the whole mess into the hallway. Snape almost wanted to give him his points back, but decided not to cloud the issue. His legs were ready to give way, but he had to stay upright a little bit longer. He didn't dare appear weak in front of any of the Muggles, not even the boy. He picked up the nearest book and put it into Dudley's hand. "Here. Read this tonight. I'll expect you to be able to give me three feet on it in the morning," he ordered waving Dudley back into the room and going out to the hall.

"Three feet of what?" Dudley asked as Snape closed the door on him.

The potion is failing now. I HATE this part.

He stumbled against the trunk and only the quick motion of the chair prevented him from falling.

"Aromahola!" he told the lock, and heard it snap shut.

The hallway grayed at the edges, swallowing the light.

I can't pass out. Not yet. "Turn around," he ordered the chair.

Eventually, he found the other door handle. "Aromahola!" he cast again, and began to shake so hard the chair closed its arms around him without a command.

He waited to see if he'd end up unconscious in the chair in the hall, but the tiny tunnel of light refused to vanish from his vision. "Take me... to the other bedroom. To the boy."

The chair rocked upwards, and he could hear the clicking of its legs on the floor. He clung to consciousness. Just a little more work and he could give up for the night.

The chair stopped. Snape put out a hand and found the magically warmed blankets, following the edge of the bed until they stopped and then, with a vague feeling of looking the wrong way through a telescope, found Harry. He was still sleeping. Still breathing. *So far, so good.*

Just one... more... thing...

"Put me in the other bed," he told the chair, and shut his eyes, surrendering to the darkness.



THE CAPTIVES

SUMMARY: *It's too early to sleep, for some.*

PETUNIA HEARD the lock click over at the door, and berated herself for failing to check it when Snape had first closed it. She might have escaped! Might have been able to free Dudley and run for it, now that Snape had shown his truly evil nature. Tying her up! Locking Vernon under the stairs! The man was horrible.

She went back to trying to work off the gag. It didn't have a knot, nothing that she could untie, but she could work her fingers under it, and coax it to move, gradually, away from her mouth. If she left it for a moment, though, it contracted again around her face. She'd begun by trying to pull it down, but when she'd discovered that it contracted she had changed her mind and worked upwards instead, dreading the thought of the thing's horrid texture against her neck all night.

It felt like...like fish flesh. Like petting a manta ray. Like grasping an electric eel. Under her fingers she could feel little sparks moving under the surface like moths in a light fixture.

This is all Lily's fault! If she hadn't got herself killed she would have been the one to deal with her precious brat and his freak teachers. We SHOULD have left him at an orphanage. If it hadn't been for old Figg's meddling, no one would have even known the boy had been left here in the first place. Except for the freak who left him there, of

course, and what could he have done about it?

Vernon had decided that it was only the proper thing to do, to raise the orphaned boy properly. It would be proof that a proper family could eradicate the weirdness, if he and Petunia trained the boy up right. Then he had gone off to work, and it had been Petunia who had to deal with Harry all day.

Fourteen years that boy's been here, a thorn in my side. Disobedient, defiant, taking the bread from my poor Dudley's mouth. I should have drowned him as an infant.

She shuddered, ambushed by an old memory best forgotten. A week after Harry had appeared on the doorstep; Harry sleeping in the pram in the driveway while she took Dudley in and settled him for his nap. She'd bumped it — accidentally of course — as she went past, and it had started to roll very slowly down towards the street. But she had Dudley to see to, and Privet Drive was never very busy. She'd been giving her son his bath when she heard the screech of brakes outside. But no one had come knocking on the door.

All the time she'd been putting Dudley into his pajamas and settling him into his cot she'd waited, her shoulders tightening, for the knock. And it *hadn't* come. At last she'd gone outside. There was no one around.

The pram was three houses down, smashed against a tree.

But Harry was sitting in her flowerbed, chuckling as a worm crawled over his bare feet.

She'd told Vernon that the pram brakes were faulty, and they'd written a nasty letter to the company. But she'd never told him that her nephew had been in the pram.

Or ought to have been.

They were spying on me. The freaks. I still cannot believe that a one year old child could have...

She'd never dared try again.



Dudley sat down on the guest room bed and made a face at the tome Snape had shoved into his hand before he'd locked the door. OLIVER TWIST. He'd had to write a thank you note for the book three Christmases ago, because Aunt Marge's librarian friend had a nasty habit of raising a fuss if her gift subscription to the "Young Briton's Classic Book Club" weren't acknowledged. Four useless books a year. Four stupid thank you notes a year. (Although those were a lot easier now that he'd shown Mummy where to type in the title and author. All he had to do was change the font for appearances sake and sign the printout.) Just because the old cow had won some sweepstakes years ago and didn't have any children of her own to spend it on. Business correspondence, Daddy called it. At least she never expected him to actually read the books.

Snape did though.

And it was pretty good odds that they'd changed the story when they'd made the film. Which was all right, because he'd only seen half the film anyway. Bunch of stupid orphans, all singing about food...

What kind of a teacher is Snape, anyway? Dudley wondered. He let me eat. That makes him nice. But then he locked Daddy under the stairs, and Mummy in my other room, and me in here, and that makes him mean. Doesn't it?

You lock things up because they're bad. *But we haven't been bad. Not really. We've done the things Snape asked us to.*

You lock things up because they're dangerous. *Maybe he thinks we're dangerous. That's better. Maybe we're as frightening to the freaks as they are to us. That'd be great. Except...*

Snape hadn't seemed frightened. Tired, at the last, yes. But mostly... mostly, he'd seemed angry.

Very angry.

Maybe he's afraid of what he'd do to us, if we WEREN'T locked up.

Dudley fiddled with the book, nervously, bending the cover back and forth. There wasn't anyone around to stop Snape from doing whatever he felt like, except Harry — and after Dudley had poisoned his bird, he had a hunch that Harry wouldn't have a lot of reasons to stop Snape from doing something awful.

I'd better read this book, after all.



It was a very small cupboard.

It smelled funny.

And it had spiders in it.

It was dark, too.

It didn't have to be dark. There was a light, installed on the underside of one of the higher stairs, and Petunia had replaced the batteries in it not four months ago, but Vernon had decided that the spiders were less nerve-wracking when they were invisible.

At least for the moment. He reserved the right to change his mind the next time one of them ran across his face.

Had it been like this for Harry, every night for the eight years he'd slept in this cupboard? Surely not. *He had a sleeping cot. He wasn't directly on the floor. The spiders...*

...would have been able to climb right up the legs of it.

Damn.

Vernon wanted to be angry. He wanted to be furious. But he knew why Snape had locked him in here.

And he couldn't even blame Harry for it.

Not much anyway.

Boy probably witched the spiders away from himself somehow, Vernon consoled himself. That's right. Spiders like freaks. You're always seeing them together, witches and spiders and bats and things. And Harry Did Things, even before he ever went to that school. He would have been all right in here. He would have been just fine.

Except for the not-being-able-to-get-out part.



Harry was shaken awake by the chattering of his own teeth. He'd been too hot, the last time he'd surfaced at the edge of consciousness, and he vaguely remembered pushing the blankets away, but now he was too cold, like he'd been trapped at the bottom of Hogwarts lake too long.

Cedric...

He shuddered, and pushed himself up from the pillow, not wanting to go back to sleep if it meant more dreams about the Tournament. His stomach made a funny, gurgling noise, and he tasted sour vomit at the back of his throat. Harry groaned, swinging his feet over the side of the bed. He'd have to break the window open to be sick outside or something, or maybe try to get to a corner. Uncle Vernon would never come to open the door this late at ni...

Something nudged his knee and Harry jumped backwards, the scream caught in his throat as he clapped both hands over his mouth and swallowed hard to keep from throwing up all over the Animated chair. It scuttled back a few inches and settled with an air of hopeful willingness.

The chair. Snape. Right. Harry reached out a hand and the chair came forward, positioning itself so he could make the

transfer easily. "Take me ... lavatory," he gasped out, hoping that the chair wouldn't lurch too much along the way.

To his surprise, once he got to the basin, he couldn't actually manage to be sick. At least not at that end. And even the bout of diarrhea wasn't as bad as it could have been. It wasn't any worse than the reaction he got from eating too many sweets with Ron. He'd actually warmed up some by the end of it, and wasn't shaking so much. When he looked in the mirror, he could see pink rising on his face, and feel the flush of something like health beneath it. What had Snape said? Something about being out of balance?

It felt a little bit like being on a see-saw looked. First up, then down; first hot, then cold. First sick, then hungry. Harry thought about going downstairs for a snack, and decided against it. He'd only get sick again later. Better stick to getting a drink of water from the tap.

The sound of the flushing toilet seemed particularly loud, and Harry grimaced at his reflection as he washed his hands, hoping that the tone-climbing whine wouldn't wake up Snape. He was crotchety enough at the best of times.

Someone banged on the wall. "Hey!" It was Dudley. "Hey? Is someone awake in there?! Can you hear me?"

Idiot!

Harry's legs shook as he stood at the wall and cupped his hands against it to make a sound tunnel, and hopefully muffle his shout back. "Shut up, Dudley!"

"Harry? Harry, let me out! I've got to go!"

Like you ever did the same for me. Harry thought, and then remembered that he'd never asked. And Dudley had made sure to give Harry bathroom breaks on the rare occasions when his parents had gone out for an evening and he'd

stayed behind. Even if he and his gang had teased Harry about it all the way down the hall and back. And besides, Harry told himself, if I don't let him out, he'll just keep making noise until he wakes up Everyone. Including Snape.

"Shut up, and let me come around to the door," Harry called through the wall, and he heard Dudley bumbling against furniture in the guest room as he turned to summon the Animated chair. Hedwig crooned at Harry as the chair carried him across the dark bedroom to the hall, but fortunately, the shadowed black form on the bed near the window didn't seem to have been disturbed. Yet.

Dudley was already calling Harry's name through the door by the time Harry got there, and he had to thump on it to get the big lump to stop making noise long enough to listen.

"You're going to wake up Snape," Harry threatened, in a loud whisper.

"Oh. Sorry." Dudley's volume dropped immediately. "Sorry. Hurry up and let me out."

"Just a... Wait. The key's not here, Dudley."

Dudley made a funny, straining sort of groan. "Can't you ... can't you do magic and open it?"

"Not without my wand. Which is in my school trunk." Harry realized that the trunk was just beyond him in the hall suddenly. "Which is right here," he said happily. Uncle Vernon's combination locks didn't look too hard to figure out. "Hold on, Dudley."

"No, wait. You'll blow us all up!" Dudley forgot to whisper in his panic.

"Blow us up?" Harry repeated. "And don't shout."

"The professor. He said... something about booby traps," Dudley babbled. "Because it had been out of the house."

Harry sighed. He'd really have felt better with his wand, but Snape knew better than he did if there was a chance that one of Voldemort's agents had gotten to his school trunk. *They might have turned it into a Portkey. Or something inside it.* It wasn't worth the risk. "That leaves that out, then. Without a key or a wand, I can't open the door. Sorry, Dudley."

"But I've got to peel!"

"So hang it out the window," Harry told his cousin impatiently. His head was starting to hurt again, and he wanted to go back to bed.

"What?" Dudley exclaimed.

"You're a boy. It's dark out. Use the window."

"But... but..." He could almost see the confused look in Dudley's piggy eyes.

"Would you rather explain to Snape why you woke him up?" Harry said. "Cause if you plan on it, tell me now so I can go find a safe place to hide."

"No. No, that's all right." Dudley panicked nicely at the thought. "I'll just...just do what you said."

"Turn the light off, first," Harry advised him, and then patted the arm of the chair. "Take me back to the bed, please."

As the chair negotiated the turn into the bedroom, Harry heard a rattling noise on the dressing table. He couldn't see in the dark room after the light in the hallway very well, but Snape hadn't woken up, so he thought it was safe to turn on the overhead light for a moment. The sudden brilliance caught Hedwig, investigating the mouse cage, but the look she turned on Harry was unabashed.

"Still hungry, are you?" Harry whispered to her. "Chair, take me to the dressing table please."

He glanced over towards the window bed. Snape was

sprawled uncomfortably at the edge of it, his face waxy white where the gauntness of it hadn't cast deep shadows. The light hadn't disturbed him, at least. Harry wondered what had made him so tired, and decided that he didn't want to disturb Snape to ask. *He's so tired he might actually answer.*

When Hedwig saw that Harry was going to give her another mouse to eat, she hooted her approval, winging to the top of the bedside table lamp for a good perch to swoop down from. Harry realized that the lampshade could never hold her weight. "Hedwig!" he called, but it was too late.

With a crash, the lamp fell to the floor, the bulb popping loudly. The mouse escaped from Harry's hand forgotten as he twisted round to defend himself from whatever an angry, wakened Potions professor might do.

But Snape still hadn't moved.

"Oh hell," Harry breathed, his stomach in a cold knot. "He's dead."



THE VIGEL

SUMMARY: Harry alone.

“**I’VE KILLED** another one.”

Harry clutched at his hair with his right hand, staring in horror at the motionless form of Severus Snape. He and Ron had joked around about the party most of the students would throw if Snape ever drank the wrong potion, the special award for services to the school. It had always seemed funny, but...

That was before. Last year.

This year...

I’m Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived — and got everyone else around him killed!

I didn’t mean to!

But maybe he had.

I wished the poison out of Hedwig. He said so. And I’ve always wished for him to ... well, not to die, not exactly, just to go away or something.

And wishing, it was like... like a way of doing magic, accidentally. He’d worked out some of it — the doing magic without a wand part, anyway. It wasn’t like you had to be Dumbledore, although it probably helped. The Headmaster did magic without a wand all the time, summoning feasts and things. But ordinary wizards just had to be frightened enough, like Neville was when his uncle had dropped him. Or angry enough,

the way Harry had been at Aunt Marge two summers ago. The way he almost always was, around Snape.

Or the way I used to be. Before I knew that he was Dumbledore’s spy. A Death Eater.

Nobody would believe Harry hadn’t done it on purpose. *Harry Potter, Defeater of Voldemort. You Do Things. You know that’s how it’s going to play out in the papers. Harry Potter Murders His Teacher, who had gone especially to Potter’s home to tutor the boy in hopes of raising his dismal marks, which were owed to Potter’s involvement in the recent Tri-Wizard Tournament which came to such a tragic end with the death of Potter’s fellow competitor, young Cedric Diggory, whom many say ought to have been the winner of the Tournament....*

“C’mon, Harry,” he told himself in a whisper. “Stop panicking. You could be wrong. Go,” He swallowed, hard, “check.”

He watched Snape, for a long time, staring at the tumbled form until his eyes hurt, and he had to blink to sooth them. He didn’t see any movement. None at all.

But with Snape’s big cloak all tangled up like that, he might not be able to anyway.

Harry reached out to shake Snape’s shoulder, but stopped. It didn’t seem like a good idea. If he were alive, Snape would probably wake up angry. Probably with a curse all ready to set in motion against whoever had disturbed him.

Might be worth it.

Might not.

Harry bit his lip and looked around, trying to think. There was a mirror on the dressing table. *That’s what they use in movies, to see if someone’s... okay. I can see if his breath shows. See if his REFLECTION shows.*

The reflection did, quite clearly. *So much for Ron’s theories.*

Harry brought the mirror as near as he could to Snape's face without touching him.

The mirror stayed clear.

He held it there another minute. Two.

The mirror was still clear.

"Shit."

Harry put the mirror back on the dressing table. He couldn't bring himself to touch Snape's skin, to check for a pulse.

I wonder how hard it is to stow away on a boat to Australia.

I wonder if Hedwig will like the mice in Australia. They had funny mice, with long tails, and they hopped, like the one in that video of Dudley's. She'll probably hate them.

If she could fly to Australia, she could fly to Dumbledore.

"Hedwig," Harry turned to his owl. "Hedwig, do you feel well enough to take a message to Hogwarts?"

Hedwig turned her head toward him and blinked thoughtfully, but hunkered down where she was in a way that he knew meant a negative answer and began to preen her chest feathers.

"To Ron, then?" Harry asked. He'd got into the habit of talking to Hedwig a lot during the holidays. At least she listened, which was more than any of the Dursleys did. "No, no, I'd best not get Ron involved. Even if he believed me, he'd only end up in trouble too. And if I called Hermione on the 'phone, her parents would probably answer." He didn't want to imagine what would happen if Hermione's parents thought they should take a hand. Muggle policemen, probably, and wouldn't Uncle Vernon have something to say about that! He held out a hand to the owl and she flew over to settle carefully on the arm of the chair where he could scratch her chest.

"All right," Harry resolved at last. "I'm not sending any messages, until I know he's dead. I'll feel better knowing, and if he

is dead, well, then, he'll be somebody else's problem. I hope."

Hedwig seemed to agree. She nibbled reassuringly on Harry's fingers.

"Why did it have to be Snape?" Harry asked her, knowing that he was starting to whine, and not having the strength to prevent it. The summer couldn't get much worse if he was at the point where having Snape be stone dead wasn't an improvement. "Not that I wish it were any of the other teachers. But Snape... He's always hated me. He hated me from the very first time he saw me. He was always trying to get me expelled, or giving me detentions or taking away points. It's just like him to go and die at the worst possible time, and leave me holding the baby. He probably did it just to be nasty."

He looked over at the dark form on the other bed. "Why did you have to die with me?"

Because he came here to help me. And that's why people get hurt, helping me.

He didn't have to come.

But he did. And he did help me, and Hedwig.

Even though he hates me.

God, if he's still alive, I promise, I'll pay really, really close attention in Potions class from now on and I'll even read all the —

Potions class. Potions!

"Wait!" Harry sat up a little straighter. "Wait... Potions class. That very first day. He said something about a potion that made you look dead! The, the wotsit... the, the Draught of ... Living Death! It's a sleeping potion, that makes you look absolutely dead! Maybe he drank some of that!"

Hedwig made a chuckling sort of noise that he thought was approval. Harry smiled. Snape wasn't dead. Probably. But then he thought of a snag. "Only. Why would he take it?"

Think, Harry.

"Maybe... maybe... maybe it's the antidote to the other stuff. Something to let him sleep. Oh, please?" Harry looked at Snape, trying to discern anything that might indicate that the man was alive. There was a loose hair plastered down across his face, across his mouth, for that matter, but it wasn't moving. Not even after Harry waited a bit. *No, not a good sign.* Still, Snape didn't look quite, well, empty. Not the way that Cedric had looked. His mouth hadn't fallen open all the way. And his eyes were closed properly. Cedric's body had looked less... less... more wrong.

Not that Snape looks right.

Harry tried to think of everything he'd ever heard or read about sleeping potions. There were always ways to wake someone who'd taken one, no matter how powerful. Loud noises and bells were a favorite, but the antidotes could be amazingly specific. *Lord, I hope he doesn't have to be awakened by love's first kiss. I don't think there'd be any volunteers.*

No, Snape would never have taken a potion with conditions that smarmy. "Hermione probably looked it up," Harry murmured to Hedwig. "I bet she could tell me all about the Draught of Living Death, if I asked." He looked out the window, but there was no sign of dawn. The clock on the nightstand was blinking 88:88, because no one had re-set it after the power outage. "If it's a potion he took, then I could probably wait till morning and call her."

But if it isn't a potion... Dead bodies start to smell, don't they? The dead mice certainly had. And they'd gone all stiff for while, which probably made them harder to hide. *I'd best try to wake him up now. Just to see if I can.*

He tried the alarm clock first, setting it on the bed near

Snape's ear. The sudden raucous buzzing startled him so much that he fell off the chair, and Hedwig took off and hooted noisily as she circled the room, but if the clamor made Snape twitch at all, Harry missed seeing it.

Hedwig waited until Harry had pulled himself back up and turned off the clock before she settled down on her perch, rumbling disapprovingly, deep in her chest. "Sorry," Harry called to her softly, shaken by the failure of the alarm to waken Snape. "I meant it to bother *him*."

The bird turned her head thoughtfully, this way and that, and then picked up a feather she had shed while she was preening. Silently she flew to Harry, landing on his arm and leaning up to tickle his nose with the feather.

"Hey! Hey, stop that... Wait." Harry almost managed to laugh. "You think I can tickle him awake." He took the feather. "It's worth a try."

There weren't many targets. Snape was bundled, as usual, to the neck, and Harry wasn't about to try to pull his boots off. One hand was on the other side of his cor...body, and the nearer hand was half buried in the folds of his cloak. That left his face. His nose really. If this worked, Snape was going to be furious.

I can live with that. He's been furious before.

And if it didn't work, well, then Harry was no worse off than before.

Carefully, trying to keep most of his body out of obvious spell range, he extended the feather towards the tip of Snape's nose. It shook a little — the way his entire arm was beginning to shake — since the angle was so bad. And then, suddenly, he noticed part of the feather shaking in a different direction from the rest of it.

Oh, please...

He waited, holding his breath, and trying all the harder to keep the feather still.

It happened again.

Yes!

And again!

Gently, he laid the feather across Snape's face, so that the most delicate strands were closest to the man's nostrils, watching through eyes that wanted to blur.

They moved! They moved! They really moved!

"He's alive!" Harry shouted. "Hedwig, he's alive!"

The shout brought pounding from the guest room and Harry's old room, and he heard Dudley and Aunt Petunia shouting questions, but Snape still didn't react, and some of Harry's relief drained away.

"Well, he's breathing anyway." *A little. Not even enough to dislodge the feather.*

"Maybe he's just really really tired." *Maybe he's dying.*

Or sick. Sick's better than dying.

Still. Out of the frying pan, into the fire. How'm I supposed to take care of a sick Snape?

I wish Professor Dumbledore were here. I wish I dared go catch the Knight Bus to Diagon Alley and find a doctor — No, scratch that. A doctor would find the Dark Mark on his arm, and that'd be a mess. I'd have to get him to Madam Pomfrey somehow. Or get her here. I can't leave him here alone with the Dursleys. If Aunt Petunia manages to get out, she'll kill him — or vice versa. Aunt Petunia was trying to get out, by the sound of it.

Maybe someone would wonder where Snape was.

And maybe not. Harry had a feeling that Snape disappeared often, without explanation or warning. Especially now, if he'd gone back to being Dumbledore's spy. Or Voldemort's.

Aunt Petunia was making an awful racket.

I need to scare her, somehow. Maybe I can get Snape's wand again.

He bit his lip. Snape kept his wand in a pocket on the...*on the left, because you draw across the body in a duel.*

Lightheaded and flushed, Harry carefully turned back the edges of Snape's cloak until he saw the edge of dark wood. Picking Snape's pocket didn't waken him either, which wasn't good, but Harry felt a little less powerless with a wand in his hand, even if it were Snape's. It felt strange to know that he was going to deliberately use magic during the holidays, and he hoped that Snape's letter had arrived by now.

The chair cooperated beautifully, crouching low, so that Harry could look through the food slot and take aim with a Petrificus Totalus spell. Aunt Petunia fell over with a crash, never losing hold of the bicycle handlebars she'd been hitting against the door. Her sudden silence wasn't noticed right away by Dudley though, who kept on shouting "What's happening? Mummy?" for five minutes before trailing off into uncertain mutterings.

It felt even stranger using Snape's wand. It wasn't right. Just necessary. Harry wiped the sweat off his forehead as the chair lifted him upright again. He wished he knew whether or not it was safe to get his own wand. Snape's didn't balance right, like it had a center of liquid instead of wood.

At least Snape wasn't dead. Yet. Which meant it was probably safe to call Hermione, even if her parents did answer the phone. Harry ordered the chair to take him down the hall to Dudley's room. Dudley had a telephone, although the line was mostly used for the Internet. But when Harry picked up the handset, there was no dial tone. He clicked the button several times, but there was no response. The phone was plugged in, too.

So much for that bright idea. Must have been the lightning. In a

way, that was a good thing. It meant Piers wouldn't be wondering why Dudley wasn't on-line. But it left Harry without a way to get any help for Snape.

He went back to the master bedroom, feeling hot and frustrated. Snape still hadn't moved, blast him. If he woke up... When he woke up, he was going to be stiff from the uncomfortable position he was in.

"You're probably doing all this as some kind of a test. Like making me drink one of Neville's potions," Harry accused.

He checked the feather again, grateful to see the tiny movements of air confirmed. Maybe if he got Snape into a more comfortable position... It wasn't as scary, thinking about touching someone who was alive.

Snape was heavier than he looked — although Harry suspected that a lot of the weight was his clothes. It was too awkward from the chair to do much more than unbutton the man's gaiters and pull off his boots. The socks came too, at least partway. Snape's feet were blocks of ice.

Well, at least there was something Harry could do about Snape being cold. He moved back for a better view and tried to remember how Madam Pomfrey moved her wand. "Lectum Stenero," he commanded, and the bedclothes shifted, as Snape floated up a few inches and then was surrounded by the sheets and blankets and tucked into the newly made bed.

Hedwig hooted approval, and Harry grinned shakily at her, feeling flushed. Snape did look better this way, as if he were just sleeping. Harry could almost convince himself that the man's skin tone had gone to ecru instead of pasty white.

So. Snape was breathing. He still looked exhausted though. Harry knew the feeling all too well.

"There's got to be something else I can do," Harry said, looking

around the room for ideas. What he wanted to do was go back to bed and sleep, but he didn't feel like it was safe to leave Snape on his own yet. The man still might die on him, and leave Harry trying to explain why he hadn't done anything about it.

Why didn't he respond? Why was his breathing so very shallow? Harry worked up the nerve to touch Snape's hand.

Why is he so cold?

"Could be a potion. He could be sick." Harry rubbed at his face, trying to wake himself up a little. "Maybe he's just tired. Full of... what did he call them? Fatigue potions?"

Fatigue poisons, boy. Pay Attention!

Harry looked up, startled, but Snape was still comatose. That's what he would have said though. *Maybe I'm starting to hallucinate. Maybe he feels cold because my temperature's gone away up.* His glance fell on the snowglobe.

Extractus Toxinus.

Snape had said that the spell had removed Harry's fatigue poisons. So whether it was a potion keeping Snape unconscious, or fatigue toxins, the spell would work. But it needed an... an object.

Something he cares about. Or something that someone who ... who loved him... cared about.

Snape had known that the snowglobe had belonged to Harry's mother. He'd sent her a Christmas card. Maybe... just maybe, he'd known about the snowglobe because he'd seen it before. Because, maybe, just maybe, Snape had given it to her in the first place. *If he gave her a card, why not a present? That would explain why I can see Hogwarts in it.*

Snape and my mum.

* YICK!*

Maybe not. But maybe...

Maybe what? Despite himself, Harry began reviewing

old confrontations, trying to think if he'd ever heard Snape say anything bad about his mother. Anything at all, for that matter. Snape had said plenty about James Potter, but Harry couldn't think of a single occasion when he'd said anything about Lily. He couldn't think whether or not Snape sneered when she was mentioned either.

She ought to have been an easy target. The girl who fell in love with James? But Snape didn't talk about her. So either he didn't care about her at all...

Or he cared about her a lot.

He'd been furious with Aunt Petunia when she'd started insulting Lily. He must have liked her.

But that didn't mean that it worked the other way around.

She married Dad, after all.

"Still, she liked him enough to keep his Christmas card," Harry told himself, unhappily. "Maybe that's enough." *It's going to have to be. It's not like I can get my hands on Snape's teddy bear.*

He went over and fetched the snowglobe, turning it one more time, and wondering if using it as a focus for the spell a second time would do it any harm. The sweat pooled on his back and hands, reminding him that he was awfully tired to be attempting an advanced spell. But Snape was too still. If Harry tried to go to sleep without doing anything he'd have nightmares the whole time.

He rested the glass part of the globe lightly against Snape's forehead, and raised the wand, practicing the awkward motion a few times, hoping he'd remembered it right from watching Snape just the once. The wand still felt strange, as if it reacted sluggishly to his will. "This is for Snape," Harry reminded it. Then, hoping against hope that he was doing the right thing, he cast the spell. "*Extractus Toxinus!*"

It HURT!

Harry gasped as the water in the globe began to swirl and glow, tightening his grip to keep it from slipping as firepoints of pain began to work their way through his fingers and palm, past his wrist and up his arm. Snape gasped — the first noise he'd made in hours — and grimaced as small beads of red-tinged sweat formed on his skin and formed small runnels like backwards rain on a windowpane, climbing up and somehow through the glass.

It's working! Harry thought. But he couldn't keep it up. The wand slipped out of his hand and the spell stopped, leaving both Harry and Snape breathing as hard as if they'd been in a race.

But Snape wasn't awake.

And he was still cold.

And his breathing was already going soft. Going away.

I'll have to do it again.

If I can.

His ears roared as he bent to retrieve the fallen wand, and he had to close his eyes to keep the world from spinning. Had Snape felt like this when he'd cleared the poison from Harry? Probably.

Harry pulled the excess length of his pyjama sleeve down and wrapped it around the snowglobe, to reinforce his hold on it before he positioned it again. He put it against Snape's hand this time, where he could prop it on the bed and it wouldn't fall if he passed out.

The wand was moving a little smoother. Or he wasn't noticing the oddness as much.

He took a deep breath. Raised it. "Extrac..." he began, and then felt a hand fall heavy on his shoulder.

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Potter."

THE SLEEPER

SUMMARY: *Harry gets some needed information.*

HARRY NEARLY FELL OVER, spinning to see who had come up behind him. Luckily, Professor McGonagall had a firm grip on his shoulder, and she steadied him, plucking away Snape's wand with her free hand. "Extractus Toxinus, and with Severus' own wand?" she murmured, plainly unable to think of a set of circumstances that might lead to this strange pass. She fixed Harry with a stern eye. "I'd like an explanation for this, Mr. Potter."

Harry startled himself, and her, by taking a half-step forward and burying his face against her shoulder, "Professor McGonagall!" his voice was muffled by the cloth and the beginning of tears. "I thought he was dead — he might be dying!" She tucked Snape's wand away, under his pillow, and then steered Harry awkwardly over to the other bed. He let himself be guided, holding as tightly as he could to the snowglobe so it wouldn't fall. She sat with him next her, and let him cry on her robes for a little while, . "There, there, Potter. It may not as bad as all that." She summoned a handkerchief and substituted it for the globe. "Blow your nose and lie down and I'll take a look at Severus, shall I?"

Harry nodded around the square of cloth. "Yes, please."

McGonagall went back to the window, putting the snowglobe on the sill. Then she sat on the edge of the bed and studied Snape for several minutes, which gave Harry a chance to try to stop crying. He watched as she cast a spell that sent blue light fluttering over the supine Snape. "Well?" Harry asked, nervously, when she didn't say anything.

McGonagall shook her head, absently, still watching the blue light. As she moved her wand the light followed the gesture, up towards Snape's head. "Why Extractus Toxinus, Mr. Potter? Has he been poisoned?"

"I don't think so," Harry said. "But when he cast it on me, he said something about it taking away fatigue poisons. And I know he's tired. He said so."

She dispelled the light and turned towards Harry, one eyebrow high. "Perhaps," she said drily, "You should begin at the beginning."

Harry ran a hand through his hair, trying to remember it all in sequence. "I ... I wrote Professor Snape for an antidote, but instead of sending it, he came. And then it wasn't Hedwig that was poisoned it was me, so he used my mum's snowglobe to get it out, and that made me feel better, and he said it was because I didn't have any fatigue poisons, but it made *him* so tired I thought he was going to faint. He drank some potion later that made him feel better, but... then... when I woke up..." Harry swallowed, hard. "Do you think maybe he's not dying?"

"You don't know which potion, do you?" she asked.

Harry shook his head. "It was blue. And the bottle's still in his coat pocket. On the right." He wished she'd just say whether or not Snape was dying. Then Harry could stop shaking and go back to sleep. "He said I couldn't have any, even if there were any left."

She retrieved the empty vial and sniffed at it. "Endurance

Potion," she said. "I should have known." She sighed and came back over to stand beside Harry, casting the blue light once again. It felt like warm rain against Harry's skin. When he fidgeted under her scrutiny, she began talking to calm him down. "Professor Snape is not dying, Mr. Potter. He's resting. Rather thoroughly."

"Resting?" Harry's voice cracked with disbelief.

She hesitated for a moment, considering, "A more accurate description would be dormant."

"Dormant?" Harry repeated. It didn't make sense. Trees went dormant in the winter, he knew that from Herbology.

"So I believe." McGonagall looked as if she'd thought she'd explained it.

"But... do you mean he's in a coma? I mean, people don't go dormant." Harry pressed. His head was starting to ache.

"Muggles don't," she said, nodding agreement. "Neither do most wizards. But there are a few... I went to school with Severus' grandfather, and he was always late to school in the autumn because he was waiting until his mother woke up for the winter."

"Do you mean Snape goes to sleep every summer?" *He does spend his summer in a coffin. Ron was right.*

"No," McGonagall said. "I've never known Severus himself to go dormant before this, actually. But he's not badly injured, he's not poisoned, and he's not ill. I think he's just exhausted." She dispelled the light. "You, on the other hand, are feverish. And your liver isn't right."

"I told you, I was poisoned," Harry said impatiently. "It was an accident, but Snape... Professor Snape, I mean, took it all out. I keep going from hot to cold now. I still don't understand about the going dormant part. Why?"

She pushed Harry back against the pillows and rearranged the blankets while she explained. "Do you remember Fleur Delacour?"

"Of course I do," Harry said. *I dreamt about her a lot last term. And I don't think I was the only one.*

"And Hagrid, of course," McGonagall went on, although Harry didn't see the connection. "The thing is, that some wizarding families have chosen to blend with other... other magical species as a way to preserve their families and their power."

Harry thought about that through the soft fog that wanted to settle over him. "Do you mean Snape's not all human?"

She looked down at him. "Does that make a difference?"

"Well, it means I owe Ron a dozen Sickles," Harry said, and then bit his lip because he'd said it out loud and backedpedaled quickly. "I mean... well... I suppose not. Should it?"

"No more than having Muggle grandparents should, I should think," McGonagall said. "Although it does mean that some of the students who come to Hogwarts have special requirements."

"I bet Dumbledore lets them come anyway. Like he let Professor Lupin come." Harry thought that was a good thing, on the whole, although he wondered if some of the Slytherins might be more dangerous than they looked. And with Millicent Bulstrode that was saying something. He turned his head to look over at Snape — who still looked frankly dead. "He's not a... not a vampire, is he? I mean, vampires hate werewolves. You see it in all the films."

"No, Mr. Potter, he's not a vampire."

"Are you going to take him back to Hogwarts with you?" Whatever he was, Harry wasn't sure he wanted to be in the same room with Snape in this condition. He'd probably die anyway, just to make Harry look bad.

McGonagall got up and walked over to the window, looking out and up. She frowned and checked her pocketwatch. Harry could see that the sky was beginning to change. It

would be morning soon. Her glasses shone silver with light from the streetlamp as she considered. "He'd be safer here," she said, and she didn't sound very happy about it.

"Safer here?" Harry said. "If Aunt Petunia gets out, she'll have him arrested! If she doesn't just put a stake through his heart!"

"Then you'll have to protect him," she turned to Harry. "You've got that letter to cover any magic you do," she went on, rubbing her hands together thoughtfully, speaking more softly, as if to herself. "And until Albus returns, it's better that no one is quite sure where Severus is. I can persuade Arthur and Hopkirk to hold their tongues without too much difficulty."

"But... but... you mean, Snape's going to stay here the rest of the summer?" Harry couldn't believe it, and he wished he had the energy to get out of bed and argue about it. "Couldn't you stay instead?"

"That's the one thing I cannot do," she said, suddenly quite serious. "If I don't return to Hogwarts soon — quite soon — well..." she cut off the explanation. "It won't be for the whole summer, Harry. A few days at most. Just until Professor Dumbledore gets back."

"But I'm sick," Harry pointed out, not even bothering to not whine. "I'm getting better, but I can't look after him properly."

"I'll send you some help," she promised, looking out the window again. "Hide Severus in the cellar if you must, but keep him safe." She pulled out her wand and cast a quick spell at Snape, transfiguring his cloak and coat into what looked like a gray nightshirt where it showed above the blankets.

"What if I get into trouble?" Harry asked.

"Have you a fireplace?"

"Yes."

She pulled something that looked like a firecracker out of

her pocket. "If you're desperate, throw this in the fire. But only if you really need help." She set it on the bedstand by Harry and laid a hand against his face. "By the time you wake up, you'll have some help here. I promise."

"But..." But she was already casting the sleep spell. Harry fought against it, but the thick warm darkness was too much for him, and he faded away, dreaming of Snape trapped inside the snowglobe on a mantelpiece over an electric fire.



THE MORNING

SUMMARY: "Some kinds of help are the kind of help that helping's all about..."

SOMETHING WAS PUSHING against Harry's arm. He pulled away from it and flipped onto his stomach to get more sleep.

"Is Harry Potter awake now?" The squeaky voice could only belong to one person and Harry made himself not groan too loudly. Couldn't Dobby bother Ron or Neville for a change and let Harry sleep a little longer?

"Come back later, Dobby," he mumbled into his pillow. "I'm tired."

"Dobby will let Harry Potter sleep. Professor Snape will know what to do about the man under the stairs."

Man under the stairs? Snape? SNAPE!

Harry sat up, forcing his eyes open and looking for the blurry shape that was Dobby frantically. "No, no, don't bother him!" Snape was cranky enough in the usual way; heaven only knew what he'd be like if he was wakened from a dormant state. Harry'd seen a television show about bears once, and he didn't want to take chances.

The blur came closer and put Harry's glasses into his hand. They didn't help much. Dobby usual assortment of garish odd clothing had been augmented by the discovery of sequins sometime in the past month and a half, and he glittered in

the morning light. He smiled at Harry cheerfully, his long ears semaphoring wildly with pleasure.. "Dobby has come to help Harry Potter, sir, with the Dursleys and Professor Snape. Professor McGonagall says that no one will miss Dobby or go looking for him, so Dobby is the best choice for the moment. Dobby came right away, and has found Harry Potter, sir, Professor Snape, and three Dursleys. Two are sleeping, but the man under the stairs..." Dobby paused, waiting for something, and after a moment Harry realized it was a name.

"Uncle Vernon," he prompted, wondering how on earth Snape had gotten Uncle Vernon to fit in the cupboard.

"Uncle Vernon Dursley is banging on the door and saying he must get out and go to the lavatory." Dobby bounced with excitement. "Will Harry Potter sir come downstairs, or should Dobby open the door?"

"I'd best come," Harry said.. He could just imagine Uncle Vernon's reaction to the sight of a house elf. "You'll frighten him." *On second thought...Uncle Vernon's going to be furious about being in the cupboard all night. And with Snape unconscious, he'll want to take it out on me. Frightening him might not be a bad idea after all.* Harry glanced over to see if Snape had moved at all. He hadn't. "No... no, Dobby, you open the door for Uncle Vernon, let him use the lavatory ... but not the phone or anything... and then, then..." *If I put him in with Aunt Petunia they'll be able to plan things.* "Then put him back in the cupboard and lock it again for now. Until I think of someplace better."

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby vanished with one of his whipcracks of magic and Harry heard a shout of terror from downstairs. He grinned, imagining the look on Uncle Vernon's face. Dobby was startling enough even when you were sort of used to magic.

Harry stood up, meaning to go and use the loo himself, and dizziness hit him like a slap on the back of the head. He sat back down again. "I'm getting very tired of this," he grumbled, before calling to the chair and using it to go to where he needed to go. He felt better afterwards, and on the way back to bed he looked over to Professor Snape.

Do dormant people need to pee? Harry hoped not. One of Dudley's books had a chapter about bears, but Harry wasn't sure if it would mention things like whether or not bears could hold it all winter. And Dudley's books were in the guest room with Dudley, which meant waking Dudley up. And Dudley would want to pee, all right. And then he'd want breakfast.

"I want breakfast," Harry said. Maybe some food would make the dizziness go away. And if he weren't dizzy, then Harry could figure out what to do about the Dursleys breakfasts. And about the Dursleys. *I can't leave Uncle Vernon under the stairs until Professor Snape wakes up.*

Aunt Petunia was all right locked in Harry's room — he could put some food through the door flap for her. But he'd have to find a way to feed his uncle and his cousin without letting them loose. It was a good thing that today was Sunday, though. He wouldn't have to decide what to do about Uncle Vernon's job until tomorrow morning.

It made Harry's head hurt just to think about it. Last summer he couldn't have thought of anything better than having the Dursleys locked up and permission to use magic too. This summer... *It's just more responsibility. Something else to mess up and get someone killed. Dudley, probably.* He rubbed at his forehead with the heel of his hand, wondering if the pain were from his scar or just from not feeling well.

Dobby came back into the room and started opening draw-

ers, climbing up the bottom drawers to see in the one's nearer the top of the bureau.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked, grateful for the distraction.

"Dobby is finding Uncle Vernon Dursley clean trousers, Harry Potter sir" said Dobby, jumping down and going over to look in the wardrobe. "Uncle Vernon Dursley was very surprised to see Dobby, sir."

Harry snorted, caught between laughter and dismay. "He's still locked up, right, Dobby? I mean, he can't come up here?"

Dobby nodded vigorously. "Uncle Vernon Dursley is locked in the lavatory, and Dobby has made the window too small for him to fit through. Dobby is knowing many ways to keep punished people from escaping." The tennis ball eyes suddenly looked worried and his ears twitched nervously. "But Harry Potter is not punishing Uncle Vernon Dursley in a bad way, is he? Harry Potter is a good wizard. Harry Potter would not flog Uncle Vernon Dursley or use the bone breakers."

I really don't want to know what happens at the Malfoy's house, Harry thought, shuddering. "No, no, Dobby. Nothing like that. It was Professor Snape's idea to put Uncle Vernon in the cupboard, and as long as he gets a chance to eat and use the bathroom when he needs to, I think he'll be all right. I mean... I used to sleep in that cupboard myself."

Dobby's relief was as extravagant as his worry had been. He beamed at Harry and bounced over to hug Harry's legs where they dangled over the edge of the bed. "Good Harry Potter, wise Harry Potter, kind Harry Potter..."

"Hungry Harry Potter," Harry interrupted the flow of praise quickly, before Dobby could get any more momentum. "I'd like some breakfast, Dobby."

Dobby practically did a backflip. "Dobby will bring Harry

Potter sir breakfast!"

"And make some for the Dursleys too!" Harry shouted after Dobby's back as the house elf scrambled out the door, Uncle Vernon's trousers flapping behind him. That would solve one problem. Harry wasn't sure he could stay on his feet long enough to cook anything, although the dizziness was fading now.

He got up, determined to practice walking before he forgot how, and went over check on Professor Snape. The man still looked dead — but the feather that Harry found to check his breathing with still fluttered intermittently. Harry sighed and dared to touch Snape's cheek and forehead. "You're still awfully cold," he told the sleeper. "I hope that's not wrong."

Carefully, Harry eased Snape's wand out from under the pillow. It still felt funny, and Harry wished he could just go and get his own wand from his trunk, but he wasn't sure if it were safe to try it. Still, the Dursleys couldn't know that it wasn't his own wand, could they? And as long as he looked like he could do magic, he probably wouldn't actually have to do very much of it.

"Maybe if I just turned them all into toads until Snape wakes up..." Except that he wasn't sure that he could manage it. — Transfiguring people was Seventh year stuff — and even if he did, he wasn't sure it would last very long.

And they'd probably change back while I was trying to sleep. Or wander off and get squished by a car.

"I'm too hungry to think properly," Harry told himself. "I can't do anything about any of the Dursleys until I've had some breakfast."

He could have some cereal while Dobby cooked. Well, he could if he'd thought of it in time to ask Dobby to bring it up. He went over to sit on the bed again, and rubbed at his grumbling stomach.

Wait. He could do magic. Harry smiled and took out Snape's wand. "Accio Frosted Corn Flakes!"

There was a sudden, horrible crash of glass downstairs. A moment later the carton of cereal turned the corner of the door from the hallway and thudded into Harry's free hand. There were glass bits sticking out of it. One of the larger ones clearly had the pattern of the glass from the kitchen door.

Harry swallowed, hard, and put Snape's wand down, very gently, on the nightstand. "Oh, help."



THE HOUSE ELF

SUMMARY: "And some kinds of help are the kinds of help we all can do without!"

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"POTTER!"

Uncle Vernon's shout made Harry freeze with terror. His uncle was furious this time, and no wonder!

The glass shards in the mangled cereal box began to quiver, and then suddenly they all darted back toward the door, leaving the box to explode messily, scattering cereal in all directions.

"Get down here, boy... what the hell?!" Uncle Vernon's roar of disgruntlement cracked, ending in a high pitched shout that was somehow worse.

Harry jumped to his feet like a fishhook had caught under his navel and the line was reeling him toward his doom. He barely managed to avoid stubbing his toe on the school trunk in the hall. It was never a good idea to leave Uncle Vernon waiting. It always made things worse.

He stumbled on the stair, but managed to catch the rail and look over it, down into the hallway where Uncle Vernon was standing in the early morning sunlight from the window, his clothes a-glitter with small fragments of glass. He was gaping at Dobby, who was nonchalantly socketing the largest shards into place in the doorframe. The house elf selected another one of

the floating sharkfins of glass out of the air and set it into place, melting the glass together again with a spark from his finger.

Harry'd never seen Uncle Vernon achieve quite that shade of purple before.

He tried to breathe quietly, but it was too late. Uncle Vernon had noticed him. For a fat man, he could turn amazingly quickly, and it was only the stair rail that kept him from grabbing Harry by the ear.

"Look what you've done, boy!" the man roared.

"It's all right," Harry said hastily. "Dobby's fixing it. No one will be able to tell..." He went sprawling as he backed up the stairs, watching as Vernon came around the end of the banister.

"I'll teach you not to muck about with my home!" Vernon took a fistful of Harry's hair in one hand and raised his other hand like a wall, ready to strike.

"You leave Harry Potter be!" Dobby cried, with a whipcrack of magic that yanked Vernon away from Harry and left him hovering upside down against the far wall, a knot of black hair still in his fist. The glass door, no longer supported by the house elf's magic, fell apart, shards turning into smithereens as they landed on the kitchen tile. Harry curled up on the stairs, eyes watering, clutching at his head where it felt like half his scalp had been pulled out by the roots. He could hear Uncle Vernon roaring again. Upstairs, Aunt Petunia and Dudley were making screaming too. And over it all were Dobby's piercing cries of "Bad Uncle Vernon Dursley!"

Unless Snape really were dead, he'd come sweeping down the stairs any minute now, like the Breath of Doom, and Harry'd spend the entire next term in detention, scrubbing floors with Filch, and it would be worth it. Just to have someone else have to sort out the Dursleys.

But Snape didn't come.

Gradually, Harry managed to uncurl a little. He wiped at his eyes with one sleeve. "Dobby," he said, and then repeated it, trying to get the attention of the furious elf. "Dobby!"

"Yes Harry Potter, sir?" Dobby stopped bouncing Uncle Vernon against the wall. He looked at Harry expectantly.

"Put Uncle Vernon... put him back into the lavatory, all right? And lock the door. He'll be safe enough in there."

"I demand..." Uncle Vernon began, but Harry had had enough of it.

"Shut up!" he shouted, paling at his own temerity. "It's better than the cupboard — at least you'll have water in there when you're thirsty."

Uncle Vernon tried to choke out some kind of response, but it was too late; Dobby pointed a long finger and flung him, still upside-down, along the hall and into the tiny lavatory.

Harry sagged. "I wish Professor Snape would wake up," he groaned.

"Dobby will fetch him, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby offered, and started up the stairs.

"No! No, Dobby!" Harry intercepted the elf. "He needs his sleep. Professor McGonagall said he was dormant. And he must be, or all that racket from Dudley would've wakened him already."

"Ooooooh," Dobby's round eyes nearly bugged from his head. "Dobby understands. Dobby will not be bothering Professor Snape while he is dormant." The small figure shook with some remembered terror. "I will stop the racket, Harry Potter sir," he offered, and before Harry could think to grab him again he was off up the stairs.

"PROFESSOR SNAPE IS DORMANT AND YOU IS NOT TO BE WAKING HIM!" Dobby announced loudly enough for the

neighbors to hear, and Harry groaned, waiting for the barrage of shouts and questions.

But, to his astonishment, the noise stopped. All he could hear was Uncle Vernon banging on the pipes.

Maybe Aunt Petunia and Dudley had actually listened to Dobby.

Maybe Dobby had done something to them.

Harry scrambled on all fours up the stairs, and found Dobby coming back toward him, looking pleased with himself. He started to ask what Dobby had done, and realized that he couldn't hear his own voice, even though he could still hear the banging below.

Dobby smiled reassuringly and tugged at Harry, coaxing him down the stairs, and as soon as Harry's head was lower than the ceiling he could hear Dobby saying. "...keep the bad Dursleys from bothering Professor Snape for two hours."

"What have you done?" Harry asked.

"House elf magic. Is the Silence Spell to get the cleaning done without bothering the master of the house." As usual, when Dobby mentioned having a master, his ears twitched nervously. "No sounds made inside the Spell are heard."

"But sounds outside the spell can be heard. So if I shout something down here...Aunt Petunia and Dudley can hear it. But if they say something, they can't hear it and neither can we." It made sense in a house elf kind of way. Especially in a house like the Malfoys'. The house elves would want to hear the master of the house coming, but wouldn't want the noise of their cleaning to disturb the master. "Good. Well done, Dobby. Can we use it on Uncle Vernon as well?"

Dobby shook his head mournfully. "Dobby is only to be casting one Silence Spell at a time."

Harry sighed. "That's all right, Dobby. Go start cleaning up that glass, will you? Please?" Dobby bounced off to obey. Harry went over to face the lavatory door, trying to think over Uncle Vernon's banging. He didn't want to go get Snape's wand if he didn't have to, but what else could he use? Oh yes. Threats. Snape other favorite choice. But it would have to be something Uncle Vernon would believe...

He knocked on the door. "Uncle Vernon?"

"What? Let me out of here!" Vernon roared. Harry was getting very tired of Uncle Vernon roaring. He leaned against the wall to keep from shaking so much.

"If you don't stop making noise... uhm," Harry changed his mind. Telling Uncle Vernon he'd miss breakfast would only make him louder. "If you're not quiet, I'll turn you into a newt."

"You're not allowed to use magic, boy!" Vernon answered, but his voice was considerably softer.

"Not without supervision," Harry said firmly. "But I'm not unsupervised, am I? And Dobby will do it if I don't."

"But... but... you can't intend to leave me in here all day!" Uncle Vernon protested, still softer. "I'm still stiff from being in that cupboard all night!"

Harry thought about the small room in front of him. There wasn't much more space than was needed for the handsink and the toilet — certainly not enough for a man the size of Uncle Vernon to work out his stiffness. But Harry's head still hurt from losing that clump of hair, and he remembered the look on his Uncle's face.

"I'll think about it," he said at last. "After breakfast." And went to help Dobby.



Petunia tried screaming again. Nothing. She wasn't sure what had happened, exactly, but it had to be more of that dreadful magic. And there was someone — or something — new in the house. She wasn't sure what it was, but that voice didn't sound human.

She flung herself angrily onto the bed, which didn't squeak. Through the air vent, she could just hear Harry and the new arrival talking in the kitchen.

"No, Dobby... Wait..."

"Harry Potter sir will like eggs and bacon."

"Yes, but you don't need to build a fire in the oven. Look here. See? Turn these, and the gas comes on."

"Clever Harry Potter..."

"Here, stand on this. I don't want you to burn yourself."

"Kind Harry Potter..."

Disgusting, grovelling *thing*. Heaven only knew what damage it was doing to her kitchen. She turned her thoughts to the announcement it had made. Snape dormant? Not to be wakened? That meant he was sleeping. Off his guard. If only she could get herself and Dudley to safety before the horrid man woke up...

Petunia got off the bed and tried swinging the bicycle handlebars she'd found against the door. There was no sound, but she didn't make much more than a small dent in the panel. She tried again, but the door was solid wood, and it was obvious that she wouldn't be able to break through it after a few blows. Angrily, she threw the handlebars aside. They ricocheted off the wall, knocking free a lump of plaster from the drywall.

A smile crossed her narrow lips. If no one could hear her, no one would stop her. Grimly determined, she took up the handlebars up and began to consider where to dig through the wall.



THE BREAKFAST

SUMMARY: Food glorious food.

DUDLEY DURSLEY was frustrated.

He'd tried shouting. He'd tried screaming. He'd tried kicking at the door. He'd knocked things over. He'd broken things. He'd shrieked until his throat started to hurt.

And no one was paying attention to him.

He sighed and flopped down onto the bed, inhaling the wafting scent of bacon with a wistfulness that he normally only felt at Smeltings. Why didn't Mummy come and fix everything? Send Harry and Snape away and let him eat a proper breakfast? Well, no, even if she sent away the freaks she'd still want him to stay on his rotten diet. Mummy didn't have very many things she wouldn't give in on, but the diet had proven to be one of them. Dudley turned over and buried his face against the pillow, trying to block the tantalizing smell.

"I've just got big bones," he mumbled into the softness. "It's puppy fat." It was awful not being able to hear yourself. "The school should let me bring a uniform from a tailor."

So what if he couldn't play any of the outdoor games without wheezing? He didn't want to play them anyway. He'd rather sit on the side and yell for Piers during a rugby game than play himself, thank you very much. What was the fun of being knocked

down? And so what if his heart sounded a little overworked to the doctor? The doctor was the one who wanted him to exercise more, and everyone knew that exercise made your heart work all the harder, so what was all the fussing about?

Something touched his shoulder, and for a wild moment, Dudley thought his heart was going to stop altogether. He flipped over so fast he fell off the opposite side of the bed, taking the covers with him. He struggled free of them finally, and sat up to find that someone had left a tray on the nightstand.

Someone invisible.

Or already gone.

Dudley got to his feet and went around the bed to look at the tray. Bacon. Eggs. Waffles. Fried potatoes. Toast drenched in butter and an entire pot of jam.

Dudley backed away from the laden plate with panic in his eyes. "They're trying to kill me!"



Harry pushed the remains of his breakfast around on the plate with his fork, wishing that he felt like eating it. Dobby, once he'd figured out the 'fridge and the stove, had set to work with a will. He would have cooked enough food to feed a dozen people, if Harry hadn't stopped him.

Dobby had cooked enough for six. Which was just enough, if you included Hedwig, who had flown down to find Harry. It was good food, too. Harry had heaped his plate, but between being tired and nervous, he'd found that he couldn't manage more than a few bites of anything without starting to feel ill.

He picked up a piece of bacon and snuck it over to Hedwig while Dobby investigated the pot cupboard. It would be a shame to waste any of it.

And he had to admit, the food was helping in that it mollified the Dursleys somewhat. Uncle Vernon had shut up about having to eat in a toilet pretty quickly, anyway. Heaven only knew what Dudley and Aunt Petunia thought. Harry had told Dobby to just slide Aunt Petunia's food through the doorflap, but the elf had had to go inside the guest room to feed Dudley.

Harry wondered if Dudley had seen Dobby.

That would have sent Dudley into hysterics, probably. Not that anyone could tell, since Dobby hadn't waited around to find out, and the silence spell was still working.

It was nice, not having to listen to Dudley having a tantrum. Or clomping around upstairs. But it was strange, too. And kind of creepy. Harry had never realized before how much he depended on sounds to let him know where the Dursleys were in the house. Dobby moved very quietly, when he wanted to. Which made sense, if you thought about it. House-elves didn't usually want to be noticed much. Snape moved quietly too. When he moved. If he ever moved again.

It was too quiet.

That had to be what was making him think creepy things. Snape wasn't dead. McGonagall had said so. He wasn't even dying. Probably.

Snape wouldn't want to die. He wouldn't want to miss all those chances to be awful.

Except that he could come back as a ghost, couldn't he?

Uncle Vernon would go spare.

All of a sudden, Harry wanted noise. He got up from the table and scraped his plate, putting it into the sink and starting the water into the basin. He'd squirted in some of the dish soap when Dobby popped up beside him. "Oh, no, Harry Potter, sir! You is not to be washing up. That is Dobby's job."

"It's all right, Dobby," Harry said. "I don't mind. I do it all the time."

"But," Dobby frowned and his ears sagged floorwards.

"Dobby is here to help."

Harry sighed. "Well... if you really want to..."

The house-elf perked up immediately and pulled over a chair, somehow sizing it so that he could stand at the right height to wash the dishes.

Harry wandered out into the living room and flopped onto the couch. Something square and hard jammed into his back and he groaned as he fished around for it and pulled out the television remote. Television. That would make noise. Even on a Sunday morning. He hit the power button and started flicking through the channels. Static. Static. Static. Static.

Maybe the storm put it out. "Rats." Harry tried to think back to the little muggle science he'd had in primary school, but he couldn't remember much of it. Something about needing a circle for electricity to work, which didn't make any sense. The television was at the end of the wire from the wall.

Uncle Vernon could probably fix it.

Harry thought about how angry Uncle Vernon probably still was, and shook his head. Bad idea. Uncle Vernon might be frightened of Snape and Dobby, but he wasn't afraid of Harry.

Dudley on the other hand... Dudley was terrified of magic. Harry could get a twig from the back yard, claim it was a magic wand, and Dudley would believe it, he was that dumb. The only things Dudley bothered to learn were the things he cared about. And Dudley loved television.

And if he got Dudley out of the guest room, he could put Uncle Vernon up there, which would let his Uncle stretch out a little, and let Harry use the loo without climbing all those stairs.

"Dobby! Dob..." Harry called.

The house elf popped up beside him, dripping wet, with dishsoap bubbles clinging to one ear. "Yes, Harry Potter, sir?"

"I want you to help me with something..."



Harry stepped cautiously into the master bedroom. Cornflakes crunched soundlessly under his feet. He stopped at once, glancing apprehensively at Snape, his shoulders tightening against the inevitable sarcastic comment.

No sound. No movement. Snape still looked dead.

People in comas had tubes and things, didn't they? Wires and monitors and stuff, like in the movies. Maybe Dobby knew what kind of thing Snape should have. No. Better send a note to Professor McGonagall, once Hedwig felt better.

Harry hurried over to the nightstand and took a deep breath before cautiously taking up Snape's wand. It still felt awkward, with that peculiar sense of something sliding inside it, but he needed it to get Dudley's door open. Dobby had to stay downstairs and keep an eye on Uncle Vernon.

What kind of a center would make a wand FEEL like this? It was easier to consider the wand than consider Snape's condition. *Unicorn hair... phoenix feather... manatee teeth...mercury?* Harry had a feeling that the wand didn't like him. No surprise there.

"Sorry, it's an emergency," he told it, as he went back to face the guest room door. The wand couldn't hear him, of course, but maybe it could tell what he was saying. He wondered if it would blow the guest room door right off the hinges just to be uncooperative. "It's just for one spell. It's an easy one. Standard book of Spells. Chapter seven." Harry wished Hermione were here. She'd know whether or not an incantation would work under a Silence spell. But then again. Maybe Snape's

wand didn't like silly incantations. Snape didn't need one to clean up a potion spill anyway. It felt stupid, talking to a wand, and stupider talking to a wand when you couldn't hear yourself talking. "Maybe I'm getting sick again."

Harry put his free hand on his forehead, wondering if he could tell if he were feverish. He felt funny, anyway, and his breakfast was sitting lumpily inside him. "We've got to work together. It's an emergency," he tried to convince the wand. "You helped me last night. And I'll give you back to Professor Snape when I'm done."

The wand slewed sideways, dragging his hand with it, and Harry felt a sudden, refreshing chill.

"Okaaaay," Harry said to it, tightening his grip. "Uh... thanks."

It was hard to tell if the wand moved, or that was just his hand shaking. Harry aimed it at the doorknob, hoping that Dudley wasn't just behind the door. "Alohomora," he said.

To his great relief, the doorknob turned, and the door stayed on its hinges.

Harry breathed again.

He touched the doorknob.

It didn't crumble.

And Dudley didn't seem to have noticed. Good. He could take a minute to get rid of the wand.

Harry went back into the master bedroom and hastily set the wand beside Snape's pillow. He didn't want to touch Snape's hand again. It had felt like stewed slugs gone cold the last time. He looked around, in case he needed to do anything else, but all he could think of was taking the animated chair downstairs. Dobby could clean up the cornflakes later. And the snowglobe was safer where Dudley wasn't going to touch it.

The animated chair didn't react when Harry asked it to follow

him, which was a shame, so he added it to his list of things for Dobby to do later. He hurried into the hall and faced the guest room door, drawing the stick Dobby had gotten from the yard and holding it like a wizard from a cartoon. He felt a right git, but Dudley ought to be impressed and intimidated.

Harry kicked open the door, rushing inside like a tv cop.

Dudley hadn't even noticed him. Harry's cousin was sitting on the floor by the bed, twisted up in a blanket, reading something. His face was all red, and wet, and his shoulders shuddered every once in a while, the way that shoulders did when you'd been crying for a long time and were finally calming down. Another tear slid out of his eye and he smeared it sideways before it could drip off his nose with a clumsy hand, still unconscious of any observer.

Harry stared, forgetting his ruse.

Dudley was crying. For real.

And he hadn't eaten his breakfast.



THE DAY

SUMMARY: *Dudley has to cope with having Harry in charge.*

SOMETHING MOVED, beyond the edge of the book, and Dudley looked up to find Harry standing in the room, holding a magic wand. He froze, waiting for the laughter and the scorn. It was too late to wipe the tears off of his face, and of course Harry would be pleased to have the chance to tease.

But Harry didn't smile. He beckoned Dudley towards the opened door, his mouth opening uselessly. The magic silence was working on him, too, then. Maybe the one who had been shouting about Snape sleeping had made the silence. Or Snape.

Harry beckoned again, a little more impatiently, and Dudley scrambled to his feet, clutching OLIVER TWIST a little tighter. He didn't have any feet on it for Professor Snape, yet, and he wasn't sure how to go about having any, but maybe Harry would tell him, and then Snape would stop being mad at him. Dudley was tired of having people being mad at him.

He followed Harry into the hallway and down the stairs. About halfway down, all of a sudden he could hear Harry talking again.

"... just a little farther. Now. Can you hear me, Dudley?" Harry asked, looking back up at his cousin.

"Yes," Dudley answered, but he still couldn't hear himself. Harry seemed to be satisfied, though.

"Do you want to stay downstairs for a while?" Harry went on. "You can, if you don't scream."

"Why would I...?" Dudley started to ask, and then he saw his father tied up and gagged with towels, floating upside down at the end of the hall. A little...brown...thing... was standing underneath, pointing a long bony finger upwards. When it moved a little, so did Daddy. Dudley felt himself scream, a little anyway, but since he still couldn't hear himself at all he didn't think it counted. After the first shock he swallowed hard, and inched on down the stairs to Harry, holding his hand over his mouth to keep from screaming again as the little whatever it was started up the stairs, with Vernon bobbing along behind. His father's eyes were furious, and they didn't soften much when they caught sight of Dudley on the way by. But there wasn't anything Dudley could do but shrug. He watched wide eyed, crowding close to Harry as the strange parade passed him. At least Harry looked human.

"Come on, Dudley," Harry said, tugging on Dudley's sleeve to get him started down the stairs again once the creature had vanished into the upstairs hall. "Do you feel sick?" he went on, to Dudley's surprise. "Is that why you didn't eat breakfast?"

Dudley's stomach rumbled, and his face got warm. To cover his embarrassment he shrugged, and scowled, glad that he had cried so much it was hard to start in again. "I'm not allowed to eat any of that stuff, you know that Harry," he mumbled, looking down at his belly as he followed Harry down into the dining room. Someone had cleaned up all of the dishes from last night's dinner, and Dudley's stomach growled with the memory of all that food, even as he cringed at the thought of what the doctor would say if he knew. "Unless Mummy sent it up?" he asked, thinking of the possi-

bility for the first time. If Mummy thought it was all right for him to eat some bacon...

"Aunt Petunia's still locked in my room," Harry said, sitting down and raking a hand through his hair, which was even messier than usual. "I never thought I'd see the day you turned down food, Dudley."

Dudley sat down too, and used a napkin to wipe his face, hiding his expression for a moment. It wasn't *that* hard to start crying again, and he didn't want Harry to tease him. "I hate my diet," he tried to explain. "But... I don't want ... I hate being fat, too," he blurted out, and somehow the words just kept on coming. "But since I've had to keep to my diet at school, I'm not as fat as I was last year. I'm stronger. I don't want to go back to being so fat I can't even walk down the hall without getting tired."

He waited, but Harry didn't say anything. He put down the napkin and met Harry's eyes, expecting scorn. But Harry was just listening. He even looked worried.

It was one of the hardest things Dudley had ever done, telling his cousin the truth, but he felt compelled to go on now he'd started. "The doctor said if I keep eating all the foods with a lot of fat, I'd die."

The green eyes looked back at him as if they'd never seen him before. Harry bit his lip before answering. "I'm sorry," he said. "I never thought of that. I thought you liked all those foods."

Dudley blinked. It hadn't occurred to him that Harry might have given him those foods because he *liked* them. "I do," he said slowly, working it out in his head. "I just can't have them. Not that much, not all at once. Just a little, now and then, for special occasions."

Harry smiled, wanly. "I'd count this as a special occasion," he

said. "I mean, how often are you held hostage in your own house?"

Dudley shrugged, and smiled back nervously. He was glad Harry understood. He couldn't remember ever feeling quite this way before. He'd never cared about Harry's good opinion. He wasn't sure that he cared about it now. But it was good not being all alone anymore. "How long do you think it's going to last?" he ventured, not really expecting an answer. "Being a hostage, I mean?"

"I dunno," Harry said. "At least until Snape wakes up. And that might be days."

"Days?" Dudley echoed. That meant he could wait and read the book later. And that he'd be stuck in the guest room for days. "But... No one can sleep for *days*, Harry."

"Snape can," Harry said, pulling a face. "Professor McGonagall... one of my other teachers... she told me that he's gone dormant. He's awfully tired. You could tell if you'd ever seen the way he usually is."

"Nicer?" Dudley asked hopefully.

"Not really." Harry leaned on his arm, resting his face against one hand. "I don't really know how long he'll sleep. He might wake up an hour from now for all I can tell."

"But I haven't got his feet yet!" Dudley fretted. If Snape was meaner when he was rested, Dudley didn't want to be found wanting.

"His what?" Harry said.

"Feet. Three feet, he said, on this book. But I don't know what he meant by it." Dudley confessed.

"Three feet of writing," Harry said. "Like a book report." He turned the book Dudley had held out so he could see the title. "Oliver Twist. I liked that one." He handed it back to Dudley. "Don't worry. I don't think Snape's really going to wake up in an hour. McGonagall wouldn't have sent Dobby if she thought that being

dormant was only going to last as long as regular sleeping."

"Dobby?"

"Yes," Harry said, brightening a little. "Look, if you're hungry, I'll have Dobby make you a breakfast of things you are allowed to eat, all right? You just have to make sure you don't eat too much."

"Is Dobby that little brown thing that was making Daddy float?" Dudley pulled in on himself, looking around worriedly.

"Yes," Harry said. "Dobby's a house elf. But he won't hurt you. Not unless you try to hurt me or Professor Snape, that is."

"Are you certain?" Dudley's voice cracked a little.

"Yes." Harry turned his head and called, "Dobby! Come here."

Dudley put the napkin into his mouth, and bit it out of sheer nervousness, but the small figure that came to Harry's call didn't look quite as dangerous close up. Just ... freaky. Light-bulb eyes and big mobile ears on a shrunken marionette made out of brown wrapping paper might come close to describing it. It dressed as badly as Harry did, or worse. But it seemed to be... well... humble, bowing to Harry and smiling hopefully.

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir?" said the creature, like it had been trained or tamed or something.

"On the refrigerator there's a paper that says 'Dudley's Diet' on the top. It has a list of all the foods Dudley's allowed to eat, and how many calories he can have at each meal. Could you make him another breakfast? One that fits the diet, please?"

"Does Harry Potter sir want Dobby to make a second breakfast for everyone?" Dobby asked, tipping his head to one side.

"No, just for Dudley, thanks," Harry said decidedly. "Come on, Dudley. You can fix the television while Dobby's cooking."



Harry watched Dudley surreptitiously from the couch as his cousin stewed over the Dickens and tried not to drip juice from the large fruit salad that was the centerpiece of Dobby's idea of a diet breakfast onto the pages. The television was on, showing a rerun of an old American series, but much to Harry's surprise, Dudley was pretty much ignoring it.

Harry had never known Dudley to ignore the television. Or to care much about schoolwork or what the teachers thought. Or about what the doctor thought, for that matter. Only about what Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon thought, and they both thought that Dudley was perfect the way he was.

And Harry had always thought that he was just awful.

And stupid.

But...

But Dudley had known just exactly how to go about getting the television to work. Something about the power going out and losing all of the settings because the batteries were dead; he'd mumbled to himself as he went about it, with a quiet competence that Harry had never suspected in him.

Not that being an expert in getting televisions reset was all that much to brag about, but that had also surprised Harry: Dudley hadn't bragged, or run Harry down for not knowing how to do it.

Of course, it might have been breakfast that distracted him. Or Dobby. Dudley was definitely frightened of Dobby. And Dobby was fascinated by the television, coming from the kitchen trailing bubbles to see what had happened whenever there was a burst of laughter.

Maybe Dudley thought Dobby was checking to see that he was doing his work. That might explain why he was working.

As long as he was behaving himself.

Harry shifted position and watched the flickering scenes

on the television screen for a while, but it was just sound and patterns. He closed his eyes, to rest them for a minute, and was vaguely aware of his own breathing steadying and slowing as he drifted off into a doze, only vaguely aware of the moving patch of sunlight, and Dobby giving Dudley a plateful of something to snack on. His dreams were strange, and he wanted to wake up enough to wipe the sweat away from his face, but he couldn't quite manage it.

And then the doorbell rang.



THE FRIENDS

SUMMARY: Visitors mean trouble.

AT FIRST, Harry thought he'd only dreamed the sound of the doorbell, or that it was something from the television, but Dudley's exclamation of dismay and a hand shaking his shoulder made him reconsider. "Harry," Dudley was whispering frantically. "Harry, what am I supposed to do?"

"What is it?" Harry asked, forcing his eyes open. He felt like he was sleeping in glue, and his mouth tasted like it, too.

"It's Piers, and Dennis, and Malcolm, and Gordon. I saw them through the window. Mummy will kill me if they see that on the floor!"

"See what?" Harry took the glasses that Dudley was pushing into his hands and set them on his nose and then blanched. "Oh, no!" Dobby was curled up sound asleep in front of the television. By the look of things, the little house elf had sat down cross-legged to watch the screen for so long his ears had drooped, pulling him forward until he'd gone to sleep with his face on the rug and his ears splayed out on either side of his head like rumpled socks. The noise and motion didn't appear to be making the slightest impression on his slumbers. "Not Dobby too!"

The bell rang again. "I can't pick it up," Dudley blathered,

jigging nervously from one foot to the other. "It might bite!"

Adrenalin cleared Harry's head a little. "All right," he commanded. "I'll take care of Dobby. You answer the door before they wake up Snape. *And get rid of them!*"

"How am I meant to do that?" Dudley wailed, scuttling towards the door.

"Think of something!" Harry called, and scrambled over to collect Dobby in his arms. The small figure felt horribly limp, but snored reassuringly. Harry ran for the kitchen, letting the door swing shut behind him just as he heard Dudley turning back the front door bolt.

"It's about bloody time!" Piers's voice sounded horribly loud to Harry, and it must have done to Dudley too, because his cousin was quick to hush his friends.

"Harry's... I mean, my Mum... Harry's given her... she's got a terrible headache," Dudley couldn't seem to settle on a lie. "I can't come out, and you've got to... Gordon!"

"Didja hear about the big lightning strike?" Gordon's voice was a lot nearer to the kitchen than the front door. The only place big enough to hide Dobby in the kitchen was the oven. No. Definitely not. Harry dashed for the door that led to the garden shed.

"Gordon! You can't just walk in!" Dudley protested. Harry could hear him puffing heavily as he came into the kitchen after Gordon, and the clumping of more feet in his wake.

"Got the central telephone tower. Took out every mobile phone in the south of England," Gordon's cheerful reporting went on blithely, in spite of Dudley. Harry could hear the refrigerator door being opened. "I expect that's why you didn't answer when we called, hey, Dudders?"

"Anything good in there?" Dennis had followed Gordon. Harry bit back a groan. Obviously, Dudley was going to

need help getting rid of his friends. And Harry's wand was upstairs. Snape's wand was upstairs. He couldn't Memory Charm anyone even if he knew how! He'd even forgotten the stick he'd been using to impress Dudley. It was probably stuck between the cushions on the couch.

"Dobby, wake up!" Harry whispered, shaking the elf gently. "Wake up!" He shook a little harder, but all it did was make Dobby snore a little louder. "What's wrong with you?" He set Dobby down carefully in a basket of laundry, tucking dangling limbs up so that he could cover everything with a towel, and then went to listen again at the door.

"...thought we'd come over here and try it out. I've got the codes for everything but the final boss, and he ought to be easy with all the armor on and an extra powerblaster apiece," Gordon was saying. "All I need to do is install that new graphics card your dad bought for you and we're good to go. At least until it starts thundering again. But that won't be for hours yet."

"Pass me some of that ham, Gordo," Malcolm sounded impatient. "I'm starving."

"You ate at Dennis' house," Piers said. "Hey, Dud, aren't you having any ham?"

"No," Dudley said. "And neither are you. It's for my Dad."

"Oh, your mum'll buy him some more," Dennis said. "She always does."

Harry hoped he was doing the right thing as he opened the door and stepped through quickly, shutting it behind him. "You heard Dudley: Aunt Petunia's not feeling well."

"Well, well, if it isn't Potter, come to get beat up," Piers Polkiss had put on nearly eight inches of height and a lot more muscle than anyone who had been that scrawny as a child deserved. Harry remembered suddenly that Piers was

on the Smeltings rugby team, and had a reputation for roughness. Not that getting hit by Piers could be worse than being hit by a bludger, but Harry didn't feel up to it just now. He set his jaw and tried to look as if he didn't care what Piers said.

"Harry?" Gordon blinked at him. "What's wrong with you?"

"Maybe his bird died," Dennis chortled, tipping back his chair. "Is that it, Hair-Head? Didjer birdie eat a bad mouse? Hey, Piers, birdie ate a bad mouse, musta been from your house!"

Harry would have turned his glare on Dennis, but Piers was in the way, and the bit about the bad mouse had put a smile on his face that Harry longed to wipe away. He thought of several really good hexes, including one that would turn Piers into a ferret.

"What do you know about my owl?" he said, in the lowest register he had.

"You shouldn't feed birds bad mice, Potter. Going to get a bad grade at that school of yours, now, aren't you?" Piers sneered. Harry felt his face getting flushed as he knotted his hands into fists and glared at Piers, waiting for the larger boy to start something. He didn't need a wand to rearrange a face like that, just one... more... reason...

"He's not pinin', he's passed on! He has ceased to be! He's expired! He's a stiff! Bereft of life, he rests in peace! He's off the twig! He's kicked the bucket! This is an ex-parrot!" Dennis chanted cheerfully.

"Lay off about the bird!" Dudley growled, shoving Dennis off his chair and into Piers's back. Both boys went down in a tangle onto the floor. "And get out! Before you wake my mum!"

"Since when do you care about the freak's bird?" Piers came up, belligerently, only to stop when he was confronted with the unusual sight of the cousins standing shoulder to shoulder.

"Since it's bloody expensive to replace an owl!" Dudley shouted back. "I told you it belongs to his school!"

"Easy," Harry said quickly, remembering the danger. "You'll wake up... everyone upstairs."

Dudley grimaced, and turned red with the effort of not shouting again, but he didn't stop scowling at Piers.

"Are you sick too, Dudley?" Gordon put a hand over his mouth. "Is it contagious? Is that why you're acting so strange?"

"Probably," Harry said, seeing an opening. He stepped a foot or so away from Dudley. "Sorry, Dudley. I know I'm supposed to keep my distance. Still, I haven't vomited for hours." He tried to look contrite. "I haven't breathed on you, so you're probably all right if you wash your hands."

"Vomited?" Even Piers took a step back.

"Yes, and Uncle Vernon threw up for hours last night," Harry said with relish. "I think that's why Aunt Petunia's so ill from taking care of him. I've been scrubbing things clean all morning. It'll take hours to get the laundry done at this rate."

A light finally showed up in Dudley's small eyes. "That's right," he said. "So if you don't want to all end up sick, you'd better get out of here, like I said."

"Gee, you could have told us before we came in," Gordon said, pushing away from the table and getting to his feet. "Malcolm, leave that, it's contaminated."

"Confaminatet?" Malcolm asked around a mouthful of sandwich.

"I thought you said the ham was for your father," Piers said suspiciously.

"Oh, it's probably all right," Harry said with a flash of vicious inspiration. "I rinsed it off before I put it back into the refrigerator. And it wasn't right next to Uncle Vernon."

"Rinsed... I don't think I feel so good," Dennis whimpered, pushing away the sandwich he'd not tasted. "I'm going home."

"Me too," said Gordon. "Send me an e-mail when you're over the plague, Dudley, and I'll come over and put in that graphics card." He grabbed Malcolm's collar and tugged the larger boy to his feet. "Come on, Malcolm," he said, batting bread and ham to the floor. "Leave that."

"But..." Malcolm let himself be led off, still confused.

Piers lingered the longest, but in the end he sauntered after the other three, muttering to himself. Dudley and Harry followed him to make sure that he really left.

When they were finally gone, and the front door was latched behind them, Dudley turned with a relieved grin. "That was brilliant, Harry."

Harry grinned back. "Did you see the looks on their faces?"

"Except Piers," Dudley said, sobering a little. "I don't think he believed us."

"No," Harry sat down on the stairs, suddenly aware of how tired he was. He looked up at his cousin, wondering if this unusual sense of camaraderie was enough for a straight answer. "How did they know about the mice?"

Dudley blushed and looked at the floor. "It was Piers's mouse poison," he said. "And Malcolm and Dennis thought it would be funny. Gordon didn't though."

Harry nodded to acknowledge Gordon's relative innocence. "And you?"

Dudley shrugged. "I... I thought you'd just let the owl go outside to hunt, the way you did last summer," he offered, and then shrugged again and looked up at Harry with an uncomfortable twist to his mouth. "I hoped she'd fly away and not come back. Or that she'd die, I guess."

"Why? Hedwig's never hurt you." If he'd felt better, Harry might have gotten angry, but now he just wanted to know.

"None of my pets ever lived this long," Dudley said, with a touch of his usual petulance. "Not even the turtle."

Harry could have pointed out that turtles tended to live longer when they didn't get thrown through a plate glass window in a fit of temper. And wasn't it just like Dudley to get jealous because Harry had anything at all? But he could almost understand. And it might have been Piers's idea to begin with. And besides, with the adrenalin worn off, he didn't have the energy to get mad at Dudley for something that Dudley had already apologized for. "She's all right now, and that's what matters, isn't it?" He yawned and rubbed at his eyes.

"Why's everyone so sleepy?" Dudley asked querulously. "Professor Snape, that Dobby thing, you... and Mum and Dad aren't making any noise either."

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "Are you sleepy?"

"Not in the least," Dudley said. He bit his lip, thinking ponderously while Harry leaned his chin on his hands and tried to work out how much effort it would be to move over to the couch. "Maybe coffee would help. Would you like me to make you some?" At Harry's stare he smiled nervously. "I've watched Mum make it. I know how."

"I'd like that," Harry said, wondering if he'd already fallen asleep. Dudley being nice had to be a dream. Probably. But coffee was a good idea. It always smelled good, even if he'd never been allowed to taste it. And being left alone for a few minutes would give him a chance to think about what kind of spell Snape had put on Dudley and whether or not it would work on other people.

"All right," Dudley turned to go to the kitchen, and then hesitated. "Harry?"

Harry opened the eyes he'd let drift closed. "What?"

"Would you... would you help me with my feet? The ones

about the book? I'm kind of stuck." When Harry didn't answer right away — because he was flabbergasted at the request — Dudley even added, "Please?"

Harry nodded hastily, "Of.. of course," he stammered. "I... I don't know how much help I can be, but I'll look over it."

Dudley nodded and left. He really did waddle, Harry decided, watching his cousin's awkward gait from behind, but so would anyone with that much extra weight. For the first time it occurred to him that Aunt Petunia hadn't done Dudley any favors by indulging him with all his favorite foods for years. And that was uncomfortably close to the idea that maybe Dudley had been ... well... mistreated in a way, and maybe that was why he was the way he was. That and a mean streak. Harry thought about the turtle, and Hedwig and shook his head. Maybe his temperature had gone up again. He'd actually started to feel sorry for Dudley: the boy who got everything, and usually by making sure that Harry didn't get any at all!

Dudley poked his head out from the kitchen door. "I'll make us some lunch too," he said. "And some for Dooby, if you can wake him up. He does eat people food, doesn't he?"

"Dobby," Harry corrected automatically. "Yes, he does." Maybe Dudley was sick or something. Although he didn't look it. "Thanks," Harry added belatedly, and Dudley nodded and disappeared back into the kitchen. *He must REALLY want help with that paper for Snape.*

Harry pulled himself upright using the banister. First things first. Visit the loo. Get Dobby out of the shed. And then, somehow, try to figure out how on earth he was going to help Dudley with his homework without starting a fight.



Dudley put the ham away, feeling virtuous because he didn't snatch any off the plate. The coffeepot was on, and the water was beginning to make small noises, so it wouldn't be long before it was ready. A glance at the clock showed him that it truly was well and truly past noon, in spite of how hot it was, so he opened a couple of cans of soup as well, and dumped them in a pot. Soup would be hard to get wrong. And it was good food for someone who was sick.

Only... He remembered that the being sick part was just something he and Harry had made up. Except Harry really *did* look like he was sick. When he'd come through the kitchen to fetch the house elf out of the back shed he'd been much too thin and pale, with his green eyes duller than they usually were. Small wonder Gordon had believed that he was ill. Though the green eyes had gotten a lot brighter when he'd been glaring at Piers.

Dudley hugged the thought of Piers backing down to himself. Piers thought he was such a big shot now that he was on the rugby team. He needed to be taken down a notch. Maybe Harry could get some of that horrid candy that made your tongue so big, and Dudley could sneak some into Piers's book-bag. That would be fair revenge for the mice, too.

Toast, butter... Harry didn't eat enough. That's what made him so thin. Dudley sliced the other half of the melon from breakfast and put three of the slices on Harry's plate and kept one for himself. *It's not like Mum's a bad cook. Harry just doesn't appreciate good food.* A brief vision of the highly polished plates Harry normally passed back out through the cat flap countered that notion, and Dudley frowned. *It must be the doctor's fault. He's the one who told her that the diet was the right one for a fifteen year old boy. He should be able to tell that Harry's different from me.*

Of course, that was the problem. Mum wouldn't want the doctor to know that they were related. She'd always taken Harry to the National Health clinic when the school had wanted him to have shots. Still, doctors had to know about all sorts of shameful things and keep them secret. They studied weird diseases and all, and knew how to do stuff. It wouldn't hurt to let the doctor know that Harry was a freak, probably. Maybe there was a blood test for magic. Maybe there was even a cure. Dudley hesitated over the cake on the top shelf of the refrigerator, and then decided to give Harry a slice. Maybe there was only a treatment, after all. He'd have to check for a website.

When he went out with the tray to the living room, Harry was leafing through OLIVER TWIST. He had Dudley's written work laid out across the coffee table, but he'd propped up the doodle page against the flower vase. Dudley blushed. He'd forgot about that page. Now Harry would know how much time he'd wasted this morning when he should have been working.

"Lunch?" he said, hefting the tray to a more comfortable position.

"Great." Harry flashed him a brief, grateful smile and cleared the papers to one side. Dudley put down the tray and tried to sneak away the sketches. "Wait," Harry said, before he could crumple the paper. "Don't mess it up."

"It's just messing around."

"Yeah, but it really looks like Dobby. I'd like to keep it." Harry took the paper from Dudley and smoothed the edges. "I thought you only drew cartoons."

"Manga aren't cartoons," Dudley began. To his surprise, Harry listened to him through lunch as he talked about drawing, and how good a character Dobby might make for a video game. Dudley liked having Harry pay attention to him. It made

up for the look he got on his face when he drank the coffee.

"Maybe it'd be better with milk and sugar," Harry said, getting up to go to the kitchen.

Dudley took a sip from his own cup, and grimaced. "It sure doesn't taste the way it smells, does it?" He followed Harry. He wasn't allowed sugar, but there were packets of artificial sweetener in the cupboard.

They tried sugar, sweetener, the last of the milk from the pint, and some evaporated milk that Aunt Petunia had got for baking and finally added some hot water from the tap to the mix. Even that didn't make it taste right to Dudley, but Harry drank it anyway. "It helps," he croaked, wiping water from his eyes, and looking far more alert. "Just the thing."

They went back to the parlor and Harry tried to wake Dobby up enough to drink a spoonful of sweetened, cooled coffee. Dudley watched from a safe distance as the great googly eyes blinked open.

"Dobby," Harry said urgently, setting aside the spoon so that he could shake the elf by the shoulders. "Dobby, are you all right?"

"Dobby forgot not to eat the eggs, Professor McGonagall," Dobby said sleepily, his eyes closing as his head flopped sideways.

"The eggs? What's in the eggs?" Harry said. "Dobby, what did you put in the eggs?"

"The whole bottle would knock out an elephant, so only use three drops at a time," Dobby's voice came out like an old lady's, and Dudley stepped farther back, sure that the thing had been possessed. "It will keep things calm until Professor Snape is awake."

Harry, hearing this, fumbled through the jumble sale layers of the doll-sized creature, checking pockets. He came up with a small purple bottle which he uncorked, and then sniffed at. "Whew," he said, pushing the cork back in to the

neck of the bottle hastily.

"What is it?" Dudley asked, imagining poison.

"A concentrated sleeping potion." Harry said, fighting a yawn. "Just breathing it is enough to make you drowsy." He rubbed at his eyes fiercely. "Dobby must have put some in the scrambled eggs."

"So I didn't fall asleep because I didn't eat any eggs," Dudley concluded after a moment's thought.

"And I didn't stay asleep because I didn't eat all of mine," Harry agreed, tucking Dobby back onto the couch, and then yawning hugely.

"Maybe if you had more coffee," Dudley suggested, seeing that Harry was beginning to sway sleepily.

Harry reached for the cup, chugged the rest of the coffee down, and shuddered. "Blech!" he said, his eyes streaming, but open. "And Uncle Vernon likes this?"

"Should we give coffee to Mum and Dad, then?" Dudley wondered.

"If we wake them up, we'll just have to feed them," Harry pointed out. "And explain. They're probably just as happy asleep. And you've still got to work on your paper."

Explaining would be bad.

So they started to work on the paper. It wasn't easy to concentrate, as hot as it was. Harry had a lot to say, and he wasn't very patient. Dudley felt worse and worse as Harry kept making him change sentences, telling him that things were obvious that weren't obvious at all. He could feel sweat trickling down his back from the effort. And Harry kept pushing. Finally, Dudley burst out, "You're making me sound stupid," and slapped his pencil down on the table.

Harry jerked back like he had expected a blow. "Sorry," he said after a moment. Carefully, he eased forward again and

began to fiddle with the empty coffee cup. "I shouldn't expect you to just know things. I guess this what be what Hermione feels like when she's trying to help *me*."

Dudley didn't know that Harry needed help at school. He picked up the pencil again, and erased the sentence Harry hadn't liked from the paper. "Is Hermione your tutor?" he asked, hoping that if they talked about something different, they might not fight.

"No, she's a friend of mine." Harry said.

"A girl? You've got a girlfriend?" Dudley didn't believe it. He turned his head sideways to look at Harry's messy hair and thin strange face. Did freaks... wizards ... even have girlfriends?

"I've got a girl who's a friend anyway," Harry said, his ears red.

Dudley guessed that they did. "What's she like?"

Harry considered the question. "Really smart. I mean, *really* smart. She reads all her textbooks before the class even meets for the first time, just because she's interested. She gets the best grades of anyone."

"No, I meant is she pretty?" Dudley said, impatiently. Trust Harry to not mention the important things.

"She is when she wants to be," Harry smiled at a memory. "You should have seen her at the Yule Ball. She was almost as pretty as Cho."

"Cho?" Now Dudley was very curious. Harry's voice was much different when he mentioned Cho than when he talked about Hermione. And his blush was much deeper.

"Cho Chang. She's really pretty. *All* the time. But she was dancing with..." Harry's face changed all at once and he reached for the paper again with grim determination. "We're getting distracted. And you really have to finish this before Snape wakes up, or he'll make you do one twice as long."

Dudley didn't think he could get Harry to talk about girls again, but he needed a rest. "Couldn't we take a small break? Just a few minutes. A couple of rounds of Nintendo? I'll let you use the red controller. It's too hot to work without getting cranky."

Harry leaned back, less nervously this time. "It is hot," he agreed. "And a break sounds good. But let's play something that works better when we work together, instead of a game where we fight each other, all right?"

Even with a game like Ms. Pac-Man, though, Harry wasn't practiced enough to keep up with Dudley. He kept using up all his lives and leaving Dudley to go on. Dudley didn't mind playing alone. Harry even said things like, "good move!" a few times, and he got a little better each time they had to start over. Then Dudley had a streak of really good levels. When he finally lost his last life he turned to ask if Harry wanted to try another game and discovered that Harry had fallen asleep again, a soft sheen of sweat on his flushed face.

It was too still hot to go back to working on OLIVER TWIST. And the videogame sounds weren't waking anyone up. Dudley could hear his father snoring upstairs. He decided to play a little longer.



THE ESCAPE

SUMMARY: Storm's brewing...

PETUNIA DURSLEY struggled to open her eyes. Her arms were stiff and aching, and her mouth was sour, and there was something ... something she was meant to be doing. Somewhere in the distance she could hear Vernon snoring. She tried to make sense of that. He seemed so far away. Had he gone to sleep downstairs? Or was she downstairs, and he upstairs in their room?

A deep breath, and a shudder, and at last the gumminess gave way and she could open her eyes. She was sitting on the floor, gripping... bicycle handlebars. There was no bicycle attached to them. How odd. Why —

Memory returned in pieces, like falling leaves. She was trapped, in Potter's room, that was it, and she was going to get out.

Blurily she looked up at the wall she'd been working on. It was marred, but not much more than that. The damage, and its necessity, made her angry. This was not the first wall she'd ruined in her escape attempts.

The first hole she'd made had been in the closet, going into Dudley's room. Her effort had gone pretty well, until she'd struck wood and realized that it was directly behind Dudley's big bookshelf, which if pushed over would have landed

directly on the computer desk. Destroying Potter's wall was one thing; destroying Dudley's new computer another.

And by then she'd been so hungry that she had decided to risk eating the breakfast that had been pushed in through the door flap. It was, much to her surprise, still hot, and much tastier than she'd expected. There'd been a certain piquancy to the eggs that she'd found hard to resist.

Fortified for her second attempt, she'd decided to go straight into the hallway. That had meant wrestling aside Potter's warped bookshelf, which had been a dreadfully exhausting task, and then her first few blows had revealed a support pillar, so she'd had to move to one side and try again, and then... somehow... she'd gone to sleep. Right there on the floor, amid all the dust and splinters.

Impossible. Probably that awful freak had bespelled her again. That seemed to be his answer to everything. Well, she had an answer to that. She was getting very, VERY tired of being frozen or tied up or otherwise assaulted!

She made herself move, rolling onto her knees and then dragging herself upright by bracing herself on the bookcase. She shivered as trickles of sweat ran willy-nilly across over her skin. It was hotter today than yesterday, with a thick sultriness to the air that promised another storm. She looked out the window and saw storm clouds climbing up to swallow the descending sun. *Unnatural weather. THEY must have something to do with it, somehow.* But a good thunderstorm would keep everyone inside, and give her and Vernon a chance to deal with that horrid freak, who richly deserved whatever he had coming to him.

She gripped the handlebars firmly and swung them zealously at the wall. The crash startled her backwards, and she stared at the crater she'd made, the handlebars still ringing

faintly and her hands tingling from the blow. That hadn't happened before. She'd never heard a thing.

The unnatural silence of the morning had dissipated, then. Her breath sounded very loud now as she waited, listening hard. It wasn't fair that you couldn't even hear the freaks, once they'd decided to be quiet. Worse that you couldn't hear yourself. But since the silence was gone, they might have heard her.

From the parlor she could hear Dudley's alarmed voice, and then Potter's halting reply. Harry still sounded sleepy or ill. She kept listening but heard nothing that might be the nasty stranger's menacing baritone, or the shrill obsequiousness of the person Harry had been talking to in the kitchen.

At last she decided that no one was coming upstairs.

Good. Carefully, she adjusted her grip on the handlebars, thought about the wall and the noise for a little while, and finally tried dragging the raw end of the handlebars down the wall. It left a deep scratch and hadn't made too much noise. Downstairs she could hear the boys arguing, and for once she encouraged them silently.

Smiling like a fox, Petunia lined up the handlebars for a second run. *Very nice indeed.* Her escape would take longer this way, but it would be quieter, and she knew now just how very thin the walls actually were.

Now it was only a matter of time.



"What is it, Dudley?" Harry asked, propping himself up on his elbows. His cousin's exclamation of alarm had woken him up from a particularly spectacular bad dream, and the repetitive music of the video game had him half convinced that he was still asleep.

"I thought I heard something upstairs." Dudley said.

A particularly loud snore from overhead rattled the ornaments on the shelves. "If it wasn't loud enough to wake up Uncle Vernon, it's probably not important," Harry said, and then reconsidered. "Unless it's Professor Snape waking up..." He found his glasses and jammed them into place, then pulled himself off the couch and ran a hand through his hair in a useless attempt to look more alert.

"I haven't finished *Oliver Twist*!" Dudley exclaimed, abandoning the videogame controls and heaving himself toward the table and chair.

"Just look busy," Harry suggested, reaching down to turn off the videogame and switch television channels. He settled on something that looked educational, a program about deep sea exploration, and moved the cushions around so it wouldn't look like Dudley had been watching as well. As he moved the last cushion, he unearthed a plate with a few cake crumbs on it. "Dudley!" He waved the evidence at his cousin.

"I was hungry!" Dudley whined defensively. "It was just a piece of cake. It wasn't even very big!"

"I thought you didn't want to die!" Harry said, straining his voice in attempt to shout quietly. He couldn't believe that Dudley had fallen back into his old ways so quickly. "If you keep cheating on your diet —"

"I don't want to die of starvation, either!" Dudley shot back, shifting backwards on his chair and twisting his pencil in both hands. He had an expression that Harry didn't recognize at first. "And I don't want to die. But it's dinner time, isn't it? And really, Harry, it wasn't a very big piece. It wasn't!"

Belatedly, Harry realized that Dudley was looking ashamed of himself. With difficulty, he made himself stop and think

before he said anything more. It was getting late. The light from the windows was fading, dimmed by evening storm-clouds. And even if Dudley deserved a yelling at, it wasn't really Harry's job to keep him on his diet, after all. "All right," he said, with only a small exasperated sigh. "If you say so. It's your diet, Dudley, and you know what you need to do."

Dudley's big hands were still turning the pencil, but his shoulders settled down a little. "Well... I had a sandwich too," he confessed. "Maybe I should skip dinner."

"Maybe." Harry said, but Dudley looked so miserable at the possibility he relented. "Or maybe you should, uhmmm, just exercise some — do sit-ups or something, later, but have a proper dinner now," he improvised. "You can't have got any nutrition from the cake."

Dudley brightened. "That's true," he said. "Exercise makes up for food, doesn't it?"

Harry laughed, "Of course it does," he agreed, and with a wary glance at the stairs settled back on the couch to resume his pose of an invalid watching television. Dudley took the hint and started re-reading what he'd written so far.

Neither activity was very exciting. Every so often they looked up at the ceiling, listening for more signs of life. After a few minutes, Harry switched off the television so he could listen better.

"Nothing," Dudley whispered. "Maybe he's not awake yet."

"I wouldn't count on it. Snape's sneaky," Harry warned.

"Do you want to go up and check?"

Harry considered it. "No," he said. "Dobby can check when he wakes up." He turned the television back on, but the divers' lengthy explanation of a new gadget couldn't hold his attention. He got up and looked out the window. The storm was coming in faster now, clouds chasing one another towards the sea.

Maybe that was what was making him restless. It always did Hedwig. He should check on her. Which meant going upstairs. He knelt on the couch and twisted round to turn up the larger light, and found her perched sound asleep fluffed like a snowball atop it. "Well, the weather's not bothering you, anyway," he said gently, leaving the light and his owl alone. He turned back and knelt on something hard and slippery: the dessert plate Dudley had left. Harry decided he was more hungry than annoyed. "You finish your paper, Dudley, and I'll make some dinner. For everyone," he decided. "They can't sleep forever."

"Do you want me to help?" Dudley asked, looking eager to abandon OLIVER TWIST again.

"Better not. You've only got about fourteen more inches to go, you know. And if you don't give it to Snape he's likely to have you cleaning the floor on your hands and knees." Harry grinned at Dudley's appalled grimace and went into the kitchen. It had been a long time since he'd had a chance to cook properly, and much to his surprise, he was looking forward to it.



Scrape.

Scrape.

Scrape.

Slowly, surely, Petunia was carving the outline of a doorway into the second layer of plasterboard. She timed her efforts to match Vernon's snoring from the guest room, a rhythm she knew all too well. Downstairs she could hear the yammering of the television, and the rattle of pots against the stove. Outside she could hear the distant clumping of thunder and the rustling of the leaves the wind spun through the trees. She started to smell ham frying, and then

the starchy steam from the rice cooker. It had to be Potter down there. Dudley would have asked permission first. Not that Dudley should be cooking, and probably he would be set back days with his diet but after all her poor baby's delicate nerves were under such *dreadful* stress —

It was just as well, she determined, rising to the occasion. *Stay down there, and stay busy*, she willed the boys. *Don't come up and see what's happening. Stay just where you are and we'll come rescue you.*

God knew what the horrid freak was up to. With any luck he'd had a heart attack from stress; he had looked dreadfully ill.

Another scrape, this one imagined marking the freak's ugly face, and the line in the plaster was suddenly so deep that she could see half a dozen small holes that went all the way through into the hallway.

She made herself stop, 'til she could breathe normally. This was the danger point. She wanted to just burst through the wall, but doing that would make too much noise.

But she could do it. *Across. Down. We'll save you, Duddykins.* Scrape patiently, deeply, carefully, on either side of the "doorway" to make the holes large enough to put her fingers through and get a grip. She succeeded, and cautiously poked a finger through, wiggled it twice, and drew it quickly back. It was still attached and not turned green or black. Breathing hard, she set the handlebars aside and carefully took hold of the defined section of plaster, rocking it back and forth, thrilling with victory as it began to break loose. Bits of plaster tumbled down as the section worked free, falling like warm snowflakes onto her hair and her nose and her triumphant grin.



Harry grinned as he worked. He was rather pleased with himself. He never had a chance to cook at Hogwarts, and it was fun now not having Aunt Petunia ordering him about the kitchen. Harder, too, in some ways. He hadn't remembered to thaw the Sunday roast beforehand, so it was sitting in the sink with warm water running over it to hurry it along; Aunt Petunia always said that the microwave ruined a good piece of meat, and he hadn't wanted to fetch Snape's wand for a thawing spell. That was all right. They could always eat the roast last, or just before the pudding.

Not that there was that much else to eat first. Harry had been surprised to find so little in the refrigerator. Probably that had to do with Dudley's snacking. Aunt Petunia might dote on Dudley, but she was realistic where his appetite was concerned.

Harry had scrounged everything he could and then looked through Aunt Petunia's collection of cookery books for ideas of what to do to use up the leftover ham, three eggs, and the tag ends of assorted bags of frozen vegetables. He'd already made a respectable green salad from the last of the fresh vegetables and lettuce while he was waiting for the rice cooker. He had a feeling that maybe he shouldn't have cooked up all the rice at once, but he wasn't going to let that worry him. There was always rice pudding. He set some of the rice aside in a small pot and mixed the rest in with the ham and vegetables in the frying pan, stirring until the distribution of bits looked about even, then returned to flipping through one of the books.

No luck. Rice pudding required milk. In fact, a discouragingly high percentage of the recipes called for milk or cream. *Wait, we had evaporated milk for the coffee* — He found the can where it had been left on the counter, but it had an evil smell now and Harry decided that evaporated milk could turn on a

hot enough day. He opened the back door and set the can outside. Nevermind. When Dobby was awake, they could send him to fetch some milk, even if they wound up having the pudding as an evening snack. Harry thought that sounded nice — kind of cozy, really, although it was strange to think of anything "cozy" and the Dursleys' at the same time, but then again everything was all turned upside-down anyway. He resolved to give Dudley plain rice with his dinner so he could share the pudding later.

There'd probably be plenty. There was a lot of rice, which Harry hoped made up for what seemed to him not a lot of actual food. Uncle Vernon was likely to be hungry. And Snape might wake up hungry as a bear. Harry stirred the rice once again, turned down the heat, and opened up the cupboard to rummage around again, hoping for new ideas.

There wasn't much in the cupboards, either. And come to think of it, the grocery sacks he'd unpacked for Aunt Petunia this summer had all been light, with not much in them. He supposed she'd taken to buying no more than what she needed for a few days at a time. That seemed strange.

Or maybe she only bought what she could carry home. She wouldn't send Harry to the store anymore, and she certainly couldn't send Dudley, and Uncle Vernon was bored by shopping. Harry shook his head, reaching back behind a box of salt on the bottom shelf to pull out half a bag of walnuts and a rather stiff bag of marshmallows that had been obscured in the back. He thought of the apples in the refrigerator bin. There was still some mayonnaise. He could make a fruit salad, like Dobby had made for Dudley's second breakfast. That would help round out the meal. And here was a tin of lima beans, which was odd because no one liked them. Per-

haps they'd been bought by mistake.

Maybe Dobby liked lima beans.

There were still four potatoes in the bin, though. Harry smiled at them. He knew how to make chips. As lovely as the food always was at Hogwarts, it always reached the tables at just the right temperature to eat, and Harry had a weakness for chips that were too hot. He always had taste-tested several chips to find out whether or not the rest were ready, even if it had meant biting into a not-quite-ready-in-the-middle chip for starters so that Aunt Petunia wouldn't find out he could tell when they were done just by looking.

Harry went back to the cookery book, stopping at a recipe for a "Vegan" spice cake that didn't require milk, or eggs. That would work for dessert, or for breakfast tomorrow. If he couldn't manage to get out to a store it would have to be all right to eat spice cake for breakfast. He read the ingredients list again to be sure, and decided that if got the batter ready now, he could put it in the oven with the roast, since the roast was going to be late anyway. They might have that for breakfast as well. OR maybe he could send Dobby out for eggs.

Something rumbled outside in the distance and Harry glanced out the window. The storm was definitely getting close — it was getting quite windy and dark outside. He'd best get out all the ingredients and get cooking. And light a candle in case the electricity went out again.



The lovely smell of food was beginning to be absolute torture. Dudley turned up the television to drown out the clattering in the kitchen. A sudden louder crack of thunder reminded him that he wasn't usually allowed to watch television in a

lightning storm, but he was clear across the room from the set, so it wasn't the same as if he were playing a videogame.

He'd rather be playing a videogame. He cast a dark look at the book and his unfinished essay. Drat Dickens anyway. Every time you thought he'd got done with the story he made someone else do something mean to Oliver.

The deep sea diving program had ended and they'd gone on to a rerun of a program he'd seen a dozen times. Dudley left the set on anyway and sat down to measuring his taped pieces of paper to see how many more inches he had to go. TEN.

He felt saved when someone knocked urgently at the door. Dudley cast his pen aside gratefully. It was probably Piers, who hadn't the sense to come in out of the rain until it lightnined, and who hadn't really believed them this afternoon anyway. No problem. Harry and he could handle Piers — Harry could give him some of that nasty candy he'd talked about.

That would be much more entertaining than Charles Dickens.



A crack of thunder very close to the house startled Petunia into stepping backwards, and a piece of the plaster the size of a dinner plate came with her. She caught herself and listened, clutching her prize, but no one seemed to have noticed her success over the thunder and the loud gabble of the television.

Cautiously, she looked into the hall, fighting against a sneeze and then giving in as the thunder grumbled again. No one was going to hear her over that, nibbling through the walls like a mouse. Very warily she put her head forward to peek 'round the edges of the hole.

Potter's trunk was in the middle of the hall, where everyone would trip over it. The guest room door was closed. Her

bedroom door was open. She could just see the shape of someone under the blankets in the bed at the other end of the room, defined now and again by the drape of the curtains flapping in the wind.

The window was open. Vernon never slept with the window open.

And the boys were downstairs.

THAT DISGUSTING FREAK IS SLEEPING IN OUR ROOM!

She growled, low in her throat, startling herself as much as the thunder had. But only for a moment. Teeth gritted, she latched hold of the torn plaster and ripped loose chunk after chunk, breaking nails on both hands, hissing threats and epithets the whole while until she'd made a gap large enough to climb through.

She lost a shoe on the way and stopped to retrieve it, the dust on her cheeks streaked with angry tears as she reached back into the broken room to get her footwear. The handlebars gleamed nearby and she took those up, hefting them in her hands as she stalked down the hallway.



Harry had the chips in the deep fryer, and the cake batter in the tube pan. The roast was still solid at the middle, so he was working on chopping up the apples. A crack of thunder nearly made him cut himself, and he lost part of an apple to the floor. But the lights stayed on, so he shook his head and went on working.

The rhythm of the knife against the cutting board half-obscured the knocking from the other room, and it was only his cousin's call of "I'll get it," which attracted enough of Harry's attention to make him realize that they were about to get

more visitors. "But Muggles would ring the bell!" he realized a moment later, and headed for the kitchen door with the knife in his hand. He got there just in time to see Dudley opening the door to three tall, cloaked figures wearing white masks.

DEATH EATERS!



Petunia crept grimly across her bedroom, clutching the bicycle handlebars and trying to breathe quietly through her nose. That horrid man had ruined the bed, splitting it into two pieces and rearranging the room. He was lying in the half under the window, shrouded now and then by the curtains. In the glimpses she got by lightning, the flashes glinted strangely off of his skin. No doubt he'd been rained on. Good.

Something crunched underfoot, startling her. She looked down and saw a flattened flake of something. After a worried moment she decided it was cereal.

They'd made a mess in here, she realized during the next flash. *Thoughtless, all of them.* Potter was always making messes.

Of course it was going to cause a worse mess when she hit the intruder with the handlebars.

Much worse than a smashed piece of cereal. She'd have to hit him hard enough to be sure, and he'd probably bleed. He'd probably bleed a lot. Rugby players did.

If she could just prevent him from waking up, Vernon could dump him somewhere. In a ditch. A very rainy ditch.

She tightened her grip on the handlebars. They were slick from her palms.

She hoped to God this worked.

On television, they always hit the back of the head. How could you hit the back of someone's head who was lying on his back?

Probably they don't want to mar the actors' faces if they hit too hard. She'd have to hit hard. She rehearsed her reasons to herself and tried not to think about the blood.

HE'S IN OUR HOUSE, IN OUR ROOM, IN OUR BED —

And now she was standing over the bed, and he hadn't woken up. The wind pulled back the curtain and she stared down at the man. Snape lay still, as white as the sheets. Whiter. And... glittery.

It took two lightning flashes to comprehend, and another to be sure: a thin chrysalis of ice had formed over him. What was he going to turn into now?

I should have brought a wooden stake! She raised the metal bar, which no longer seemed heavy enough.

Someone screamed and her heart stopped. DOWNSTAIRS — DUDLEY!

"I'M COMING, BABY!" she cried, and swung with all her strength. Beneath the ice Snape's eyes slid open.



THE ENEMIES

SUMMARY: Snape wakes up.

⁸⁸ **GET IN OUT OF THE RAIN**, you bloody great...git?" Dudley's voice cracked as he realized belatedly that the figures standing on the doorstep were too tall to be anyone he knew.

It was the Phantom of the Opera. With a friend. Two friends.

"Dudley! Get out!" Harry's hoarse shout from the kitchen door was barely audible over another rumble of thunder. "It's me they're after!"

All the Phantoms had wands.

No! Dudley fell back, and thumped into the wall, and wailed as they came for him.

Two of the killers pushed past, wet cloaks sliming over him. "Oh, ghah!" Dudley edged toward the door, only to find himself facing the third Phantom, whose wand was pointed at his chest like a loaded gun. *This is just like SCREAM. I'm going to die —*

He looked to see if Harry could help. His cousin was facing off the others with Mum's best butcher knife. Where was his wand? Didn't it take magic to fight magic?

One of the two facing Harry reached out a massive hand, and then pulled back hastily when Harry sliced at it. "Bloody hell, Draco," he said, turning around to look at the one near

Dudley. "You didn't say he'd have a knife!"

"Malfoy?" Harry exclaimed, and then said something that Dudley couldn't hear because of the thunder. It looked rude, though, if lip-reading meant anything.

The one menacing Dudley... Dirk or Melvin or whatever his name was ... seemed to be in charge. "There's two of you!" he shouted at the others. "Get the knife away from him!"

"I'll do it," One of them said, raising his wand. The other one grabbed his arm.

"Not that way!"

"Don't be so stupid," Melvin yelled impatiently. "Do you want to bring the Aurors down on our necks? You don't need magic to thump Potter. You're bigger than he is! Just do it!"

Huh? They don't want to use magic? Dudley thought that all wizards used magic all the time, unless they were forced not to do it. Well, except for student wizards like Harry, who usually couldn't use magic during the summers without getting expelled.

Harry sliced at the one nearest him and actually hit, opening a long slash of bright red across the knuckles of one ham-sized fist. The man howled with pain and shock, surprisingly shrill. Harry looked almost as startled as his victim, but he recovered with a fierce grin. "I'll cut you down to size!" he promised, giving the knife an elaborate wave. "*Finite Enchantment!*"

Sparks of bright blue magic crackled off the end of the blade, earthing at the base of the dark robes. Suddenly, all three of the invaders were two feet shorter, stumbling as if they'd fallen off of magical stilts. The one next to Dudley was flailing for balance.

Happy Christmas! Dudley grabbed the man's — the boy's — wand hand and shoved it into the wall, while swingin a nice right cross. The wand hit the doorjamb and cracked, and the

mask slipped under the blow, revealing a blond boy no older than Dudley was himself with a pale thin face and startled gray eyes; the sort of boy who wanted beating up. Dudley grinned as the boy squirmed free and backed away, whimpering. It was wonderful. He hadn't felt this good since he and Piers had reduced a snotty first-year to a lump of weeping jelly on the first day of last term. He cracked his knuckles and advanced, growling, "No one thumps on my cousin but me!"



Flash of lightning.

Flash of silver, striking at him.

Malfoy's cane! FANGS ARE POISONED — Snape forced his shoulder up against the blow, hoping teeth would snag in heavy wool.

Strange ringing *crack!* and a sense of impact. No bright pain, nor creeping numbness. Good.

But his face felt stiff, and it was hard to breathe. Hex —? Desperately he shook his head, fighting the effects, and he could move, he could breathe, but he choked and coughed as — ice — crumbled into his mouth. It was cold and good on his tongue and woke him somewhat. *Danger. MALFOY.*

He spat out the ice, got control of his tongue, focused as much as he could on the bright metal being raised to strike again. Screamed, knowing Lucius was ready for it, "*EXPPELLIARMUS!*"

Marionette spin and a high shrill cry. The figure was gone, and the gleaming danger with it. *Too easy.*

My head hurts. But it was his shoulder that had been hit. Lightning flash and thunder reminded him of the danger.

MUST BE READY. *How?*

"ACCIO WAND." The thrumming wood clapped into his palm,

like iron hitting a lodestone. He grasped it firmly and felt better, in some control of the situation.

Which is — ?

MALFOY. Snape wrenched himself up, nearly falling off the ...*platform...table...BED...* confused by the clattering that fell around him like a disorientation spell. Something slithered, *shifted*, underfoot. He stumbled aside. Lightning flashed, reflecting off shards of brightness on the floor — *mirror?* *Another seven years?*

Lightning again, illuminating the shards. *Not glass.* ICE. And a strange carpet, whose patterns meant nothing.

Where in Hogwarts am I?

— AND WHERE IS LUCIUS?

He spun, aiming into shadows, slipped on ice and fell. Thunder prevented him from hearing his tormentor's laughter and he caught his breath, waiting for the spells to hit.

Nothing.

Thunder. Lightning.

The thin gray stuff between his knee and hand glittered, and he stared at it until he recognized the glitter as frost forming between weft and woof of soft cloth. *Chilling charms wrong.*

Why am I in my nightshirt?

And no slippers.

Well, I was sleeping — I think.

Thunder, loud and long.

Quiet. *Thank you.*

Another unpleasant noise. *Shrill. Angry.*

SHOUTING. *Who's shouting?*

He pushed himself up, finally saw the crumpled heap of a body against the far wall, where his spell had thrown the attacker. *Serves you right.*

A long shriek, that sounded familiar. It broke in the middle with a gasp, like a hinge in the cry. A child's voice. *A child being hurt — NO —*

Harry Potter's voice, oddly thick but fierce: "YOU'RE IN FOR IT NOW, MALFOY!"

POTTER!

Snape was up and across the room before he knew he'd moved. The lightning made shadows dance, made him stagger to keep his balance. He thwacked off a door and kept going, clutching his wand as if it were going to hold him upright. *I'm trying, Lily* — Careening down the corridor, banging his shin on a misplaced trunk and not even stopping to swear...

The stairs led down.

He caught the banister before he could fall, wrenching his shoulder painfully in the need to hang on without losing hold of his wand.

What —

He looked down.

The steady light coming from off to one side only lent more confusion to the melee in the dark, narrow space. *Figures. Moving.* Lightning through the open door at the far end of the hall showed more. Potter, pale as milk, braced in a doorway, knife flashing in his grip as he held off two Death Eaters, one dripping blood. A bulky figure — *has Longbottom put on that much weight* — silhouetted against the light, with his foot on a third killer's cloak, collecting it with both hands and starting to reel in the smaller —

Boy.

Boys!

Not Lucius. Snape realized, finally seeing the size and shape of the boy trying to scrabble out of that ridiculous

cloak before he could be reached. It didn't work; in a trice he was down, crushed to the floor with the bigger boy kneeling on his wrist to make him drop his wand. He tried to squirm away — couldn't — the big boy hauled him upright by the collar and light fell on the pinched, panicked face.

Suddenly it all made sense. Snape swayed in relief, clutching the banister. *Not Lucius. Draco. Draco and Vincent and Gregory.*

And Potter.

And... Dursley?

Snape advanced down one stair, finding his voice to thunder, "STOP THAT!"

Pity the real thunder drowned his words.

Goyle picked up a spindle-legged table and swung it at Potter, knocking the knife out of his hand. Crabbe lunged, catching Potter's pyjama shirt with a shout of triumph. Goyle lumbered forward, raising the table like a club. They had to be stopped.

The incantation is...

"Sonus!" Snape tapped his wand to his throat and roared in a voice so loud that bits of paint and plaster sprinkled down from the ceiling, "ENOUGH!"

He was a moment too late. Dursley's fist was already in motion, and it smashed into Draco Malfoy's aristocratic nose with enough force to send him sprawling. Snape winced when he saw the rush of bright red blood on Malfoy's face. Crabbe and Goyle, better at freezing, had stopped their attack short of Potter. Good. He tapped his throat again to dismiss the earsplitting spell. No need for it now.

Four faces were staring up at him. Two wore white masks. IDIOTS.

This is just like their stupid Dementor trick. Can't they do something NEW?

My head hurts.

The stairs were shuddering, about to move. Snape made his way down them hastily, stepping off before they swung away, and then braced against the wall when the corridor floor took up the vibration. He glared at the children, waiting for them to arrange themselves appropriately. Crabbe and Goyle dropped Potter and the table and backed up against the far wall with gratifying promptitude. The Dursley boy edged over to pick up Potter. Only Malfoy didn't have the sense to know he was in trouble, and stayed writhing on the floor, his face masked in blood.

Masks.

The floor kept changing angles. Snape staggered over to Crabbe and Goyle and snatched the disguises from their faces. The curves of the masks melted into handkerchiefs in his hands and a rush of anger cleared some of the fog from his head. *They've got hold of the actual spell!*

Snape glared at the pair of them, but they just looked back with stolid resignation, no more dismayed than if they had been caught sneaking food from the kitchens. Crabbe was coddling one arm. Snape pulled the injured limb forward for inspection, rucking up the boy's sleeve to show a shallow gash which he richly deserved. Snape dropped that arm and pulled forward the other, shoving back that sleeve to find —
— NOTHING.

He checked Goyle's arms for damage as well, found nothing worse than scored knuckles.

Not the actual masks, then. Unless Malfoy...

Snape stalked over to look down at Malfoy, who was rocking miserably, clutching both hands around a fold of his overlong robe that he'd pressed up to catch the stream of blood from

his nose. Snape bent down to grab the boy's shoulder and haul him upright. Dizziness washed over him. Only years of practice kept his glare in place as he waited for it to pass.

Malfoy began to babble, nervously. "Id's nod our vault! We jutz cabed do vizzid Podder and dey addagged uz!"

It wasn't even a very good lie. Snape arched a skeptical eyebrow, and the boy swallowed and stopped making noise.

Where was his mask?

Ah. Snape spotted a white handkerchief on the floor. It could stay there. He certainly wasn't going to bend down again to pick it up.

Malfoy's hands were covered with blood. *Check for... check for damage.* Snape stripped off the sodden robe roughly, ignoring Malfoy's mewling. Nothing on either arm. Just a boy's raid, then, a show of bluster.

Playing at being murderers.

He got distracted by the swollen, darkening bruise on Malfoy's nose. *Broken.* It made the crook in his own nose ache to look at it. Or was that the storm? His nose always hurt in storms.

Malfoy's wand was broken too, even though he still clutched it stupidly. *That can't be fixed. The nose might.*

Crabbe and Goyle were here somewhere. Snape summoned them with a peremptory gesture, and they came, stumbling over their foolishly long cloaks. They put the cloaks into his demanding hand. It took a moment to remember why he'd wanted them.

"Take him... take Malfoy to the hospital wing," Snape snarled in a gap between thunderclaps, propelling Malfoy into their grasps. "Do not attempt to mend his nose yourselves!" Their answers were drowned in thunder, but they nodded obediently. "Go," Snape pushed the three of them at the open door. "Now!"

They went.

Snape closed the door behind them and leaned his face against the cool wood. *Wretched little inbred morons. One of these days they're going to do something I can't ignore or explain away.* "Twenty points," he told the door. "Each. And detention." *We'll see how you feel about polishing bedpans.*

And once he'd dealt with Malfoy and his minions, he'd have to deal with Potter.

AGAIN.

My head hurts.

This was all Potter's fault. Somehow. It always was. Snape had never had to break up half so many fights before James Potter's arrogant scion had waltzed into the school. *Merlin's blood! He's worse than his father! Always grandstanding, and he's never met a risk he wouldn't take — sneaking around all the time, full of secrets, THAT'LL GET YOU KILLED.* "Idiot boy!" he ranted for the two thousandth time to his empty fireplace. "Opening the door to a lot of Death Eaters! Your mother died saving your life! The least you could do is STOP AFFORDING THEM EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO FINISH YOU OFF!"

My head REALLY hurts. Shouting at Potter always gave him a headache, and this one was promising to be spectacular. Snape gripped the crook of his nose and pushed away from the door, turning to go and search out headache powders, clothes and coffee.

He found Harry Potter staring at him with dismayed green eyes.



THE HUNGER

SUMMARY: Dobby wakes up, too.

* LICK *

A flood of bright steady light confused him; illuminating strange shapes and colors. Wrong, all of it, except for the soft gray cloth that ended at his own wrist. *I am in my nightshirt and my nightshirt is at Hogwarts. I only ever sleep at Hogwarts.* Snape clung to this verifiable certainty. *More students playing stupid pranks. Potter's fault.* Snape glared down at Potter — not so far down these days, the boy was growing. "Explain."

Green eyes glowed defiance at Snape, and Snape stared back, startled to see the ghost of Lily's stance and bearing in the child. *Did you clench your fists at the merfolk too?*

Potter stumbled angrily over the words, spots of pink burning hectic on his cheeks. "They attacked us... and I couldn't just run... I couldn't. I had to try to save Dudley —"

"You WHAT?" the cry of disbelief from the fat boy cracked the staring match, but the Muggle wilted under the sudden attention of two wizards. "Er... I mean... Look, I'd better go and check on the food then, shall I?" He fled through a glass door.

FOOD?

Snape staggered as something hit him like a well-placed curse, too hard and too quickly to mask in front of the chil-

dren. He collapsed against the wall, wrapping his arms around himself to try to contain the overwhelming sensation.

"Professor!" Potter leapt forward, catching Snape and preventing him from finding a more comfortable position. "Wait! No! Don't fall over!" The boy was babbling, making it harder to think. "Just a few steps, sir. Here. Come sit on the couch." Snape let himself be propped up, moving his legs obediently as he tried to make sense of things. Thunder rattled the windowpanes, nearly drowning out the boy's yattering. "Professor Lupin said that, too... said I shouldn't take risks... but things always seem to happen to me. I never put my name in for the Tri-Wizard Tournament! I mean... I might have done some stupid things when I was younger, but I thought that I needed to. I don't want to waste what my mum did for me." And then, with a cracking note of incredulity, "Did you like my mum?"

Lily.

"ShewasthetruestfriendIeverhad." The words were engraved in elaborate script, worn by repetition into deep grooves in the lonely hours of the night. Memories too, no matter how often the kaleidoscope was shaken, tessellating bloody and golden, Gryffindor colors filling the space behind his eyes —

— down in the mud before her, lightning crazing the world, *nothing right, nothing ever right any more...* PLUS ÇA CHANGE, Potter had come to her on one knee, now he came to her on two, *anything you can do I can do better...* he couldn't bear any more... he'd cast it all away with his bloodstained soul... but first he had to tell someone what he knew, what they'd done... someone who hadn't been seduced by Voldemort's soft lies... someone who would listen... Lily would listen, Lily had always listened, but it hadn't been his *fault* then...and now... now...the words went on, impossible lying truth and anyone

else would have stopped listening to the horrors, would have not waited to hear him finally say I'M SORRY —

Lily believed me when no one else would.

— her hand startling on his shoulder, her arm linked unyielding in his, pulling him upright... her fingers unclenching his fist, revealing the phial of punishment, of judgment that he'd saved for himself, for someplace quiet and hidden... like a fantastic dream, her smile, sad and — *kind?* — as she answered what should have been unanswerable... as she placed words where he had none—

— murdering yourself won't make it right. —

— it will make it stop —

— no... it will make YOU stop... and we NEED what you know... we need what you can still find out for us... we need YOU... come on... come with me... DUMBLEDORE WILL KNOW WHAT TO DO —

—a moment's hesitation... *for the honor of Slytherin...* but that honor was already besmirched — *stained* — and by his own hands... it is no worse a betrayal... she was talking of life, purpose, plans, a way to make amends, and he grasped at her future like a wisp of straw, grateful to her for seeing that he did not truly wish to die, and for all his gratitude he still tucked the phial safely back into his pocket —

—wrenching sway of Apparition, her wandwork so bright and sure... she was wonderfully powerful now in her gravid condition, and he could not turn aside her insistence on coming with him, to vouch for him to Dumbledore... Hogsmeade crouched silent beneath the unending storm, nature raging over the spilling of innocents' blood, rattling a warning from John o' Groats to Land's End... the thunder crushing conversation... he had nothing left to say, all his rehearsed words used up... staggering all the long way up to Hogwarts castle... stub-

born witch huddled next to him, her warmth at his side as she slogged with him through the greedy mud, one arm wrapped around him, the other cradling her cauldroned belly... rain whispering deprecations, speaking of depredations... numbness like poison in his blood, in his head... nothing real, save for Lily's hand hot as a coal in his... her hand and the rain, cold and welcome against his face —

— standing before the stern stone gargoyle which guarded Dumbledore's office... rain hissing outside the walls, snaking silvery down their soaked robes onto worn flagstones... he had stood here so many times before, practicing answers, waiting to be asked questions that he daren't answer *for the honor of Slytherin...* the gargoyle sneering down at him as always before it turned away and set the stairs grinding down like millwheels of doom —

Lily knew the new password.

—staring at her, wondering how deeply she was involved in the war, seeing some strange ineffable thing cross her eyes ... what's wrong? the first words he'd spoken since Godric's Hollow... maybe she was wrong, maybe it *wouldn't* work, he still had his answer in his pocket, the last and most definite answer... her answer to take his hand and lay it smooth beneath hers against her rounded belly... wet cloth and warmth beneath it, and then the kick of a small, hard heel into his palm —

— so very wrong he'd gone, such awful distance now between them... she a bearer of life, he a dealer in death... the dichotomy robbed him of words, of breath... all the pain and misery inside him rose to choke him *if only it could* and he began to weep, shuddering, gagging on the foulness —

—and then the taste of coffee, laced with brandy... he clutched at the ceramic cup, hoped the drink would put

words back into him so he could speak... Lily's presence beside him on the venerable couch holding his hand, anchoring him while he recited his piece... one more long gasping run through his winterbare confession all the way somehow, somehow, to I'M SORRY and he shattered, sobbing like a child who'd played with lucifers and set the house ablaze —

—Lily's voice, quiet but determined, as she outlined the advantages of his change of heart...Dumbledore's voice concerned, describing the dangers...his own voice hoarse from unaccustomed tears, putting the choice in their hands...he had to make things right, somehow, and he was too tired to weigh the options: espionage, or Azkaban, or the small glass phial in his pocket...only the first held any hope of doing good, but at least neither of the other two held hope of doing more harm...Dumbledore handing the choice back to him again... it doesn't matter...it does matter...better to make amends than to make an end...faint outrage that the old man could make a pun of his dilemma but the blue eyes were not twinkling... Lily again, pressing her hand against his arm, too close to the shameful mark of his last choice...to save even one life —

— yes...he had to make things right...to save someone, how marvelous that would be...and in the end he must be finished, by his insane peers or by the friendly phial safe inside his pocket —

— rain beating against the high windows, lightning outside and thunder... the warmth of the fire uncomfortably close, and the scent of Lily's perfume beginning to fade already... she was gathering herself to go out into the night...back to Potter and the promise of the child who was to be... don't go it isn't safe... but it was safe as any other place out there and she smiled when she saw him looking and her eyes sparkled with their old sun's-edge fire... the feather light benediction

of her kiss against his forehead... "It'll be all right, now," she said. "You'll live." ...promise or geas...the phial lay useless now... he'd have to live —

Lily saved me.

"And I couldn't save her," Belatedly, his ears registered the hoarseness of his own voice. *Did I say that aloud?* Who could tell beneath the shudders of thunder? Lightning again... green eyes... and ... *black hair?*

"Please, sir. Just drink this. Just a little." A boy's voice; *Potter?*

"Maybe we should put him back to bed, Harry. He doesn't look well, all clunched up like that." Another boy. *Dursley.*

"I don't think we can get him up the stairs."

"Don't you know how to make people float yet?"

"Of course I do, Dudley. That's a First year spell. But if we can just wake him up enough to tell us what's wrong then I'll know whether or not to send to Hogwarts for help."

Send to Hogwarts?

More recent memories scrambled for their places. Potter was hurt — sick — poisoned — wasn't he? And Dursley wasn't a student he was...*Cousin. MUGGLE.*

More of the world came out of the gray fog. Garish wool, crocheted in bright squares, an afghan someone had wrapped around his shoulders. His own knees pale and ordinary beyond the end of his nightshirt. *I must be at Hogwarts.* A cup of brown stuff.

Coffee. Tucking his wand into his sleeve for safekeeping, he wrapped his hands around the cup, grateful for the painful heat of it. *This is real.* Someone steadied his hands as he sipped, at first. The coffee was bitter, reheated. Someone had tried to disguise the taste with sugar and had failed. "This is swill," he said. But it was sweetened swill and his body

screamed for more. He put the cup back to his lips and gulped down the rest of the bitter liquid until he got to the sugary sludge at the bottom. He leaned back with the cup upended over his mouth, waiting doggedly as the sweetness oozed slowly onto his tongue.

Somewhere beyond the coffee cup, the boys were still talking. "Maybe we should get him some more."

"We can't; that's the last of the pot. I used it all up at lunchtime. But we could just put more water in the coffee maker and see if it worked. Like using a teabag a second time."

"Worth a try." Potter sounded doubtful.

"It won't matter what it tastes like if we put in enough sugar," Dursley said confidently. "Not if he's hungry enough. It's like a bear, isn't it? They wake up ready to eat anything in sight."

"He's not a bear," Potter said. "Well, not exactly. I don't think."

"Well, then why does he have ice on his clothes, except to make it more like winter? He's hungry because he's been hibernating." It was the sort of logic that suited children, and Snape couldn't think clearly enough to dispute it.

"McGonagall didn't say he was hibernating, she said he was dormant. There must be a difference."

Dormant? "The correct term is aestivation," Snape's father's voice echoed back to him from the shadows of the cool cellar bedroom. "Much simpler than dealing with heat or drought, but it does complicate one's social calendar. I suggest that you refrain from accepting invitations to your year-mates' homes over summer break."

But it's never happened to me before. He'd been very conscientious about following the rules. Keep your clothes cooled with a charm; drink plenty of ice water — the family had learned the trick of keeping the sleepiness at bay within a

generation or two. *This summer must be very hot indeed.*

The coffee was gone. Snape let his hands and the cup fall to his lap. His knees were bruised. He sympathized. "My head hurts," he told them, remembering.

That made two things to be certain of. No three. His head hurt. There was no more coffee. He was in his nightshirt.

Why am I in my nightshirt? There was a house elf sleeping next to him on the couch. *I've never seen one sleep before. Maybe someone had cast a sleepiness spell.* Nothing made sense because this was a dream — or a nightmare. Except he could never remember being so hungry in a dream. The sugar had only made it worse somehow. "Wake up," he told the elf. "I want some breakfast."

"Breakfast?" A hand moved between him and the elf and he followed it with his eyes, to find Potter crouched down studying his face. "Are you hungry?" Potter asked, very slowly and clearly, the way one might speak to a moron.

"Yes." He had a stomachache all over. "I am very hungry." Snape told Potter in the same sugardrip tones. Sarcasm didn't work. The boy's eyes lit up with relief.

"I see," he said. "That's easy enough to mend. Dinner's almost ready. And we can get you some aspirin, too." He addressed Snape, again with that patient clarity. "Do you want to go back to bed?"

"I want more coffee." Snape glared at the dunderheaded child. The boy was a mess: pale, and there was blood splattered on his face and arm, cracking as it dried. The pyjamas he wore were too large, and faded with wear. *Something wrong here.* Snape tried to think around the enormous gnawing hunger. You were supposed to feel hollow in your middle, not your head. But his middle was like something shrinking in

on itself pulling everything around it in as well.

"Dudley's going to make some more."

Dudley? Dursley. Muggle. He wouldn't be at Hogwarts, not even in a dream. In Snape's dreams, the children were always home for the summer, safe, or at least not his responsibility. And in his nightmares, the Weasley twins were always in attendance.

But if he wasn't dreaming, where was he? Not at Hogwarts. Nothing smelled right, or felt right for Hogwarts. *But I have been sleeping. I am in my nightshirt. And I only ever sleep at Hogwarts.* And there had been boys — students — fighting. Students only ever fought at Hogwarts. Didn't they?

He had a memory of a dream, a nightmare, of being in a Muggle house with Lily's sister mocking him. But there wouldn't be a house elf in a Muggle house. *But Potter's cousin wouldn't be at Hogwarts.* Snape turned his head to look at the oversized child who was standing nearby, too-solid flesh. A lightning flash from the window lit up the picture askew on the wall behind him. A man, a woman, and a younger version of the same boy frozen in unnatural stasis within the frame.

Not Hogwarts. Potter's home. I came to give him...antidote. And his cousin... and his uncle... and his AUNT..

Jumbled memories fell into a line. The owl and the boy, poisoned for the sake of a murderous prank. The cupboard under the stairs. Mutilated photographs. Lily's snowglobe. Dinner. A new curse. Endurance potion.

Ah. That explains everything.

I really shouldn't take it with food.

"Of course this is a Muggle house," he grumbled at Potter, as he worked through the data. The lights, the furniture. The smell. "It must be. Every Muggle house I've ever been in has been burning."

"Burning?" both boys chorused, as if they'd only just

detected the smoke.

"Dinner!" Dursley cried out, and ran like an earthquake for the kitchen. His voice came back in a high frightened squeal. "Harry! Harry! Help!"

Potter jumped up and swayed a little before he steadied himself on the back of a chair. "Hold on," he ordered Snape, as if he had a right to give orders. "I'll be right back."

Hold on to what?



A wave of dizziness hit Harry when he jumped to his feet and he grabbed the back of the nearest chair and gave it five seconds to pass over him. He had to stop trying to cast spells without a wand. It just took too much strength away, every time, leaving him feeling like a soggy sponge. *I hate this. I'm not in much better shape than Snape is.* He'd have to risk getting his wand from the trunk soon. Whatever had let Draco and his goons into the house might work for someone else.

The smell of burning grease and a cloud of smoke rolled over him as he reached the kitchen. His first fears were relieved — no one had got in. The grease in the pan of chips had caught fire, flames leaping up to lick at the wall and the fan above the stove. Dudley was rushing from the sink, carrying a bowlful of water. Harry realized suddenly what his cousin meant to do, "No! Dudley!"

But it was too late.

The water hit the grease and sent it splattering, onto the pan of fried rice and the counter, spreading bright flames. Harry swore and ran for the fire extinguisher. Dudley grabbed the towel off the rack and beat at the blaze, squealing when the cloth caught on the handle of the frypot and most of the burning grease was knocked to the floor still afire.

"You're making it worse!" Harry yelled, as he picked up a dish-rag and beat at the flames. It didn't work very well. He needed a bigger towel to smother the flames. He needed — "Fire extinguisher!" Harry exclaimed, pushing past his cousin to get to the red canister that had been dangling next to the sink for so long he'd almost forgot it existed. "Get out of the way!"

"Mum's going to go spare!" Dudley panicked, dancing clumsily from foot to foot. "Why did you set the house on fire?"

"I didn't!" Harry protested. "All I did was make dinner!" He grabbed the extinguisher and squeezed the handle. Nothing happened.

"Not like that!" Dudley said, fumbling for purchase on the head-piece of the extinguisher. "You've got to pull the peg out first!"

"What?" Harry coughed, trying to blink smoke out of his eyes.

"This!" Dudley hooked his finger through a metal ring and tugged and the fire extinguisher began to belch out white powder — just in time to hit Snape full in the face as the Potions Master came into the kitchen with his wand held high.

The next few moments were rather loud. And messy. Dudley was cursing, Harry was shouting, and Snape was coughing, and none of them could be heard very well over the roar of the fire extinguisher as it spewed yellow-white powder in every direction. It ran out of powder and air quite abruptly, and Harry realized that he'd had his hand wrapped around the trigger. He dropped the canister and grabbed for the blinded Professor, pulling him away from the flames before his nightshirt could do more than begin to smolder.

Dudley was at the sink again, arming himself with the sprayer hose attachment.

"Good idea," Harry said, thinking that Dudley was going to rinse off Snape and then realizing that his cousin was aiming

toward the stove. "No, not that way!" He needed a wand. Snape had a wand, but he couldn't stop coughing. "Sorry, Sir," Harry said, starting a tug-of-war with the man over the wand.

"*Dobby will save Harry Potter!*" The house elf reeled into the room, raising a long thin hand. His whipcrack of magic was almost louder than the thunder.

The fire went out. So did the lights.

Dudley screamed.

"No!" Harry shouted.

"What happened to the lights? What happened to the lights?" Dudley banged into the counter and knocked something over with a crash. Water from the sprayer went flying in all directions — some of it went into Harry's ear, startling him sideways; he slipped in something slick on the floor, falling and wrenching Snape's wand from him. He fell hard on one leg and banged his funnybone on the chair, sending sparkling pangs through his arm. It took a moment to be able to cast a spell. "*Lumos!*" The tip of the wand brightened uncertainly. It didn't help. It was like holding a lantern in a yellow-gray fog.

"We're going to die of smoke inhalation!" Dudley was going to step on someone if he kept flailing around so noisily.

"Is Harry Potter all right?" A small frantic figure attached itself to Harry's sore leg.

"Dobby! Take care of the smoke!" Harry ordered, biting back a yelp. "I'm all right."

Another whipcrack of magic from Dobby, and all the particles in the air poured to the floor with unnatural speed, revealing the damage. Everything on the stove was burned, and everything on the counter had been coated with a fine layer of powder and soot. Harry glanced into the sink. Even the roast was covered with the stuff. And the bowl of cake

batter was broken on the floor. *That's what I slipped on.* Dudley had fire extinguisher powder clinging to his hands and arms, where'd they'd been splashed by the sink, and Harry could see that he had the same grit mixed with sweat on his own hands. He could feel it caked on the side of his face as well.

Snape had got the worst of it, though. His eyebrows and hair were so thick with goo that the layer was developing cracks, and he was bent over, coughing and spitting out more of the stuff. He found his voice, or a hoarse equivalent thereof and asked, "What...is...it?" shoulders braced like Neville Longbottom was when he was required to drink one of his own potions in class and was waiting to turn into a toad.

Harry reached across the floor for the fire extinguisher again and wiped off the instruction plate. "Um. Contents... contents... Monoammonium phosphate, mica, ammonium sulfate, talc, nuisance dust... nuisance dust?... irritant..."

"?" Snape made an inquisitive noise between coughs.

"It just says irritant. And methyl hydrogen polysiloxane. Whatever that is Wait, this part says you should rinse it off with clear cold water." It also said that you shouldn't inhale the stuff, Harry realized, but it was too late to tell Snape that now. "Do not ingest," he read further.

Snape promptly sicked up, with a remarkable purpose and economy of motion.

"Hey, not on the floor!" Dudley said, taking Snape's arm to turn him. "The sink's over... Harry?!" He backed away in alarm as Snape turned toward him.

Harry brought the wand around hastily and nearly panicked himself when he saw Snape's eyes. He'd expected to find them clenched shut, but they were wide open, completely coated with yellow-white powder. Alarming as that

was, it wasn't half as bad as seeing a thin black line appear horizontally across the middle of each eye as Snape's face turned toward the wandlight, only to vanish another paroxysm of coughing shook him.

"He's an alien!" Dudley squealed. "He's got two sets of eyelids! Just like in Men In Black!!"

Two sets of eyelids? Harry breathed again. Hedwig had an inner eyelid. It was called a nictitating membrane, and birds used it instead of blinking, according to his book on owl care. Of course, in Hedwig's case each eye only had one membrane, that slid from one side to the other, but Snape wasn't a bird. A lizard maybe. "He's not an alien, Dudley." Harry said as he tried to pull himself onto the nearest chair without using his sore leg or dislodging Dobby, who was still babbling apologetically. "He's just part something else."

"He's a freak," Dudley said flatly.

"He is not," Harry said impatiently. "Extra eyelids aren't any worse than hibernating, and that didn't scare you." His leg hurt. He'd hit it hard, twisted that ankle, maybe even sprained it. He looked over to Snape, who was feeling his way to the sound of running water at the sink. "Give him a wet towel for his eyes and take him up to the shower."

Dudley shook his head. "I don't want to."

"Dudley!" Harry tried to sound calm. "If any real Death Eaters show up at the door we're going to need Snape because they're not going to try to beat us up they're going to KILL us. Do you understand?" All right, so he'd ended up shouting, but at least Dudley was nodding frantically, eyes wide with horror.

Snape turned his head to look at Harry, the dusted inner eyelids startled open and then quickly shut again when the chemical touched more sensitive tissue. The beleaguered

teacher tried to say something and went off in another fit of coughing. Harry took a deep breath and forced himself not to shout again. "Look, Dudley. Just take him upstairs and put him under the cold water."

"Why can't you do it?" Dudley whimpered, beginning to edge tentatively over to Snape.

"Because I've hurt my leg, and it would take too long. Hurry up. The safety instructions said to wash the powder off as soon as possible. So you take care of Professor Snape; I'll see if I can't find anything else in the house that we can eat for dinner, and Dobby will clean up the mess, right?"

Dobby immediately conjured up a dozen miniature brooms and dustpans and began to orchestrate the attack against the dusty floor. "Yes, Harry Potter! Right away!"

Dudley swallowed hard and backed away from the magical cleaning. "But there aren't any lights, Harry," he argued faintly as he opened the cupboard door and pulled out a clean dishtowel to soak under the tap.

Harry glanced out the window. The neighbor's lights were still on, visible through the downpour. Dobby's spell to put out the fire must have done more than he meant it to. But was it just the lights that had been on, or was it all of them? The refrigerator was close enough to reach if he stretched a little. He grabbed the handle and pulled it open, and a flood of white light spilled out. "There," he said. "the lights still work. It's probably just the bulbs. You can check them as you go."

"But..."

Harry didn't have any patience left. "Just DO IT!" he shouted, and then almost regretted it when his cousin flinched and Dobby skittered backwards, grovelling in the spilled batter. Almost. He raised the wand, biting hard on the temptation

to use an Imperius curse. It seemed so reasonable just now. Dudley chose the lesser of two evils and grabbed Snape's elbow, shoving the wet towel into the teacher's hand and steering him quickly toward the door...

...which opened, revealing Aunt Petunia, blood streaming down her face from a cut near her hairline, a bar of metal held over her head like a samurai sword as she charged. "I have had enough!!!"

Snape dodged, Dudley screamed, and Harry cast a Leg Locker Curse with a speed that would have earned him top marks from Professor Flitwick. Her legs suddenly glued together, Aunt Petunia lost her balance and went sideways, careening into the open refrigerator and clutching at the shelves as she fell. Glass jars shattered as they hit the floor, plastic tubs spilled open, and food scattered in all directions. Petunia wasn't stopped. She clutched a jar of olives that had bounced off her and came up to her knees, ready to launch it at Snape's head.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Harry shouted. The spell hit with a blinding dark-blue flash, leaving Petunia frozen, the rage on her face all too clear even with the light at her back.

Snape had opened his strange second eyelids when he was being attacked, but not without cost. He crouched by the door, pressing the towel Dudley had given him against his face now, whimpered imprecations coming between the coughs. "...Merlin's ...bodkins..." Harry had never thought Snape could sound so miserable. It was more frightening than being attacked again, and Harry felt himself starting to shake.

"Get him to the shower!" he ordered Dudley. "Now!"

"But Mum's..."

"She'll still be there!" Harry snapped. "Go!" Dudley obeyed hastily, almost picking up Snape in his haste to flee. Harry

yelled after him, "And check on Uncle Vernon!"

He needed to rest. He couldn't rest. Not with Snape hurt and Dudley frightened and Aunt Petunia... Harry looked over at his mother's sister and felt a lump in his stomach. *I'm going to be locked in my room until Christmas.*

Dobby appeared at his elbow, bowing so abjectly his ears hit the floor. "Harry Potter, sir? Harry Potter is angry?"

And then there was Dobby. Harry sighed and pulled himself together. "Harry Potter is hurt, Dobby. And hungry. That was dinner before it caught fire," he explained wearily, waving a hand at the debris.

"Dobby will make a new dinner, Harry Potter!" the house elf volunteered happily.

"Clean up first," Harry told him, wishing that he were a house elf. It took so little to cheer Dobby up, really — just something to do. He watched as Dobby bespelled the sink to wash the dishes and began to mop up the batter and wished that worked as well for people.

Well. Maybe it did. Harry decided that they needed more light if they were going to make another dinner. He stood up, with a hand on the back of the chair and tried bearing his weight on his aching ankle. A careful essay proved that his ankle was only twisted — it hurt to walk, but it got a little better with each step. As soon as Dobby had cleared a good space on the floor of grease, batter, and dust, Harry got out the stepstool and a spare light bulb and climbed up to replace the bulb.

Overhead he could hear the water running in the bathroom, and Dudley knocking at the guest room door. He must have taken care of Snape. Good. One less thing to worry about, at least for a little while.

The light came on while it was still in his hand and Harry

blinked away green spots and looked away as he finished putting back the cover. The kitchen was really a mess. With the refrigerator emptied like that, Harry wasn't sure if there was enough food left to make another dinner at all.

He sat down on the stepstool. "Dobby," he asked. "Where do the house elves get the food for Hogwarts?"

Dobby hastily set aside the discarded lightbulb he'd been examining. "In Hogsmeade," he answered. "At the grocer."

"Oh." Harry said. He'd never noticed Hogsmeade having a grocer, but it made sense. He wondered if they bought supplies from Muggle farmers or if there were wizards who farmed. "If I sent you to Hogsmeade, could you bring some groceries back here?"

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir. But Dobby could go to Diagon Alley from here. It's much closer."

"Yes, yes of course it is. Good idea, Dobby. Let's make a list, then."

Dobby waved a hand and a quill and parchment appeared, floating in the air. "What would Harry Potter like Dobby to fetch?"

"Um. How about steak?" Harry said. "And some potatoes, of course. Some peas. Salad. Bread. And we need more butter and milk." The quill wrote down his suggestions. "Can you carry all that?" he asked Dobby.

"Dobby can carry much more than that," Dobby reassured him.

"Then we'd better get breakfast too. Let's see. Eggs and bacon." He remembered this morning's breakfast and Dudley's reaction to it. "Oh, yes, and yogurt for Dudley, and some grapefruit. We've got to make sure that he's got the things he needs for his diet."

"I thought you were mad at me." Dudley's voice was so quiet Harry almost didn't recognize it at first. He turned his head to see his cousin standing hesitantly in the doorway.

Harry found his voice. "I... I was just frightened. It's been a long day."

Dudley nodded jerkily and walked over to bend down and check on his mother. When Harry didn't say anything right away, Dudley straightened up and shrugged uncertainly. "He sent me away. Professor Snape, I mean, once I had the water turned on. He said he could get in the shower himself. And he asked me if there was anything to eat. Daddy's still snoring." He looked down at Petunia. "She broke the wall out of your room. I think that must be how she got hurt."

"She broke the wall?" Harry exclaimed. "How do you break a wall?"

"I don't know. It's just broken. Maybe she hit it with her head." Dudley looked around the kitchen. "Is there anything to eat?"

"Not much. Well, there's a tin of lima beans which is probably all right," Harry said. "But that's about it. Dobby's going to fetch some groceries. We're making a list." Harry pointed out the floating scroll and Dudley swallowed and nodded, paling as he always did in the presence of magic. Harry shouldn't have frightened him. "Do you want anything special?" It wasn't an apology, exactly, but it made the tension in Dudley's shoulders ease a little.

"Just chocolate cake," he said. "And I'm not allowed to have that."

"Dudley Dursley can't have chocolate?" Dobby asked.

"Dudley Dursley can't have cake," Dudley said with a scowl.

"Dobby can make chocolate yogurt," the house elf said, wagging a finger at the quill to make it write something. "And fruit salad, like Dudley Dursley had at breakfast."

"That was good," Dudley said, relaxing even more. "What about you, Harry? What do you want?"

"Things to stop *happening*," Harry said fervently.

"Yes, please!" Dudley agreed with equal fervor, and looked

up to meet Harry's eyes for the first time since he'd come downstairs. He almost smiled. "What about Professor Snape? What kind of food do you think he'll want? He sounds hungry enough to eat a cow."

"I don't know," Harry shrugged. Snape usually ate the same food as everyone else, at least when he showed up for meals. But maybe being dormant meant he needed special vitamins or extra potions. "Dobby, why don't you go and ask him if there's anything he wants. We shouldn't waste the chance since you're going to make the trip to Diagon Alley anyway."

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir." Parchment and quill coiled themselves into tight balls and vanished and Dobby raised his fingers to snap himself upstairs. Dudley jumped as the elf disappeared as well.

A moment later they heard a high, inhuman shriek.

"What's that?" Dudley exclaimed, staring at the ceiling.

"I don't know!" Harry fished Snape's wand out of his pocket. The cry had been like nothing he'd ever heard before. But the next sounds he knew. Metal bending, tile clattering, porcelain shattering... "It sounds like a mountain troll destroying a bathroom!"



THE WAND

SUMMARY: Harry uses magic again.

PETUNIA DURSLEY was furious. She could see. She could hear. She could think. But she couldn't move — not so much as an eyelid — although somehow her eyes didn't dry out. She didn't hurt — or at least she was unable to feel the hurt, but she was lying half in and half out of the refrigerator at an angle she knew would hurt tomorrow and which was forcing her to witness the unlovely sight of her precious son reduced to clinging to Harry Potter and begging him for help. She couldn't blame Dudley, all those horrid noises from upstairs had been frightening, and it had been dreadful when the kitchen taps writhed like tormented snakes and vanished away down through the holes at the back edge of the sink. It was Harry's fault for interposing himself between Dudley and the doorway, getting in the way. *He should have told him to run.* She could hear Vernon shouting from upstairs, and her heart flipped. *Run, Vernon,* she thought at her husband. *Don't let the magic get you.*

CRACK!

The awful little gremlin reappeared near her ear with a bang like a gunshot and made a beeline for the boys' knees, wedging itself between Dudley and her freak nephew.

"Harry Potter is in terrible danger! Professor Snape is being a bad wizard! Dobby has seen...mmrflmrfl..." Harry's hand choked off the sentence as the boy picked the thing up and wrapped it in his arms like a hysterical terrier.

"It's all right, Dobby!" Potter shouted. "It's all right! I've got his wand, see? He can't hurt me without his wand." But Harry was as pale as the thing, and almost as shrill.

The gremlin twisted in his arms to free its head and wailed louder, "Dobby has seen the D..."

Harry muffled the creature again, much to Petunia's frustration. *Dear God, what is that freak doing to Vernon?*

"We don't talk about that in front of Muggles," Harry said firmly. *He's going to kill him. Just like Lily and James. They kill each other all the time and now he'll kill us. Vernon — !* Petunia struggled desperately, black spots dancing before her eyes and her heart pounding her eardrums with the strain and yet the Herculean effort gained her nothing. She was still frozen, helpless.

Harry had caught the gremlin fast by both broomstick wrists and was shouting at it, " — to Professor McGonagall, and no one else, do you understand? Not another house elf, not another wizard nor witch, not a ghost, not anyone. The only other person you could possibly tell is Professor Dumbledore and I'm not sure where he is and I'm quite sure he's not to be disturbed. You go to McGonagall and you wait until she's alone. Do you promise, Dobby?"

"Dobby promises." The thing's green eyes were bulging grotesquely. "Is Harry Potter sure he will be safe?"

"Snape's not properly awake yet," Harry said. "He won't be able to get loose on his own. And McGonagall will know what to do. Now go."

The thing snapped its fingers, fading out of Harry's grasp

like a movie effect. The boy took a deep breath and ran a shaky hand through his hair.

Snape won't be able to get loose... we could kill him. We'll have to. Even that unnatural thing knows he's evil.

"What was he talking about, Harry?" Dudley asked nervously, glancing at the ceiling. "What did he mean by saying that Professor Snape is bad?"

"It's complicated," Harry said. He appeared to make up his mind about something. "Snape's — he isn't — he's not well. He is like a bear, you were right, he's going to be furious. You take Aunt Petunia and hide in the garden shed."

"What about Daddy?"

"From the way he's shouting, I think he's still locked in the guest room. He'll be safe enough in there." Harry measured the weight of the wand in his hand like a loaded pistol and then straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin defiantly. "I'd best hurry. The longer Snape's trapped, the angrier he'll be."

"But what if... what if something goes wrong, Harry?" Dudley asked as he came over to pick up his mother.

Run, Duddykins! Save yourself!

But her good boy wouldn't leave her, and Dudley managed to lift her awkwardly although she couldn't see now what Potter was doing. "Harry," Dudley said heavily, "what if? I mean, how will I know it's all right?"

"I'll come get you."

"How...how will I know if it's not?"

"Watch through the greenhouse roof. If you see any green flashes, run." She heard Harry hesitate in the doorway. "And Dudley... don't look back."



Snape was cold.

He was wet.

And that was the good news.

He shifted his head the tiny fraction of an inch that he was able, trying to see if he could free his tongue enough to speak. He hadn't the energy for wandless magic, but he had the anger and desperation and if he could only form the words of an incantation he would free himself and be damned to the cost. But the house elf had known its business all too well — the crisscrossing pipes had woven nets around his head and hands first, one snaking itself into a gag the moment he opened his mouth to try to bespell them away. He'd Lucius Malfoy to thank for teaching Dobby that trick. It was all very fine and well humiliating prisoners and tormenting the house elf by forcing the latter to act as jailer to the former, but it grew awkward if you were careless enough to lose control of the elf. Snape vowed that he'd have a chance to see Lucius benefit from Dobby's education someday.

The taste of tarnished copper pipe grating against his teeth taunted him. Copper was a fairly soft metal, as metals went, but it was still slightly too hard to chew through — he might dent it, but he'd never get through it without help, not even as hungry as he felt right now. *I'd settle for making a hole.* He could feel the vibration of the water passing through the pipe. There was still water falling on his head and back from the shower, but the angle was wrong for much of it to trickle down into his mouth. It was cold water, as cold and refreshing as the sea, if only he could drink of it. *Of course if I do manage to chew a hole, it will doubtless enlarge itself, drowning me most efficiently.* He stopped worrying the pipe.

Fortunately, neither he nor the Dursley boy had turned on

the hot water. None of the pipes that had warped and tangled their way around his body were more than warm, and most of them were pleasantly cold. And he'd managed to rinse his eyes and face clear of the grating Muggle chemicals before Dobby had beset him.

He must have been sent. It wasn't a matter of interrupting someone in the shower — house elves had been created to be body servants and were no more disturbed by human nudity than feline nudity — but no house elf of Snape's experience would risk disturbing a wizard without a reason. *And I know who sent him.*

POTTER.

Water, anger, fright, pain, he wasn't sure which had jarred the sequence of the yesterday's events into proper order for him, but Snape knew where he was now. *Trapped.* He was fairly certain that it had been Petunia who had tried to kill him when he'd first wakened. *I should have trapped her.* He knew that it had been Draco Malfoy and his bookends who had raided the Dursleys' home, blundering in as usual. *Idiot boys.* But they don't bear the Dark Mark, not yet.

How had Potter failed to realize how badly Dobby would react to the sight of the Mark? *He should have known better. How typical of him to be careless of secrets which are not his own! That boy is going to get us all killed.*

"Professor?" Potter's voice came uncertainly over the indignant roars of his imprisoned uncle and the gurgling of the water in the pipes. "Professor Snape, can you hear me?" He must be just outside the door. Snape made an impatient noise in his throat, as loudly as he could, wishing for leverage enough to clatter the pipes against the wall. "Is that a yes?"

Snape made the impatient noise again, so loudly it made his sinuses ache.

"Oh, good." Potter sounded rattled. "Uhm... I'll...ah... erm... I'll just... roll your wand in through the door, then, shall I?"

For Merlin's sake... Snape made no sound, counting to twenty in Greek in his head. When he reached sixteen he realized he was grinding his teeth on the pipe caught between them, but surely that was too soft a sound for the wretched child to mistake for assent.

From beyond the door Potter coughed, artificially and awkwardly. "Or not, then."

Silence from the boy. His uncle was still bellowing mindlessly.

Snape waited for the next crack-brained suggestion. It came. "Uhm.. Oh, I know" Potter sounded suddenly cheerful, and Snape's heart skipped a beat as a hand bearing his wand appeared around the edge of the door. "*Finite Incantatum!*"

Fat heavy globs shot out from the wand and splashed against everything in sight, black threaded through with red sparks like piebald lavabombs. Snape distinctly saw several of them vanish through walls and floor. One hit the mirror and bounced back toward Snape, and he felt the hot/sweet tingle of magic against his skin. The sudden return of the pipes to their normal positions, whipped him around to face the showerhead, leaving more bruises in their wake. He stumbled on something soft and looked down. The night-shirt he'd doffed and dropped to his feet to rinse had transfigured back into his dayrobes. He caught a whiff of chemical tang and crouched quickly to extract the phial of acid from its pocket and pour it down the drain. It had been sealed with a spell for safety, but Potter had undone that. *Unthinking brat, how many other spells have you undone with your carelessness?*

Elephantine footfalls along the hall announced the release of Vernon Dursley. Snape stood too quickly and had to grab

at the replaced taps for balance, wasting precious seconds in outlasting lightheadedness before he could stumble out of the tub. By that time it was too late. Dursley's shout of outraged triumph was cut off by Potter's panicked shout and the hiss and pop of more magic. Snape snatched the terrycloth bathrobe that was hanging on the back of the door, flung his left arm and the rest of himself into it, bundled himself into its generous folds and knotted the belt fast and stormed into the outer room to confront Potter who was standing frozen, the wand still held high as he stared whitefaced at a large fat toad. Bright satisfaction mingled with alarm as he moved up behind the boy.. *Have you no self-control, boy? Flinging curses every witch-a-ways....* Snape plucked his wand from the child's nerveless hand.

Potter flinched — he hid the motion well, stopped it almost in time, but Snape was a connoisseur of fear and he recognized it plainly. The boy's green eyes flashed with atypical fright — only a for a moment — and then they shuttered, going uncommunicative, and then Potter's face settled into the aggravating stubborn sullenness that he wore to class. "Oh, it's you," he said flatly, and looked away again, towards his accursed uncle.

"That was," Snape informed him, "a particularly Lockhartesque display of poor planning and worse results."

"Your wand doesn't like me." But the accusation had stung Potter free of the shell he'd been crawling into.

"It dislikes being carelessly used."

"I wasn't careless —"

"No? You've set the house afire, hurled chemicals and curses about indiscriminately, sent a house elf up to disturb me without considering what it might see or do." Snape had more to his list, but Potter flushed angrily and interrupted.

"Dobby was going to go to Diagon Alley, and I thought you might want something," he snapped. "Or aren't you hungry after all?"

Hungry? Ravenous! "Diagon Alley..." Snape could get a batwing casserole from Madame Mim's, and ingredients to brew—

"Yes. To the grocers. That was our dinner that was burning up, and it wouldn't have done if it hadn't been for Malfoy interrupting me. And as for the chemicals, if I'd had my wand..." Potter's furious tirade was interrupted by the bedroom door slamming open.

Snape cast the spell instinctively, and the heavy butcher knife dropped to the floor, embedding itself point first next to the small frightened shrew that had been Petunia Dursley. *That'll fetch the Aurors.* There must be alarm bells going off at the Ministry. Memory charms, and paralysis spells were one thing, Transfiguring Muggles something else indeed. *Of course, this is her third... or is it fourth... attempt to kill me. Perhaps I can plead self-defense.*

"But... she was paralyzed," Potter stammered, rising from a protective crouch. "How did she...?"

Snape swallowed his grin, glared at the boy. "If you cast spells without looking, of course they're going to go astray," Snape said sarcastically. "Particularly if they strike mirrors. You're hasty and impulsive."

"Me! You're the one who just turned Aunt Petunia into a shrew!"

"As nearly as I can tell she's always been a shrew," Snape growled. "And my spell has had only the intended consequences. As for yours...I hope you've nothing of importance bespelled in this house." *Wait. Spells. On the house. The protections...!*

Potter's eyes widened with alarm. "The snowglobe!" Ignoring Snape he turned and limped hastily to the windowsill to collect his mother's bequest.

Snape stared after him, torn between wanting to condemn the child for focussing on trivialities and unreasonable panic that the globe *had* been unmagicked. Movement from the floor recalled him to himself. The toad was trying to get away. Snape collected it and the shrew and put them into the mouse cage, transferring the remaining mice to one of the bathrobe's deep pockets, before turning to look at the boy who was still sitting on the bed by the window, studying the depths of the crystal. "Well."

"It's all right," Harry said, softly. "It changed, but not... not in a bad way."

Snape strode over and put out a peremptory hand. Harry put the snowglobe into it reluctantly, accepting the mouse cage in exchange. Snape studied the globe. The castle stood, the owls swirled, but now small figures in black scurried across the grounds, and in one of the tiny windows of Gryffindor tower he could see a red-haired girl leaning out to wave. "I see." *And if this smaller enchantment has held proof against your son's heedlessness, surely the protections on the house are secure. The Aurors will have to wait outside.* In his relief he became aware again of his own discomforts. His face itched. It must still have dust on it. He gave the globe back to Potter. "I'm going to finish cleaning up," he said, curtly. If Dumbledore's machinations were still in place at the Ministry there should be twenty or thirty minutes delay until the Aurors came, if they came at all, and there was no point in going to Azkaban still contaminated by Muggle dust. Or hungry. "Tell Dobby to make up some sandwiches."

"I sent him back to Hogwarts," Potter said absently, looking back at the snowglobe. "He was too frightened not to talk in front of Muggles."

"So you sent him off to dither in front of wizards instead!" Snape squelched the treacherous part of his mind that cheered at the thought of the end to his dangerous double game. *I did not spend the last month toadying to Lord Voldemort and playing his murderous games so that you could render that effort moot!*

"I didn't! I told him not to talk to anyone but McGonagall!" the boy shouted right back. "How stupid do you think I am!?"

"I think you've *finally* surpassed your father!" Snape hauled Potter to his feet and sent him stumbling towards the bedroom door. "Now go down and see to the food!"



Dudley waited at the base of the stairs, clutching the newel post as if it might offer some protection. He'd only just got his mother settled on some soft-looking bags in the garden shed when a weird black shape had come through the wall, splattering itself against the windowpanes and splashing over him and his mother. He'd felt sick and confused when the magic hit him, at least at first, but it had set Mum free. He'd never seen her so angry. Dudley was almost happy that he'd been too dizzy to go with her when she'd grabbed the biggest knife and headed upstairs. The lightheadedness hadn't lasted long — and when Dudley had taken inventory he found nothing else wrong — but as his head had cleared a guilty feeling had compelled him to come this far and listen.

It was only Harry and Snape yelling at each other now, although Dudley had heard something bang hard earlier. He wanted to call the police, but he just knew that they wouldn't believe him — and if they did believe him, it would end up in the newspapers and the family would be disgraced for all time. Especially if Mum had managed to hurt Snape with that knife.

Someone was coming. Dudley bit his lip in nervousness, but it was only Harry after all. His cousin came down the stairs like he wanted to stomp, but his feet hurt too much to do it. He was carrying the snowglobe in one hand and the mouse cage in the other. Dudley saw something green moving inside the wires. Snape? But the water was still running upstairs. And where were his parents?

"Do you know where Mum is?" he asked his cousin.

Harry scowled all the harder, holding up the mouse cage he held in one hand. "She's in here. So's Uncle Vernon."

Dudley stumbled back, feeling his heart pick up speed. He knew it would be bad, with all that shouting, but he'd never expected Snape to *really* change his parents into frogs. "Let them out! Turn them back!" he cried.

"I can't. Snape's got the wand." Harry said sourly. He got to the bottom of the stairs and turned toward the kitchen, disdaining Dudley's half-attempt to take hold of the cage.

"But... but..." Dudley trailed after him, trying to get a good look. He could see one brown-green lump in the bedding, and a bit of brown fur on the far side. "Why? What for? What does he want?"

"Food," Harry pushed through the kitchen door.

"He's going to eat them?" Dudley hated the way his voice wobbled nervously.

Harry snorted impatiently. "He's hungry, but I don't think he's that hungry." He set the cage and the snowglobe on the countertop and opened up the cupboard. "Ah, there it is." He pulled out a can of vegetables. "Put these lima beans in a pot to heat up, Dudley, while I see what else I can find."

Dudley looked at the label. "These aren't lima beans, they're fava beans," He squeaked. Hastily, he opened the window and threw the can out into the rain-swept garden.

"What did you do that for?" Harry demanded.

"I'm not giving him any ideas!" Dudley said.

"Then you make dinner!" Harry exploded, angrily, snatching up the snowglobe protectively. His mouth was set in a hard, mean line. "And if Snape's hungry enough for frog legs it'll be your fault."

"But...I don't know how to cook," Dudley told Harry's back as he stalked into the living room and flung himself onto the couch.

"Learn!"



THE DELAY

SUMMARY: *Consequences deferred, for a little while at least.*

I T WASN'T MEANT to be like this.

Not that Vernon Dursley had ever thought about what it might be like to be turned into a toad, but if he *had* thought about it he wouldn't have expected to be able to *think* about being turned into a toad.

And, if he had even *considered* being able to *think* as a toad, he would have thought that knowing he was really a human would have prevented him from knowing how to hop. And it hadn't. He'd jumped clear across the cage when Petunia's fur had rubbed up against him unexpectedly, and he'd landed perfectly.

It was all ... very... undignified.

If — when — Vernon resumed his proper form he was going to make certain that Harry Potter would never have a chance to do this again, even if it meant breaking both of the boy's hands along with that wand. Better yet, he'd have the brat incarcerated in a real home for delinquents as soon as possible. There was nothing that that freak Dumbledore could threaten him with that was worse than *this*.

At least, I hope not.

Petunia nudged up against him again and he shuddered at the feel of hot fur, but managed to keep himself from moving

away. It was worse for his poor darling. She'd been changed by that Snape person — at least Vernon could hope that Harry's spell was amateurish and would wear off soon.

If it would wear off at all.

He'd never paid much attention to fairy stories when he was a child. He only vaguely remembered the one about the frog prince, because it got referred to in advertisements and things, and he couldn't quite remember what had changed the frog back. Something soppy like true love's first kiss, he thought, but it was far too late for Vernon to be cured by that. Perhaps if he and Petunia kissed, they would both turn back to their proper shapes. But how did toads kiss? Or shrews? His mouth wasn't the right shape for it. He didn't even have lips.

Movement. Vernon crouched lower into the wooden shavings at the bottom of the cage. His wide-set eyes had caught the motion early, but they couldn't gauge the distance properly, so it was still shocking when the great white owl landed on top of the cage. His toad body had definite ideas about how to respond to the possibility of being eaten, and chagrin mingled with terror as Vernon watched the great bulky bird clamber around on top of the cage. When it became clear that the owl couldn't actually get through the bars, Vernon moved a little to one side, out of the wet spot, and tried to figure out how to safely shelter Petunia without having to touch too much of her fur.



"Stop that!" Dudley shooed Harry's owl away and moved the cage carefully back under the cabinets, stacking some plates on top of it and around it, so that Hedwig couldn't approach it again. She fluffed up at him and made some clacking noises

with her beak, but he wasn't afraid of her. Not much, anyway. He waved at the open window. "Go outside and find something else, bird. You can't eat my parents." She twisted her head around to look at the window, and the rain still falling outside, and then twisted it back to give him another glare before swooping out of the door towards the living room.

He moved aside one of the protective plates and took a good look into the cage. One frog and one rat, but no way to tell which one was which. "Don't worry, Mum. Don't worry, Dad. I won't let anyone eat you. Not even him."

The tiny creatures looked up at him with beady eyes and made noises, but they weren't words. They didn't seem frightened of him, though. For a brief moment Dudley fantasized about letting them out and devising some kind of communication system of squeaks and things, or having them point to words. But that might put them in more danger. "I think you'll be safer in there," he admitted. "At least as long as there's an owl in the house." He put the plate back. Hedwig was only a bird. If the cage were hidden, she might forget all about it. And once it stopped raining, she'd probably go out to hunt.

He turned back to the table and the line of boxes and jars he'd scavenged from the refrigerator and the cupboards. He stared at them, hoping desperately for inspiration. Except for some old breakfast cereal — wretched fibre-heavy stuff that tasted like scorched straw unless you drowned it milk and sugar — the array consisted of things that you put on food, or in food, instead of actually being food. If there were any bread left he could make bread and jam, and if there were crackers he could make cheese and crackers.

Too bad there weren't.

There was flour, though, and yeast... You could make bread

and cracker, couldn't you? Dudley lumbered over to the shelf of cookbooks and pulled out the fattest of them to look for the recipe for bread. He found it, and ran a finger down the list of ingredients and the directions. No. That would take too long. Snape was hungry now.

The photographs of prepared foods caught his eye and he flipped through the pages, hoping for inspiration...



Harry lay on the couch, curled up around his snowglobe as he watched the tiny figures wandering in and out of the doors of the one place he wanted to be more than anything in the world right now.

He didn't know what kind of dinner Dudley might come up with, and he didn't much care. There wasn't anything left in the cupboards except a few staples, and Harry was pretty sure that Dudley didn't even know how to boil a pot of water. *He'd better figure it out.* Letting Snape go hungry would only lead to more trouble. Not that Harry cared. It was all Snape's fault anyway.

Somehow.

Probably.

Well, maybe it wasn't, not entirely, but Snape hadn't made things any better. Why hadn't he hidden his arm from Dobby? If only Dobby hadn't seen the Dark Mark, he wouldn't have thought Harry was in danger. And if Dobby hadn't thought Harry was in danger, he wouldn't have panicked, and if he hadn't panicked he wouldn't have messed up all the pipes. And if Dobby hadn't messed up all the pipes and trapped Snape then Harry wouldn't have had to send him back to Hogwarts. And if Dobby hadn't had to go back to Hogwarts

he could have brought some groceries. And if there were any groceries, Harry could make another dinner — or even some sandwiches just to tide them over.

Of course, the first dinner wouldn't have burned if Harry hadn't had to leave the kitchen to fight fake Death Eaters.

"It's Malfoy's fault." Snape would still be sleeping if it weren't for the racket. Dinner would be made. Uncle Vernon wouldn't be a toad...

Harry wouldn't be grounded for the rest of his life.

"If I ever get back to Hogwarts, I am going to make Malfoy eat whatever it is that Dudley cooks." Harry told the snow-globe. Maybe Uncle Vernon would get tired of keeping him locked up. Harry was tired just thinking about it.

And then, suddenly, his anger ran out, and the tears he was holding back eased away, leaving a heaviness to his eyelids that was hard to resist. He could feel his body sinking more comfortably into the couch cushions and hear his own breathing steady-ing into long slow sleep. Distantly, he heard Dudley talking in the kitchen, but the words made no sense, and were no closer to him than the lessening grumbles of occasional thunder.

He shouldn't sleep. But maybe he could just rest a little until Dudley had made the food. It wasn't like his cousin was stupid enough to open the front door again, after all.



Fresh, clean water and soap were going to be something he would miss when the Aurors hauled him back to Azkaban, so Snape made the most of them now. He'd just enough shampoo left in his pocket kit to deal with his hair, but the rest of the kit was sadly depleted. Fortunately, among the scented concoctions in the shower there was one bar of simple Cas-

tile soap. *Sapo castilliensis* at least was a commodity common to both the Muggle and magical worlds — and the recipe was so simple he didn't think that even Muggles could muck it up. He'd tasted a corner of the bar to be sure, of course, and then had had to resist the temptation to eat the entire thing instead of using it for washing — only the irritation of the chemicals still on his skin, and the promise of something to eat downstairs held his resolve.

He blinked into the cool flow of water, letting it soothe away the last bits of grit on his inner eyelids and all the traces of lather in his hair. It was sweet, and he opened his mouth to it, rinsing away the taste of the pipes before drinking deeply. He wished for a toothbrush to take the taste of mouse away — his own had lost the cleansing spell to Potter's clumsiness. His feet left pools of water on the floor as he went over to search the drawer in the vanity and the cabinet on the wall for one that was still in the wrapper. It tasted of plastic, like most Muggle things did, but it worked well enough to tuck into the kit. Perhaps the Aurors would ignore it and he could it take along to Azkaban.

His clothes were clean enough now. The chemicals had rinsed away, and he dried them easily with a quick spell. He put everything on, glad of the sturdy weight of his proper clothes about him once more. Re-setting the cooling enchantment on the wool took a more complicated spell — it was only at the edge of starvation like this that you noticed the personal cost of a spell, even with a wand — but succeeded, and now he was nearly ready to face the Aurors.

He checked his pockets again. All well and good. The more ... unusual... potions were barely noticeable in the clutter of perfumes, lotions and nostrums in the cabinet. He could

trust Potter to nose around and discover them before his Aunt did. *And if he doesn't*, Snape smiled, not at all nicely, *it will serve her right*.

Now all he needed were his shoes.

Wherever they were.

He wasn't going to go to Azkaban without shoes.

After an unconscionably long time he thought of using a spell, and only jumped a little when a double thudding against the door announced the arrival of the missing foot-gear. Snape caught his breath, and went out into the bedroom to put them on.

He caught the image of himself in the mirror as he straightened again and paused to assess it. The black mass of clothing, wool too fine and heavy to wrinkle he adjusted to its best drape. His nails were clean, his hands immaculate, what a joke. His hair was still dry from the washing, he shrugged back one vagrant lock. His face — not much to be done about that. He looked as hungry as he felt, eyes deeper in shadow, skull starting to show under pale, drawn skin. He checked the buttons of his left sleeve, glanced up once more. There should have been more lines in his face, or even a shock of white in his hair, he thought, to commemorate the past month, but he couldn't discern any obvious change.

The Weasley twins have marred me more than Lord Voldemort, then? He will be disappointed.

As will Dumbledore.

Too late to change things — and if by chance someone were forced to investigate the Dursleys' behavior because of what had happened so much the better. Potter might actually spend his summers gaining weight.

I must eat. Soon.

One last adjustment of his cloak and down the stairs. He was almost ready. All he needed was food.

Just before Snape reached the bottom of the stairs, the doorbell rang. He went to the door, annoyed with himself for having wasted too much time on bathing. He'd have no time to eat after all. He squared his shoulders, furlled his cape neatly into place, readied his wand, assumed a reasonable expression, and opened the door.

But the person standing on the step was not an Auror. It was a bespectacled Muggle youth in dusty black attire holding a large red bundle. He blinked at Snape for a long moment and then broke into an incredulous grin. "Are you Neil Gaiman?"



THE PIZZA

SUMMARY: Pizza, and yet more unexpected visitors.

DUDLEY only got there just in time. "Will you sign my hat?" The pizza delivery boy produced a grubby red object with a faded drawing of a yellow pizza on it from the depths of a back pocket and held it out hopefully. "Please, Mr. Gaiman?"

"No." Snape said firmly, starting to close the door.

"Wait!" yelled Dudley. "Wait! Don't close the door! He's got the food! Food!" Dudley danced behind Snape, waving the money anxiously to keep the pizza from disappearing as he tried to figure out how to get round the scary wizard. Snape swung his glare from the pizza boy to Dudley, who made haste to explain under that penetrating black scrutiny. "I ordered pizza." Snape almost seemed to understand, so Dudley reached awkwardly past him and held out the crumpled notes. "You've got it haven't you?" he asked the boy.

"Yeah, sure" the new arrival said, pulling a stack of cardboard boxes out of the red case. "Let's see, I've got sausage, mushroom and garlic, pepperoni and garlic, vegetables special with extra garlic, and a plain garlic with extra cheese."

At least Snape had stopped looking at Dudley. It was creepy, the way he focussed so suddenly and intently on the pizza boxes, like Harry's owl spying a mouse. Much to Dudley's



dismay Snape snatched the entire stack of pizzas and slammed shut the door, then turned and vanished towards the kitchen. Dudley glanced after him with longing, but he could already hear the pizza boy tapping tentatively at the door.

He opened it and proffered the cash again. "Sorry about that."

"S'okay. Geniuses, y'know. How did you get Neil Gaiman to come to your house anyway?" asked the lanky teen as he took the money.

"Who? No, that's... that's my cousin's... er... uh... uncle. He's just. They're adjusting his medications," Dudley said hastily. It was a new excuse they'd been using about Harry this summer, and it wasn't very good when you came to think about it, but it worked long enough to slam shut the door on the boy's sympathetic nod.

He heard a muffled shout of "Hey, thanks for the tip!" and shuddered. He wasn't sure he could explain about the gratuity. Daddy always said that these people weren't worth what they were paid never mind a gratuity. But at least it meant that the pizza boy would go away. *Pizza. I'd best go see about the pizza.* He turned to find Harry leaning against the doorway into the living room, still blinking sleep from his eyes.

"You ordered pizza?" Harry asked, one eyebrow high.

Dudley flushed. "It's the only way I know how to make dinner," he mumbled. But when he looked again, Harry was grinning.

"Don't think the garlic's going to do any good," he said. "It doesn't really work on vampires, and besides, Snape's got a reflection. But it was a good try."

Dudley shrugged, but he couldn't help grinning back a little now that Harry wasn't furious with him any more. "Yeah, well," he said. "I figured we could pick it off of ours."

"I suppose." Harry yawned and ran a hand over his face. He

still looked tired, and he was favoring one leg like it hurt him, Dudley noticed, but at least he didn't look as pale as he had before. "Although I'm so hungry I'm not sure I care."

"Me too. But I think Professor Snape is hungrier," Dudley pointed out uneasily. "Come on, we'd best get in there before he eats it all."

They got to the kitchen just in time to see Snape waving his wand and muttering Latin at a steaming pizza on the table. The steam vanished, and Snape pried up a slice. It was so cold the cheese strings snapped off.

"Now it's gone all manky!" Dudley moaned, realizing that Snape had magicked his pizza. "You've ruined it!" He realized what he'd just said and slapped his hands over his mouth, but Snape was too busy eating to have noticed. One of the pizza boxes was already empty.

"This one's all right," Harry said, opening the box with the pepperoni and extracting a lovely gooey slice.

"I'm only allowed the vegetable kind," Dudley grumbled. "And only two slices of that."

"Heat it up then," Harry said, around a mouthful of hot cheese. "Use the microwave."

"It never tastes the same reheated," Dudley said, wishing he'd not ordered the extra cheese on the plainest pizza. He reached for a slice of the vegetable. Snape shifted abruptly to guard it, and the lizard part of Dudley's brain informed him that anything that moved that fast was a predator. He froze, his fingers just touching the crust, and swallowed hard as he stared into the glittering black eyes. *He's even hungrier now than he was last night.* "I ... I just wanted a couple of pieces," Dudley said carefully. "You can have the rest."

"There's more meat on this one, Professor," Harry offered,

wafting steam from the pepperoni pizza in Snape's direction. "Go on, let Dudley have his dinner."

Snape considered for a long moment, still chewing, but he nodded at last, and Dudley took his share out of the box and went to fetch a microwave safe plate, trying not to let Snape see how nervous he was. But except for a searching gaze at the microwave when it beeped, the black-garbed teacher was far too busy eating to pay much attention to Dudley. He'd gone through another half a pizza before Dudley's slices were even ready to eat.

Dudley sat down at the table and reached for the dried red pepper flakes. Carefully. Snape's eyes followed the movement and widened slightly as if he were just realizing that the bottles and cans and boxes on the table were also food, but he kept on working his way through the pizzas.

238 *I should have ordered more, Dudley realized. If I'd just had the money I would have. But ... I suppose I could use Daddy's emergencies credit card. If this isn't an emergency what is? There won't be any left for anyone else at the rate he's going.*

The thought of his father reminded him. "Er... Uhm. Harry? What sort of pizza topping can frogs and mice eat?"

"Frogs and mice?" Harry asked.

"You know... Mum and Dad."

Snape snorted. "The question is moot."

"Moot?" Dudley was almost sure that the word meant that the question didn't matter anymore and he got up hastily to check and make sure that the cage was all right and the two creatures inside it moving and breathing. They blinked up at him reassuringly. He sighed with relief. Snape must have meant the question didn't matter for a different reason.

"Do frogs and mice not like pizza, then?" he guessed.

Snape gave him a withering glance over the last box of pizza. "Have you no bestiary, boy?"

"Bestiary?" Dudley hated the stupid way he sounded when he repeated words like that, he realized of a sudden, especially since he remembered a moment later what Snape was asking. "That's a book of animals, isn't it? I think..." He had an encyclopedia set, anyway, although he wasn't sure if it was in the attic or the garden shed.

"Consult it," Snape advised drily.

"Uncle Vernon's a toad, and Aunt Petunia's a shrew," Harry said, leaning his head on one hand and eyeing the unfinished slice in his hand unhappily. He'd only managed two and a half pieces, which was surprising, considering how long it had been since lunch. "And they'd probably both like meat or cheese. Maybe some bits of crust, too. And Aunt Petunia would probably like some of the vegetables."

Dudley sat down again and made a little pile of the eggplant and mushroom bits that had fallen off his slices onto the plate and rolled some of the cheese from the box into small balls. "I wish you'd just change them back. Not that there'd be enough pizza for them if you did." Snape had ruined the last pizza already, and was eating a frost-rimmed slice with one hand while he picked up bottles from the table and read labels with the other.

"Sorry," Harry said, adding a slice of pepperoni to Dudley's pile. "I'm not even sure how I managed to turn Uncle Vernon into a toad in the first place. That's seventh year magic."

"When you employ another wizard's wand," Snape intoned severely. "You should expect unusual results."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes, Professor Snape," he said impatiently. He turned back to Dudley. "Look, get them out of there and..."

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"The Muggles stay where they are." Snape decreed.

Harry snapped at his teacher. "That spell is probably going to wear off sooner rather than later. We can't leave them in the cage."

Snape curled his upper lip, and glared at Harry like he was a particularly disgusting bit of slime. Dudley sank a little lower in his seat. *Maybe feeding him wasn't a very good idea after all. He's still cranky. And I think he thinks he's only had the appetizers.*

"Are you questioning my judgment, Mr. Potter?"

Harry glared right back. "Yes!" he said. "And you would be too, if you weren't so busy stuffing your face. If Uncle Vernon turns back into himself he'll probably squash Aunt Petunia flat. We should lock them in the cupboard under the stairs. They'll just fit."

"And if they try to escape, they'll transform in the walls," Snape said. "At least when they are here, under my eye..."

"Couldn't you just put them in two separate cages?" Dudley heard himself saying through a distant fog. Harry glowered at Dudley. He didn't much appreciate being interrupted, and neither, by the look of it, did Snape, but Dudley kept talking anyway. "I mean, I'd rather you let them out and turned them back to themselves, but at least if they were locked up separately no one would get squashed."

"Five points, Mr. Dursley," Snape said and waved his wand almost casually at the counter. In a flash, two cages stood where one had been before, each with a pair of small eyes peering out of a heap of shavings that trembled noticeably, although Dudley was relieved to see that both of his parents weren't any worse off than they had been. The potions professor glanced at the result of his spell and nodded approval before reaching for the nearest jar. He opened it up and began rooting out olives.

Harry cocked his head a little, his anger fading as he studied

his cousin. "That was almost clever, Dudley. Who woke you up?"

Dudley swallowed, "I just didn't want them to get hurt. Your owl would probably eat them if they were running around loose."

"Hedwig wouldn't do that," Harry protested, raising his arm to summon her. She flew to him and nipped at his fingers affectionately, before accepting some pepperoni. "Probably not anyway."

"It'd give her horrible indigestion if she did," Dudley said, trying to bite back a grin at a sudden mental image. "Imagine what would happen if one of them changed back halfway down. You know... Munch munch munch boompf." He puffed out his cheeks and crossed his eyes goofily, like a cartoon character with a mistaken mouthful.

Harry could imagine it, that was clear by the sparkle that appeared in his green eyes. And the notion got all the funnier suddenly because Hedwig made a funny coughing noise just then and hurked up a pellet.

"Oh, I can do better than that," Dudley told the owl — and burped rudely. Harry ducked his head and snickered.

"I bet you didn't know owls could burp!" He mimicked Hedwig's noise and she gave him a disdainful look before launching herself for one of the dining room chairs. But that only made him laugh. Dudley laughed too, managing to burp once more before the chuckles started taking over.

Harry burped back — a wonderful soggy burp — but then he was chuckling too. It was ridiculous, laughing like this, when Snape was sitting there glaring at them, and his parents were sitting in cages on the kitchen counter, but it was marvelous too — who would have guessed that Harry had it in him to be goofy? For a moment Dudley saw the same surprise on Harry's face as he felt himself. But the joke was too

good for introspection. They both fell into giggles, leaning on the table for support and bursting out again every time they looked up and met each others' eyes.



Snape glared at the pair of sniggering boys and restrained the urge to knock their heads together. *Teenagers! Feed them and they go completely to pieces.* Potter might have an excuse — by the flush of color in his cheeks he was probably mildly feverish — but the Muggle brat had no cause for such ridiculous glee.

At least the Aurors hadn't turned up yet.

The pizzas hadn't done more than take the bare edge off his own hunger.

Best to ignore the boys' foolery. He chose another bottle from the table and squinted at the clumsy lettering on its label, which looked as if a six-year-old had made efforts with a blunt quill. It seemed to hold concentrated blackcurrant juice and the images on the label agreed with this. *Not my favorite.* But he was thirsty, and so he fumbled with the seal — took a sip, decided it was tolerable, and swigged some down gratefully. It was a bit strong, though — he looked for something which might ameliorate the taste. There was still liquid in the olive jar...

"Accio spoon." *The more food I eat now, the longer it will be before I have to consume gruel at Azkaban.* Although he was no longer quite certain that someone hadn't managed to deflect the Ministry's attention from this house. That was either good, if it meant that Snape would be able to avoid answering questions or bad, if it meant that the others were depending on him to do any magic that needed doing. The way his hands were still trembling he'd have difficulty controlling anything more than minor spells.

He disliked the blackcurrant/olive mixture *but the coffee's*

gone, the boy said so and so he continued gulping doggedly, as he went through more of the foods in front of him. He decided after he'd eaten a bit more that the things stored in *what do they call it?* PLASTIC took on the taste of their containers. *Muggles must like it.* He found it revolting, not at all an improvement such as oak imparted to spirits; still it was food and here and he was feeling better now and so he continued eating. *Have to have my wits about me, the wretched children are in my care —*

He was eating a spoonful of something labelled Marmite when he heard the Dursley boy whisper, "Euwww..."

"That's nothing," Potter replied cheerfully. "You should see what we put into some of our potions."

"What kind of things?" Dursley asked.

"Well, stewed slugs, for one thing."

"Do you have any?" Snape asked fiercely. *I REFUSE to drool.*

Harry tried to pretend that he hadn't jumped. "Um.. I think so. I mean yes. Yes, Professor. I've got a jar that never was opened. But it's up in my school trunk and Dudley said it was going to blow up or something. The trunk I mean."

"Or something," Snape agreed drily, drawing his wand. "Accio school trunk!"



Dudley dodged as the kitchen door opened and Harry's school trunk appeared floating determinedly towards Snape, who directed it to the table as the door closed again of its own accord. Dudley didn't think that the table was the best place for anything to be if it were going to explode, but Snape didn't seem to think of that. He cast another spell at the trunk and colored light danced over the joins and sides before sinking slowly inside. Snape walked around it, swigging ketchup from

the bottle as he studied the patterns. "Your uncle," he told Harry, "took this trunk out of the house — out of range of the protective spell. Were I trying to curry the Dark Lord's favor by harming you, that foolishness would present a perfect opportunity."

"What protective spell?" Dudley asked, looking around as if he could see evidence of it on the walls.

"The spell which prevents unfriendly witches or wizards from entering these premises without an invitation," Snape said, narrowing his eyes at a particular swirl of light that lingered over the hasp. Almost absently, he reached back to the table for the jar of capers.

"Is that how it works?" Harry said thoughtfully.

"What, do you mean if I hadn't asked them in, those kids with the masks couldn't have come in?" Dudley asked, almost at the same time.

Harry stared at him as if he'd broken out in lemon-yellow spots. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked. "Sn... Professor Snape didn't cast a spell on you or anything, did he?"

Dudley shrugged, feeling the blood rising to his ears. He did feel more awake than usual, it was true, but he didn't see any way for Harry to be able to know that. "I got hit by something in the greenhouse that made me dizzy, but only for a minute, and that was ages ago. I'm fine now. And I still want to know about the protections. I mean, Daddy didn't ask you to come in," he looked to Professor Snape. "Did he?"

"He gestured me up the stairs," Snape said. "And as I had a letter from Potter asking for assistance, that was sufficient permission. A specific invitation is not required." He smiled thinly at the trunk. "I think it may be untouched in spite of that idiot," he said, and pointed his wand. "*Alohamora!*"

The bicycle locks writhed and clicked through the combi-

nations, falling away as the hasp popped open. Snape lifted the lid carefully, and when nothing happened, let it fall back with a thump.

Dudley craned his neck, trying to see what kinds of things Harry had in there. Clothes and books, mostly, just like a real person. Snape tipped the capers down his throat, took another drink of the purple stuff in the olive jar, and then cast his spell again. This time several objects lit up, mostly in oranges and reds. "What's that mean?" Dudley asked, stepping back.

"Enchantments," Snape said curtly. He didn't seem displeased, though. He'd probably been expecting them.

"What color would a portkey turn?" Harry asked, and Dudley was surprised by how flat his voice had gone. Whatever a portkey was, Harry didn't like them much.

"The more powerful the spell, the closer the color to purple," Snape said, investigating a yellow-greenish swirl around a book that growled sleepily. The glow vanished the moment he touched it, and Dudley realized that other glows had disappeared at a touch too, revealing the glows of the layer below. Harry certainly had a lot of enchanted things in there. But Snape was still talking. "A portkey powerful enough to take you outside of this house would be at least aquamarine. Not that the power of a spell has anything to do with it being a threat. A mild headache potion applied to someone's hat can keep them miserable for weeks before it wears off."

"Is that why you never wear a hat? I thought it was because your hair's so greasy," Harry asked, blushing as if the words had gotten out before he could censor them.

But Snape didn't seem to hear. He frowned as he moved aside the first layer of oddments and revealed a richly embroidered cloth with a deep violet glow, and then turned

a brief glare on Harry. "The invisibility cloak. Very useful, Potter. And here I had hoped it had been confiscated."

"It was my..." Harry hesitated for a moment. "My Christmas present. Professor Dumbledore knows I've got it."

Snape snorted. "He would." He pulled aside the cloth to reveal a cardboard box with a yellowish glow. "Who enchanted this, then?"

"Hermione," Harry said, relaxing again. "To keep the candy inside from melting over the summer."

"Candy?" Snape repeated, suddenly interested. Dudley edged away. He still remembered that toffee from last summer.



Harry levered himself out of his chair and collected his wand from the trunk. As long as he had that, he didn't really care about anything. "You can have some if you're still hungry. Just pass me some of the chocolate." He always felt better when he had chocolate to hand. Just in case.

"I thought you weren't hungry," Dudley said, who was obviously trying to look casual as he went over to lean against the kitchen counter. "I mean, you didn't finish your pizza."

"I'm not," Harry said, taking the bar of chocolate that Snape handed him and tucking it into the pocket of his dressing gown. "It's medicinal."

"What? You mean like a laxative or something?"

"No — it just makes you feel better sometimes when you really need to." Harry wasn't going to explain about Dementors. Just thinking about them made him feel a chill. He leaned his eyelids against the heels of his hands until he saw a pattern of lights and whorls, wishing that his humors would get into balance pretty soon. He was tired of going from hot to cold and from feeling all right to feeling exhausted. Couldn't

Snape just give him something that would fix everything?

"Here." Harry looked up. Dudley had brought him a glass of water and two aspirin. "You look like your head hurts."

"It does." Harry accepted the offering. "Thanks, Dudley." His cousin had the most peculiar expression on his face. He looked like he didn't know whether to be more afraid of Snape, Harry's wand, or the two caged animals on the counter. Still something had changed about Dudley, and Harry would have almost suspected Snape of casting an Imperius spell except that if Dudley had been hit by magic in the greenhouse it would have had to been the spell Harry had cast to disenchant the pipes, and that would have undone the curse. It had let Aunt Petunia free of the bindings, anyway. But what other enchantments could have been on Dudley?

Memory came back to him. Dudley with a pig's tail, victim of Hagrid's half-completed spell on the very first night that Harry had ever known he was a wizard. They'd had to have the tail taken off by surgery, hadn't they? So the spell had never worn off on its own. And combined with all the times that Harry, not knowing about magic, had called him "pig in a wig"... *Maybe the diet will work now. He'll still be spoiled rotten, but even doctors don't know a cure for that.*

Snape suddenly turned into a very large canary. Dudley jumped nearly four inches, which was further than he'd jumped in two years as far as Harry knew. "Was that supposed to happen?"

Harry sighed. You'd have thought Snape of all people would know better. "He must have bit into a Canary Cream. Don't worry. In a minute or two the spell will wear off." He rubbed at his forehead and wondered if chocolate would help the aspirin work faster.

The canary rooted in the box with its beak and a chocolate

frog leaped out. It caught it midair and then went still, head cocked and frog-legs hanging out.

Dudley rubbed at his arms. "It's getting cold."

Cold. The lethargy that was trying to overwhelm Harry turned to fear. He got to his feet and drew his wand, trying to decide which way the cold was coming from. "Quick... Hide Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. Put them into cupboards or something." Dementors probably wouldn't care about the Dursleys but Harry didn't want to have to worry about them.

Dudley scurried to do as he was told.

Snape moulted with a loud pop, feathers flying in every direction and sticking greasily to walls, ceiling and floor. "They're coming through the front door," he hissed. "Didn't you lock it?"

"Uhhh... I forgot!" Dudley cried. "Won't the protective spell keep them out?"

"Dementors aren't wizards!" Harry realized. "Dudley, get behind us!"

"It's not you they've come for, boy," Snape said, stepping forward. The glass door into the hall was frosting up, but shadows were visible beyond it.

Harry groaned as the despair washed over him. Already he could hear Voldemort's triumphant laugh, could see the flash of green as Cedric fell in his mind's eye. He aimed his wand, trying to summon a better memory. "Expecto Patronum!" he cried, and heard the echo from Snape. He glanced over, curious in spite of everything to find out what Snape's patronus could be, and caught a glimpse of something silvery vanishing through the back wall. "THAT WASN'T EVEN THE RIGHT DIRECTION!" he exclaimed, although he'd done little better, only managing a few silver strands.

"There's more than one way to fight Dementors, Potter,"

Snape growled. "Stay back, I say."

"Professor Lupin said..." Harry protested.

"Lupin relies too much on charm and not enough on wit! Keep your thoughts to yourself, and if you can't manage that, then use what the Dementors make you remember." Snape took another step closer to the door, blocking Harry's view.

"But it's Cedric! And Voldemort!" Harry cried, trying to make Snape understand. It was the worst thing that had ever happened to him — the nightmare that had haunted his sleep for weeks.

"You survived it, didn't you?" Snape snarled and raised his wand again. "Expecto...Gah!" his foot skidded on one of the greasy feathers on the floor and he fought for balance.

With a crack like the sound of a car backfiring a witch with purple hair Apparated into the kitchen and darted forward — only her foot hit another one of the feathers and she caromed into Snape. To Harry's horror, both of them went down in a tangle. And the door was opening...

Desperately he raised his wand again, trying to think of something, anything bright. "Expecto patronum," he stammered, just as everything went dark.



THE END

SUMMARY: More unexpected visitors. And a resolution, of sorts.

DUDLEY HAD NEVER felt worse in his life. Not even the night that he and Piers had appropriated all the candy in the dorm from the first years' tuck-boxes and eaten themselves sick. Not even the first night that he had tried to sleep without leaning on the pig's tail that Harry's gigantic messenger had attached to his behind. Not even the awful days when Daddy had tried to outrun Harry's letters. There was something about the creeping cold that made him feel like he would never be happy again. That Harry and Snape clearly feared the things lurking in the front hallway only warned him that what was coming was going to make a tail or a tongue the size of a python look like child's play.

As if his memory had been merely clearing away the deadwood, it summoned up the sound of voices, and the dark of a closet, the damp stink of mildewing choir robes. He was eleven years old again, in his first term at Smeltings, and they were going to find him.



"There must be an explanation for it," the Headmaster was saying. "Every picture in the corridor upside down in the frame, and those four Fifth years bundled up in the curtains like caterpillars."

That was the worst of it. Knowing that if Mum ever found out he'd be disinherited or kept in a cupboard for the rest of his life. It frightened him more than being turned on his head had, or the unpleasant discovery that there were bullies bigger than he was who cared nothing for the threat of parental intervention. For one horrible moment he had wanted to be like Harry and be able to make something happen, and something had.

"Not that a few bruises won't benefit that lot," came the sharp voice of the maths master. "And I don't credit their stories much. A great lump like Dursley couldn't possibly have managed to overwhelm them. He's big for a first year, but not that big."

"Well, I don't know what I'm going to tell his parents if we can't turn him up soon. They're bound to ask what happened and what am I to tell them? That he did it by magic?"

He'd never ever let himself wish that again. Not even when the Head caned him for hiding. He took three extra stripes in exchange for a promise that his parents wouldn't be told, and consoled himself with sweets instead. He'd done his best to forget it had ever happened at all. But the things in the hall were making him remember.

Snape went down blindsided by a punk girl with what sounded like a gun only it probably wasn't because she had purple hair and was probably a freak like Harry and Snape only Dudley didn't know if she was trying to help or not and even if she was she was entangled in Snape's cloak and then the power went out and there was nothing between Dudley and the cold but the darkness and Harry and Harry didn't sound like he was doing very well.

Come on, Harry. Do magic. Make them go away. Wave your wand and make them go... You can do it! Dudley thought at his cousin, desperately.

Harry was sick. Faltering. *Maybe they'll take him and leave me alone.* More memories came unbidden... Harry reining in impatience as he helped Dudley work on the book report for Snape. Harry sharing a grin as Piers and Gordon and the others beat a hasty retreat. Harry in the hallway, facing three masked strangers in Dudley's defense. Harry laughing, with him, not at him.

If Mummy ever finds out she'll never love me again.

But Harry needed help. Dudley took a step forward and took hold of Harry's shoulder, followed his arm with the other hand and made him point the wand at the heart of the cold. "Expecto Patronum!" he shouted, his voice cracking. "Come on, Harry, say it with me. Expecto Patronum!"

"Expecto Patronum!" Harry came in on the third round and there was a sudden flash of too-bright silver light from the tip of the wand. Dudley squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to see, although a negative impression of huge capes — too big to be Snape's — still floated behind his eyelids as they'd been floating in through the door.

Harry went limp, and it was all Dudley could do to keep him upright, to keep the wand pointed. He heard glass breaking, and the crack of another gun; heard a girl's voice saying "Leave him alone! What has he ever done to you!" somewhere deep inside his own head; and then, suddenly, the press of cold eased away and Dudley could feel the sweat that had frozen on his face and neck and back begin to trickle downwards.

He opened his eyes. The lights had come back on by themselves somehow. Snape was still sprawled on the floor, although he had his wand held outstretched at the broken kitchen door and his face was a mask of rage and blood. The girl was still half-engulfed, trying to free herself of the last few folds of black wool. And a tall bald black man with a gold

earring was standing by the refrigerator, shaking his head with resignation as he surveyed the scene.

"Harry," Dudley whispered nervously, shaking his cousin hard to wake him. "Harry. We've got more visitors. Harry? Harry!" And then his own knees gave way.



Snape only just managed to keep the Dursley boy from toppling onto Potter when he fainted. Fortunately, Kingsley Shacklebolt got off a spell that caught Potter. Casting a spell silently took a little extra effort, but it was definitely simpler than trying to say "Mobilicorpus" when your head was splitting from the pain of a re-broken nose. He puppeted the boy over to the nearest chair and made him sit before releasing the spell. Shacklebolt did the same for Potter, and then came over to help extract Nymphadora Tonks from his cloak.

"Sorry!" the young Auror said as she clambered to her feet. "Didn't mean to do that."

Snape waited. He still half-expected to be arrested, truth to tell, and this soon after a brush with actual Dementors he wasn't feeling any too confident about his ability to resist their influence in the long term. But he wasn't fool enough to take on two Aurors. Not the way he felt right now. And certainly not these two Aurors.

Tonks found her wand, aimed it right between his eyes. He didn't flinch as she screwed up her eyes in concentration and said, "Episkey," instead of a binding charm. Instantly the pain in his nose doubled and then receded.

"Tergeo," Shacklebolt added, cleansing away the blood. "McGonagall said you were having an interesting time, Snape, but she didn't mention anything about Dementors."

"The Ministry didn't send them?" Snape asked, accepting the hand Shackbolt held out and letting himself be pulled upright.

"Not that I know of," Shackbolt said, tucking his wand away. He went over to check on Potter. "He's starting to wake up. Is there any chocolate in the house?"

"The cardboard box, on the table." If Snape wasn't going to be arrested after all, he'd just as soon have another chocolate frog. "Don't give him anything that looks like a chocolate cream, though, unless you want him to sprout feathers." *Which reminds me...*

Tonks sauntered — carefully — over to the table to investigate the box. "You're really good with that cleaning charm," she observed, as the kitchen put itself to rights.

After years of repairing the damage caused by careless students in the Potions lab, I ought to be. The food boxes and jars and things he stacked neatly on the counter, the dishes went into the sink, the broken glass back into the door. The feathers Snape destroyed, deriving a small satisfaction from seeing them spark into non-existence. At least he had the energy and the concentration to do simple spells efficiently. The chocolate frog was still welcome, though. He turned the card in his hands — another Dumbledore. "We could have used you here," he told the small image, which smiled beatifically back and raised its clasped hands like a victory salute.

"Aren't there meant to be two more Dursleys?" Shackbolt asked, having got Harry started nibbling on a block of chocolate and shifted position to persuade the Dursley boy to rouse and do the same.

"Yes." Snape said. "But I'm not sure where the boy put them."

"Under the sink," Potter mumbled. He was beginning to recover his color again, although only in bright spots on his

cheeks. "Professor Snape, who are these people?"

"Aurors." Snape wasn't going to explain more than that. Not to Potter, not yet. Let someone the boy had better reason to trust do the talking.

"See?" Tonks took out her identification for Harry to look at. "That's not my best picture, but I was nervous. I've only been an Auror for a year. Nearly didn't pass the test..."

Snape interrupted before she could go into her entire life history. "The uncle is a toad, the aunt is a shrew. I transfigured her after repeated attempts upon my life. The last one was with a cleaver."

"Good enough reason for violating the Abuse of Muggles Act for me," Tonks said. "A Memory Charm, a little cleaning up... Get you out of the house so she can't attack you again... No problem."

"Same for the man and the boy," Shackbolt agreed. "Better they should lose an hour or two than we should have to..."

"No." Potter said firmly. "Not Dudley. He shouldn't have to forget."

"You can make me forget?" The Dursley boy stopped wolfing down his chocolate and stared at Shackbolt. "All of it?"

"Do you really want to?" Harry asked quietly, and Snape had learned too much in the past day not to recognize the hurt in the soft voice. "All of it?"

Dudley bit his lip. "No," he said at last. "Not all of it." He smiled crookedly, and met his cousin's eyes. "There's parts of it were kind of interesting I guess. I mean, I learnt all sorts of things about owls." He pulled a silly face, and then grinned, and Harry grinned back. Snape restrained the urge to pinch his nose, which was still tender. *Please don't let them start burping again.*

"See," Harry said to Shackbolt. "You can leave Dudley alone."

"I'd just as soon Mummy forgot though," Dudley was quick to say. "And Daddy. I don't think they like being animals."



Vernon Dursley was grateful to be put back into his own shape, but he'd have been more grateful still if he hadn't ended up crouched hands and knees on the dining room table. It creaked unnervingly and he scrambled off of it quickly, only coming up short when he found himself nose to wandtip with a huge black stranger, whose smile was quite as unnerving as Professor's Snape's scowl. "Er..."

"Have a seat, Mr. Dursley," the stranger invited, indicating a pair of chairs that had been set aside. "Your wife will be joining you shortly."

"Ow!" A young woman with ridiculous hair was carrying something over to the table. "Keep biting and you can stay like that."

"Is that Petunia?" Vernon asked, feeling a small spark of hope try to light itself. He didn't know if it was something about being a toad, but he'd been having the worst nightmare of his entire life, and he was still feeling chilled.

"It will be, if she has the sense to cooperate," Snape said. He had his wand out too, Vernon noticed, and Harry was negligently wielding yet another of the dreadful things far too close to Dudley. Dudley, he saw with some relief, seemed to be unharmed, but the freaks had him sitting in the kitchen, away from any protection his parents might offer.

Petunia must have heard, because she let herself be placed on the table, and much to Vernon's relief the only spell that anyone cast at her was one which turned her back to herself. With four wands pointed at her, she had no choice but to crawl off the table and come to sit next to Vernon. He put an arm around her, uncertain if she was trembling with anger or cold. Her lips were pressed tight together, and her eyes were snapping in a way that

Vernon knew usually presaged a sharp word — but she took hold of his hand and kept her mouth closed.

"What do you think?" The black man asked Snape. "Two hours? Three?"

"Wait," Snape said. "Might as well clear the ground before you cast the charm. Leave nothing undone for them to forget."

"What else needs doing?" The girl asked. "You've cleaned up most the mess."

Did Snape hesitate, just for a moment? Vernon wasn't sure. "I think Potter needs to be taken elsewhere. Somewhere he can recover. Somewhere he'll be properly cared for."

"Recover?"

"He was poisoned," Snape explained, and Vernon saw Dudley flush and duck his head. "Accidentally, of course," the tall wizard added. "And although the poison has been dealt with, he still needs a week or two of sleep and quiet. Unless the Muggle authorities are involved, I doubt he'll get it here."

"You'd c-c-call in th-the-the authorities?" Vernon stammered. "But you said..."

"That it would be inconvenient," Snape snarled. "Fortuitously, we have other options. Potter should be safe enough elsewhere."

"No," said Harry flatly. "I'm not going to go anywhere I'm going to get Ron or Hermione or someone else killed. At least this house is protected."

"And you've seen for yourself the limitations of those protections. The place to which we would send you has better."

"I'm not going," Harry said.

"It has of course the downside of having to endure the company of your *dear* godfather," Snape sneered.

Vernon had never seen that look on Harry's face. Never. "You'd let me go to Si.. to see him?" the boy asked joyfully.

"He's in the company of others, some of whom I trust to have your best interests at heart." Snape turned his dark regard upon Vernon and Petunia. "The same can not be said of these two." Vernon resented that. He'd always had the boy's interests at heart. Although perhaps not in quite the same way that Snape meant. He squirmed a little under Snape's stare, wondering if the dratted freak could read minds and trying not to think of the night he'd spent in the cupboard. They were going to make him forget, were they? Well that bit could go and gladly.

Snape tipped his head to one side, crowlike, and then gestured at Harry, giving an implicit order. "Go and fetch your clothes and things. Dursley, help him."



Harry couldn't believe his luck. It was almost worth being sick to get a chance to go and talk to Sirius properly. The two Aurors started arguing with Snape almost the moment Harry and Dudley were out of the room, but he didn't bother to really listen. If Snape was desperate enough to think of Sirius Black as anything like proper company for Harry, then the place where Sirius was hiding had to be safe enough to hide the Crown Jewels and half of Fort Knox. Maybe Dumbledore would be there too.

"Harry?" Dudley's hesitant question brought him up short as he started climbing the stairs. He stopped to look down at Dudley, who was nibbling at his lower lip. "Didn't you say that your godfather is a murderer?"

"Accused murderer," Harry said. "They never had a trial. And besides, I've met the wizard he was supposed to have murdered." Twice, he thought, and some of his happiness slipped away. Fat lot of good it had done to show Pettigrew any mercy.

"So he's not dangerous?" Dudley asked hopefully.

"I wouldn't say that," Harry said thoughtfully. "I mean, he spent twelve years in Azkaban, and it kind of left him... changed."

"Azkaban?"

"The wizard prison. It's guarded by Dementors. Imagine spending twelve years being guarded by those things that were coming after us." Harry shivered. He'd never suspected that Dudley would be brave enough to face the things that frightened him. "Thanks, by the way. I wasn't having much luck casting that spell until you helped." It had been amazing — even better than Dudley planting a punch in Draco Malfoy's face. The patronus hadn't been his best — just before he'd fainted he'd imagined that he'd seen Prongs' antlers on top of a huge ethereal boar — but it had been good enough to hold back the Dementors. Thanks to Dudley.

Dudley colored up. "Just don't tell Mum, okay?"

"Okay."

They went upstairs together, and Dudley helped by collecting clothes onto the Big Bird blanket, while Harry changed into something warmer. Then Harry added Snape's quill and inkwell to the pile, and Hedwig's new perch, as well as his tin box and his toothbrush.

As Harry took one last look around Dudley sat down onto the bed beside the bundle and sighed. "You're not leaving anything behind this time, are you? It'll be like you've never lived here at all."

Harry nodded, trying to think if there was anywhere else he should check. "That should make things easy, shouldn't it? I mean, half the time Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon act like it anyway."

"Easy," Dudley said. "But not right." He laughed unhappily. "And Gordon's got my digital camera. I can't even take a picture."

"A picture?" Harry opened his mouth to ask *why would you*

want a picture, I haven't got one of you when he realized that that wasn't what he wanted to say at all.

Dudley was scowling. "Someone's trying to kill you, aren't they? And if something happened, there wouldn't be... I mean, I've known you most my life. I'd like to have some kind of something. A memento. You know. Something. In case." He looked up at Harry. "Not a present, or anything like that. Just... something to hold on to."

Not easy. But right. Harry sat down beside Dudley and pulled the snowglobe out of his jacket pocket. "Think you can keep this safe from Aunt Petunia?" he asked.

"But that's your mum's!" Dudley exclaimed.

"Yeah." Harry hunted for words, found them. "Yeah, but... I think the protective spell is too, somehow. And maybe this is a key piece to it. I mean, I expect you're safe enough at school and all, but if Voldemort finds this house and there's no defenses..."

"Can I see it?" Dudley asked.

Harry took a deep breath and handed it over. Even with everything that had happened he was still surprised that Dudley didn't chuck it into a wall or something, but Dudley only swirled it around and set the owls to dancing. "Look," he said to Harry, with wonder and delight in his voice. "There's someone flying round the towers on a broom."



Petunia was only certain of one thing. She didn't want to be turned back into a mouse. Not with Harry's owl perching insolently on the standing lamp and staring at her with huge hungry eyes.

Everything else however... Snape had been joined by more freaks, including a battered old lunatic with a peculiar wooden leg and a — literally — roving eye.

"We're not ready I tell you," the one-eyed freak was saying gruffly. "I don't have a team in place, and from what you say, the boy's not up to flying any distance."

"Take the Muggle's car," Snape said impatiently. "No one would expect that, and Shacklebolt knows how to drive. As long as you can get Harry in..."

"That I can do," the old man said, patting a pocket. "I've got Dumbledore's note right here."

"Then do it. And the sooner the better. If an investigation were to begin by any other department at the Ministry..."

She couldn't follow it. Except for the part about taking Vernon's car, nothing made sense. Although if they were going to use it to get Harry out of the house, perhaps she'd get lucky and they'd drive it into a wall somewhere and he'd end up in a coma. That would keep him quiet for months and they could use the insurance money to buy a new model.

Vernon was sweating beside her, but she welcomed the heat. It had been cold under the sink, and for a moment there she had almost given into despair. But she was warming now. She traced the damage that had been done to her house, remembered the shambles that the freaks had made of her spotless kitchen. Anger boiled up inside her, giving her strength.

Harry and Dudley came back. Harry had made Dudley carry a bundled blanket, and was pretending to limp, although all he was carrying was a tin box and the owl's cage. He stopped when he saw the older man. "Professor Moody? The real one?"

"Yes. You can take a sip of the flask if you're wondering." *What does he mean, the real one? Not that it matters...*

The boy edged forward, albeit nervously, and much to Petunia's disgust did sniff at the flask, although he didn't taste it. He relaxed though. "Why are you here?"

"I've come to escort you out of here, as soon as you're packed."

"Okay." Harry waved Dudley up to the table where the school trunk was waiting. They crammed everything inside, and closed the lid, but Petunia found her voice when one of the freaks waved her wand and started to float the trunk out toward the front door.

"You are not going to use magic where the neighbors can see it," she ordered peremptorily.

To her surprise the bald black freak nodded agreement. "Not the wisest thing to do," he agreed. He came forward to loom over Vernon. "I will need the key to the vehicle," he said.

"My car keys?" Vernon said. "You can't take my car!"

"I can," the freak said. "But if you don't wish for me to do magic where the neighbors can see it, I will require the key."

"Oh, give it to him, Vernon. The sooner they go, the better." Petunia was watching Dudley. The poor boy was looking very nervous. *If they've harmed one hair on his head I swear I'll pay them back.*

Given the key, the tall freak picked up the trunk and went out with the girl. That left only two of them. Snape and the scarred man. And Dudley and Harry. *Three against three.*

"Come on Hedwig," Harry said. "I know you're tired of the cage, but it's only for a little while."

Hedwig hooted and came to him. Dudley watched from the safe side of the table as Harry fixed the cage around her. He was frightened. Petunia could tell. And no wonder, with the scarred freaks eye swivelling at him like it was. *Just a little while longer, Diddykins, she thought. They'll leave soon and we'll all have a nice big dinner to make you feel better.*

Dudley met her eyes and then looked hastily away, biting his lip.

"Ready, Potter?" Snape asked.

"I think so."

"Any questions?" the other man asked.

"Lots," Harry said, looking at Snape for so long that Petunia wondered what was going through his mind. "But I don't think I'm likely to get answers," he said at last and nodded to Dudley. "Good luck with your diet."

"Wait." The word came out of Dudley like an explosion. "Wait. Just a minute." Dudley turned to Snape. "They're going to forget, right? They're going to forget everything, right up until the moment you cast the spell?"

"That is correct," Snape said, one eyebrow rising a miniscule fraction of an inch in surprise.

"Then wait." Dudley left the room, came back carrying some papers. "Here," he handed several of them to Snape. "That's my book report. I'm sorry it's not long enough, but I didn't get a chance to finish."

Snape glanced down at it, clearly startled. "There were... interruptions." He scanned the writing quickly, his eyes stopping now and then to rest at a word.

Book report? Petunia couldn't believe her ears. The freak had assigned her son something as ordinary as a book report?

Dudley turned to Harry. "You said you wanted this," he said, offering a page.

"The picture of Dobby. Yes. Thank you." Harry took the paper and folded it carefully to put into a pocket. "I'm glad you didn't forget."

"And this... uhm... this is my address at Smeltings."

What!

Petunia stared in utter disbelief as Dudley handed a second paper to his cousin and explained nervously, "I know you wouldn't write me here and I'd just as soon you didn't, but if you can use real mail, maybe you could write to me. Let

me know... let me know that you're all right and stuff. I mean, you could send Hedwig, but she doesn't like me not that she's got any reason to, and I'm afraid of her. I don't know how I could write back, but I could try."

Write? Letters?

Harry stared at the paper, nearly as confused as Petunia was. "You could send letters to the same address that the Christmas presents go to," he said. "It must work."

"I never have anything to do with that," Dudley said.

"Of course you don't! You're a child! Children get presents, they don't give them!" Petunia couldn't believe her ears. What had Snape done to her darling boy? "Dudley, what are you thinking?"

"She won't give the address to me, you know she won't. Can't you write it down?" Dudley asked, ignoring his mother, who jumped to her feet, and was only stopped by the sudden wall of black wool in her way.

"I don't know it," Harry said. "But I'll send it to you, soon as I found out. My friend Hermione's bound to know."

"Get out of my way," Petunia hissed frantically at Snape, trying to ignore the wand he had pointed at her throat. She had to get to Dudley. She had to stop him before he became a freak like Lily. "Dudley, Dudley, darling, you don't need letters from that place. Why don't I make you a nice souffle? Something to settle your stomach." She called, coaxing, but Dudley wasn't paying her any mind.

"And a picture? I mean, if you want to. Just. In case."

"Sure. I know a boy with a Muggle camera." Harry went over to the wall, took one of the pictures of Dudley down. "And I'll keep this one. Just in case."

In case of what? "Diddykins! Mummy will get it for you. Anything you want!"

"If I gave you some money, could you send me a book about magic?"

Nooooooooo! Petunia staggered backwards, colliding with Vernon, who had risen from his chair and was making small choking sounds. No! No! No! "You want to know about magic?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Dudley finally looked toward his parents, and paled, but he went on. "Something happened once. At Smeltings. Just once. I... I..." he put his head down. "I think I made it happen," he whispered, but Petunia heard.

No. No. He's never needed anything. Never wanted anything badly enough... No!

"Petunia...?" Vernon's voice was cracking. "Our... boy..."

"Don't worry about money," Harry said. "I owe you about four Christmas presents already. And don't worry about the book. I'll find something." He put a hand on Dudley's shoulder. "It's all right. I expect even Muggles can do a little magic when they're scared enough."

Dudley let out a breath he'd been holding and pulled Harry into a one armed hug. "Don't get killed."

Harry hugged him back, red to the ears. "See you next summer." The black bald man came in. "We need to go," he said.

"We're coming. We're coming." Harry pulled away from Dudley and grabbed Hedwig's cage, limping hastily into the night.

Petunia barely saw him go. She was still staring at Dudley, wondering what had gone wrong. Vernon was backing away from her, asking questions. Questions she had no answers to. *Bad blood? But it was Lily. She was the one...* How had she failed? What would she do? She couldn't think. Couldn't imagine...

Snape caught her by the shoulders, touched his wand to her forehead, a smirk twisting his lips. "Justice is strange,

isn't it, if occasionally inconvenient?" he said so softly that only she could hear. "I can't think of any fate that might serve you better than you have been served tonight."

I can. End it. Turn me into a mouse.

She stared into the bottomless black eyes, waiting.

Better to be a mouse and be eaten than to have failed.

"You don't deserve this," Snape told her. "Oblivate!"

FINIS



LACINAPPE: A LETTER TO SMELTINGS

DEAR DUDLEY (you never thought you'd ever see me write that, did you? Me neither!),

Here is the book you asked for. Hermione says that of all the books that her parents got when they first found out she was a witch, *MAGIC FOR MUGGLES* was the one that made the most sense, even though it does sound pretty patronizing. I read it and she's right — even though I wish someone had given me a copy when I first got my letter to Hogwarts, because I certainly was confused, the way it's written kind of sets my teeth on edge. But if you can ignore that, it's okay. And the pictures won't move unless you tap on them three times deliberately so you don't have to worry about other people seeing it. (The picture of me won't move at all. Colin promised he did it the Muggle way.)

Hermione says can you do me a favor and check on the Internet (she can't use it at Hogwarts because electrical stuff like computers don't work here) and see what you can find out about mermaids and mermen, especially Marmenill and Margygur? Some kinds of merfolk are in my book on magical creatures, but most of the northern ones disappeared after a conference that the wizards held in 1750 about hiding magical creatures from Muggle notice, and Hermione thinks that maybe they decided to hide from wizards too because they're shapechangers like werewolves are. But Ron says that he's heard stories about them, and they're not really like selkies or mer-

rows because they're not seals in their other shape but a kind of siren and really dangerous because they come ashore and every few generations they have to have human husbands and wives in order to have kids like selkies do, only their kids don't always go back to sea the way that selkie kids do. They're not like the merpeople who live in the lake by Hogwarts, anyway, because I've seen those and they've got scales like fish do instead of fur like a seal would and anyway, they can't change shape.

When you get a chance write me a letter and let me know how your diet is working and how school's going and stuff. The address is...



THE FOSSEGRIM

COLOPHON

The layout and formatting of this document was done in Adobe InDesign, Red Hen Logo is adapted from a design by the incomprable Marwan Aridi, modified in Macromedia FreeHand and Adobe Photoshop. Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop. Frontpiece was created in the DAZ Studio. The marbled paper texture is from ArtBeats.

The Fossegrim illustration opposite is adapted from a work by Ashtyn Botterill, posted on the internet.

Fonts used in this publication: for body text, the Rogliano Pro family by TipoType. Also used is Fancy Celtic by Dan X. Solo of Dover Publications, for drop caps and page numbering. P22's FLLWTerracotta Extras is also used. PYRS Fontlab Ltd.'s Broadley is used in the embedded graphics.

Special mention should also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book. More than a decade later, their layer styles still constitute one of my first go-tos.

Graphics design by J. Odell (J0del@aol.com)

Author's note: I direct you to the articles in wikipedia on "Steller's sea cow", "nictating membrane", "siren", and "mermaid", and suggest that if you start googling Norway or Iceland and mermaids and sirens you'll end up being as lost on the net as I am.