

The Slytherin
Study Group



Year 4
by rabbit & Jinx
Adventures in FanFiction

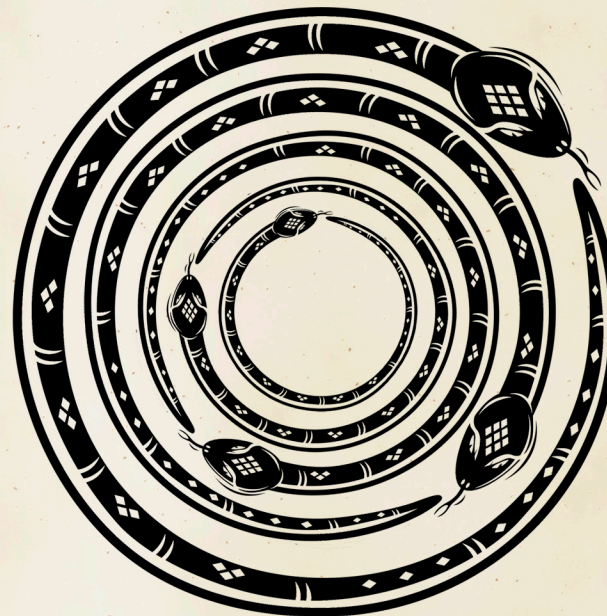
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AN ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION EDITION

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The Slytherin Study Group



Year 4

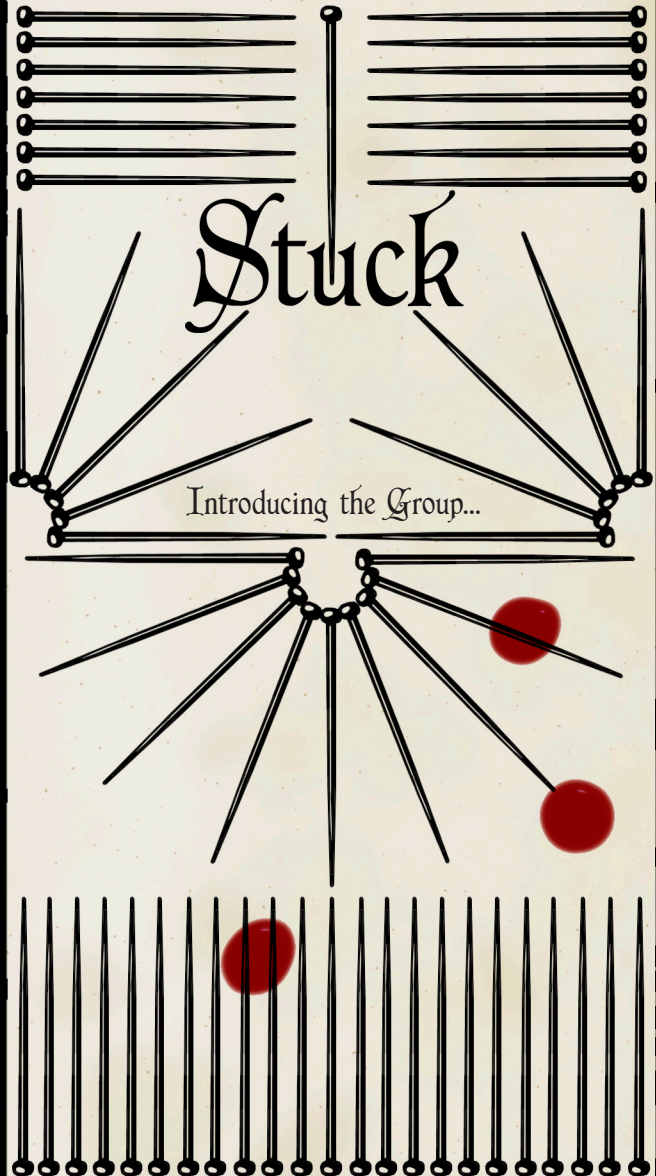
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Stuck

Introducing the Group...



Stuck

This is rabbit's fault. This spun off of "Balance."

And too many chocolate chip cookies.

The characters and places are not our doing. The vignette is. Please don't sue us, we spent all our money on chocolate chip cookies.

THEY COULD HEAR SNAPE'S TANTRUM coming all the way down from the dormitory, echoing along the corridor that led to the Slytherin Common Room.

"Transfigurations," Lucius Malfoy bet, holding up a galleon.

Gavin Goyle lifted his head out of his Charms textbook and blinked up at the coin, then slowly produced one of his own. "Charms."

Vincent Crabbe looked at them, and frowned, and returned to his Herbology reading. Severus was good at Herbology, which left that right out.

A small, thin boy whose school cape made him resemble nothing so much as an irate bat stamped into the room, lugging two ponderous tomes, and flung himself



and the books along the full length of the nearest couch.

Goyle, who didn't fancy a lapful of greasy hair, quickly moved to the table Crabbe had claimed earlier.

Snape let out a sort of snarling sigh of absolute frustration. *"It doesn't make SENSE! And I've done the reading – TWICE now!"*

"What's that, Sev?" Lucius inquired, turning the galleon thoughtfully in his hand.

"I could TURN the bloody hedgehog into a pincushion if she'd just give me a cauldron and three hours!"

"Pay up," said Lucius.

Goyle tossed over a galleon; Lucius caught it in midflight.

Snape was still ranting. *"Look deep, she says! How'm I supposed to look deep when she won't let me cut it open?"*

"If she'd let us cut it open, all I'd need would be five minutes and a bit of sawdust." Lucius shrugged. "There's your pincushion."

"Wretched things," muttered Snape.

"Which wretched things would those be, in particular? Anyone I know?" inquired Narcissa Beauregard, who always seemed to show up when Severus was pitching a fit; she enjoyed making things worse, and it was just too easy.

"Hedgehogs," supplied Goyle glumly. He too had yet to succeed in the assignment, and the test was tomorrow.

"Oh... transfiguring them?" asked Narcissa.

"No, we're training them to dance," grumbled Snape. "Of course transfiguring them!"

"It's not going well," allowed Lucius.

"Mine bit me," said Goyle.

"Mine had an accident on the desk," muttered Crabbe. "I think on purpose."

"You have to make them *want* to change," Snape mimicked McGonagall's snippy instructions. "What am I supposed to do, *think* like a hedgehog?"

"Maybe we could force *them* to read these dry old texts," suggested Lucius.

"That could inspire change," grumbled Snape, "or outright madness..."

"I did fine with mine," chirped Narcissa.

The boys turned suspicious gazes to her. Narcissa was not going to be Head Girl any time soon.

She smiled, enjoying the collective male attention, and shrugged. "I just told it, 'the pins won't hurt anymore, if you become a pincushion'."

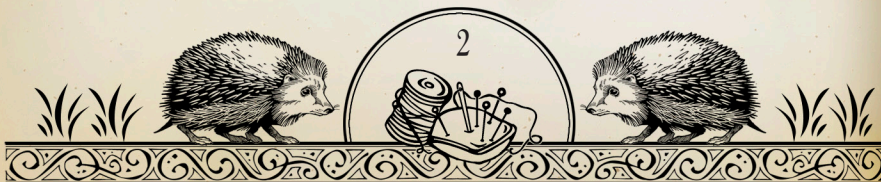


The next day, the row of Slytherins near the front of McGonagall's Transfigurations class successfully completed their hedgehog assignment in record time.

They then sat back and relaxed, and turned smug gazes on the harassed Gryffindors in front of them, who were still trying to keep their hedgehogs from crawling off the desks.

All in all it netted them fifty points for Slytherin, and the entertaining sight of Sirius Black going off to the hospital wing for treatment of a nasty bite.

The school year was definitely improving.



Stuck
in the Muddle
with You



Stuck in the Muddle with You

"Stuck" suggested a sequel...

Please don't sue us, we spent all our money on chocolate chip cookies.



THEY COULD HEAR SNAPE'S TANTRUM coming all the way down from the dormitory, echoing along the corridor that led to the Slytherin Common Room.

"Divinations," Vincent Crabbe bet, fumbling a galleon out of his pocket.

"Charms," countered Gavin Goyle, who was neatly copying over the Potions assignment Snape had done for him.

Lucius Malfoy smirked at them both and wagered, "Lily Evans."

The other boys groaned and handed over their coins; trust Lucius to make a sure bet.

A lanky boy whose school cape made him resemble



Stuck in the Muddle with You

nothing so much as a neglected bat stormed into the room, hauling several ponderous tomes, and flung himself and the books along the length of the nearest couch.

The others waited politely for the inevitable outburst.

"Transfigurations!" snarled Snape, from deep among the cushions.

"You lose, Lucius," Crabbe noted with some surprise.

"Yes, to me." Snape's hand, knuckles red from cauldron steam, was raised demandingly over the back of the couch. "Transfigurations was *my* wager, and indeed that is the source of my frustration. Pay up, all of you."

Malfoy laughed and handed over the galleons, while Crabbe and Goyle looked on bewilderedly.

"Thank you," Snape's hand vanished, along with his winnings.

"Didn't think you were anticipating any difficulty, Sev," Lucius said in cool, transparent tones, "seeing as you weren't *out here*, with the *rest* of us, concentrating on our... conundrum."

"What?" Goyle yelped excitedly. "Did we manage to turn it into something besides a footstool?"

"Conundrum?" Snape sighed from the couch, "is another word for 'problem.' But of course, *dark wizards* don't have mere *problems*, right, Luke? Too common by half."

Malfoy bristled. "See what I turn *you* into, when I assume my rightful power," he growled.

"Oh, your wretched associate who excels at potions, I expect," snapped Snape. "No change, really, except I'll be,

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what, your *Dread Architect of Insidious Doom* or *somesuch*..."

Crabbe and Goyle laughed; Lucius did have a tendency to overwork his shadowy musings about his dark future. Often before breakfast.

"I don't suppose," Snape cut above the merriment, "that any one *has* made any progress with that wretched footstool?"

"No," moaned Goyle.

"No luck, Sev," Crabbe shook his head.

"I tried setting a fire beneath it," Lucius said, the edge in his voice turned against Snape. "I thought the unbearable heat might motivate it to become something that might flee the discomfort."

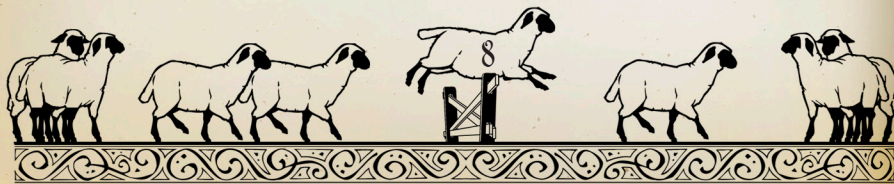
"And?" queried Snape.

"We have a scorched and rather damp footstool," admitted Lucius, templing his hands so that they would cast an ominous shadow across his face.

"Well, it's not as if it has to be the bloody *bellwether*!" Snape pointed out, hoisting himself up to glare around the room. "It just has to be a sheep! *That's* what the assignment *says*."

"Did I hear shouting?" Narcissa Beauregard inquired lightly from the doorway. "Oh, hullo, Sev," she greeted rhetorically, and made her way over to snuggle into the corner of Lucius's armchair. "I take it we've had no luck with the sheep."

"Footstool doesn't want to charm. Change," corrected Crabbe, who lately became tongue-tied every time Narcissa walked into the room.



Stuck in the Muddle with You

"Think of it as a sheep, that's the first step," Lucius advised determinedly, curling a possessive arm about Narcissa. "Like... a sheep that's got stuck as a footstool."

"You don't think it *is*," mused Snape. "Be dead helpful."

"No, unfortunately. I think it's just an ordinary, if battered, school footstool and we have to convince it to become a sheep." Lucius hooked a foot around the object of their frustration and kicked it tumbling into the center of their study area.

The footstool was indeed battered, rather moreso after a week of the group's misguided attentions, and looked absolutely nothing like a sheep. Its blue and fuchsia patterns remained cheerily uninspiring; its dented legs showed blond wounds of revealed pine; but of wool or flesh there were no signs.

Malfoy turned a baleful glare upon it. "The only things it's got right are having four legs and no brains."

"If that's all that's needed, we could turn Black and Pettigrew into a sheep," grumbled Snape.

"Wouldn't count," sighed Crabbe.

"Then it wouldn't matter when we pushed it off the parapets," Snape returned.

Narcissa rolled her eyes and interrupted before the discussion could degenerate yet again into the endless competition for Best Insult Offered A Gryffindor. "Well," she said, sharply enough to scratch glass, "if this footstool's been used like this before, perhaps it's got, you know, memories of being a sheep. Maybe that'll help."

Stuck in the Muddle with You

"Depends on what happened to it while it was a sheep, I suppose," ventured Goyle.

They stared at him, surprised by this insight.

Goyle shrugged. "Mum's got a canary that lost a wing when her brother turned it into a music box. Now it won't sing a note, and it bites Uncle Nigel whenever he goes near it."

"Marvelous," grumbled Snape. "So now we face an irate sheep, which has suffered who-knows-what at the hands of generations of Hogwarts students..."

"Assuming we can *convince* it to become a sheep at all," Lucius reminded.

"If only it were the other way round," sighed Crabbe. "Bit of work, bit of sawdust, and there you are."

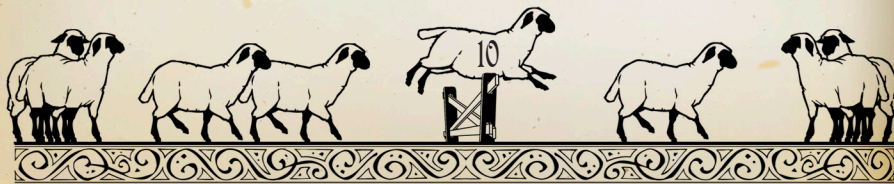
"I'm certain *that* is why this assignment requires us to proceed from inanimate to animate," grumbled Snape, dropping back down and clenching his arms across his chest.

"I don't see *why* we have to learn this," confessed Narcissa. "It's not as if I'll ever have any use for a sheep." She frowned prettily in distaste.

"Oh, certainly it sets us up for even *more* ridiculous quandaries," growled Snape. "The Seventh Years' final exam probably involves changing one of the towers into an elephant."

"But then where would we sleep?" puzzled Goyle.

"In our beds," Lucius said smoothly. "We'll transfigure Gryffindor Tower."



Stuck in the Muddle with You

The assembly laughed unkindly.

"Can you manage it while Potter and Black are in there?" said Snape, still grumbling. "Good place for them, the inside of an elephant's digestive tract."

They laughed approvingly at this, too, but in the end they still faced the problem of how to convince the footstool to become a sheep.

Narcissa frowned into the silence which had fallen, then turned her keen gaze upon the couch. "I don't suppose you've found anything helpful in all those books you're lugging about, Sev?" she wondered. "Or are they just for show?"

"Books contain knowledge," Snape explained helpfully. "When one opens them and reads them, one can extract that knowledge. You might try it sometime."

"Thanks, no," she declined with a delicate *moue*. "Why should I bother, when all we have to do is ask you, and you'll tell us?"

"At length," muttered Lucius.

"So? Anything?" she prompted Snape, while the rest of them rolled their eyes in anticipation of another lecture or two from their resident swot.

"Well, if you *must* know, *this* one," Snape intoned over the others' groans, "concerns the anatomy of sheep... *this* one is an exhaustive history of wool... *this* is our current Transfigurations text, so I don't wonder you've not recognized it... and *this* one, admittedly, is a stretch, but it covers illusion magic.... If we can make old McGonagall

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think we've turned it into a sheep, we might pass..."

Lucius laughed, not unappreciatively. "Oh, now, Sev, that is grasping at straws."

"The test is tomorrow, first thing," Snape reminded him. "Reduced to its essence, the matter is this: if McGonagall perceives a sheep, we will be given credit for producing a sheep, and therefore, we will pass."

"It's got wool ticking inside," noted Goyle, who had checked. "If we could make that grow out, it would be all woolly... just like a sheep!"

"Only a bit quiet, maybe! Here we are — !" Crabbe flicked a Chatterbox charm onto the footstool, which began bleating monotonously.

"Right, now charm it to make it move," prompted Goyle, grinning.

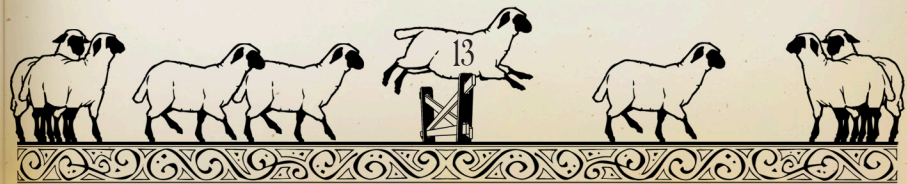
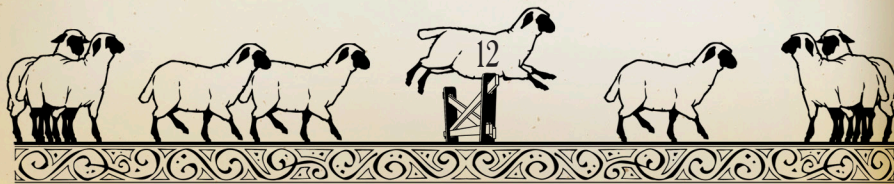
Lucius shrugged and aimed an Everdance curse at the footstool, which commenced clomping about noisily and running into the chairs.

"Oh, keep it out of the fire!" warned Narcissa.

"Whups! Yes... a pile of ashes won't save us," Crabbe allowed, herding the conundrum back into the center of the ring of chairs, which they closed about their project.

"Better," Goyle opined, watching the bumbling thing.

"Though there remains significant room for improvement," cautioned Lucius drily. "Still, if we can make it look real enough..." he mused guardedly. "Old McGonagall's not likely to cut open the sheep and find out if it's got actual guts..."



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Narcissa snickered. "Not her, she's too soft-hearted."
"We could get some, what, badger guts or something from the potions stores, right?" offered Crabbe, looking to Snape, who nodded reservedly. "Tuck them inside."

"I'm certain she *would* investigate the innards of a stinking sheep," Snape said flatly.

"Charm them to be fresh," proposed Narcissa.

Snape was still shaking his head. "The odor would be detectable through the fabric.. and she *is* a cat," he added, "at least half the time."

"Yes, when she's not busy being a sour old bitch," sneered Lucius.

They laughed heartily at this, and at the footstool which continued to clump about emitting plaintive baas.

"Oh, shut up, ewe," growled Snape good-naturedly.

Lucius laughed. Alone.

"So," Narcissa resumed the topic at last, "do we believe this illusion magic idea will work, really? I mean, it's two in the morning, and we've got a long way to go from where I'm sitting."

"It might," Snape said hesitantly. "Crabbe, *do* shut that thing up." He waited until the footstool fell silent, then looked at Lucius and Narcissa. "You two are good at charms... and hexes," he said thoughtfully. "Can we find some way to.. to hide it, really, sort of like... putting it under a sheep-shaped umbrella of magic?"

"Possibly," replied Malfoy. "But what if she reaches for it? Inspects it? She may not touch the insides, but the out-

Stuck in the Muddle with You

side – well, you know how McGonagall's keen on detail."

"Fine. Then we... we make it as sheep-like as possible," fumbled Snape. "So it fits the 'umbrella' precisely..."

"Hmm," Lucius narrowed his eyes in thought. "Not a bad idea at that. We could... if we could change only the *shape* of it... make it stretchy, pull it out like taffy... that'd get us to the basic form..."

"Oh, good grief, that's almost as bad as the assignment!" moaned Crabbe. "Even if we use the ticking for the wool, d'you know how many different things we'd have to affect? You're talking about stretching and shaping all the bits at once: wood and cloth, not to mention nails – and you know iron's hard!"

"Yes," cut in Snape, who was clinging to the back of the couch, staring at the footstool and calculating wildly. "So you have to affect them *all*...have to unite the elements in a harmonious combination and convince them to submit to the catalyst's influence..." Nodding once to himself in affirmation he scrambled off the couch and raced off to his cauldron.

"Right," Lucius slumped back against his chair and kicked the bumbling footstool over towards Crabbe. "That's lost us *him* for the next few hours. What other ideas have we got, in case our resident muck-meddler manages to poison himself again?"

"Well," Crabbe said, putting a heavy boot on the footstool to keep it from trying to burrow under his chair. "If it's not *too* bad a poison, we could all have some and



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spend the morning in the infirmary..."

"It's certainly worth considering," allowed Lucius.

"Oh, no it isn't! Not for me," Narcissa scowled prettily. "I saw you lot with those horrible green spots! Even your owls had them!"

Lucius grimaced. "Well, we've had a little chat since then, Sev and I, about remembering to crack open a window..."

Goyle and Crabbe nodded agreement, looking grateful. Their room had smelled like charred mangoes for a week.

"Come on," Lucius cajoled the group. "Think! We need results, and we need them before breakfast!"

Called to battle, they resolutely took up their wands, and turned their attentions and spells once more upon the bumbling, woolly footstool.

By three-thirty in the morning the study group's ranks were nearing a split, with two in favor of stubborn exploration of all possibilities because they weren't going to look like fools in front of that desiccated Gryffindor bitch, two in favor of working some minor hex and spending the exam time in the infirmary, and one off probably lying senseless under a cloud of purple mist.

The footstool was not much improved.

They'd gotten the wool a bit thicker, and managed to knot some of it into the shape of a tail, but on the whole the thing still resembled an ambitious dust-bunny trying to crawl back under the chairs.

Goyle groaned, watching the conundrum's antics. "It's *still* horrible!"

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"We'll keep at it," Lucius informed him in steely tones.

Goyle sighed and nodded resignedly, with a yawn. "At this point I'm about ready to just go and *find* a sheep and use that," he muttered, rubbing his eyes wearily. "Be ever so much easier, and we'd actually get some *sleep* tonight..."

Lucius turned an aquiline gaze upon him. "You're absolutely right."

"He is?" Crabbe asked tiredly.

"Yes," declared Lucius. "Simple and effective. Well done, Gavin. We go *get* a sheep, turn it into a footstool – I'm more confident we can do *that* – and tomorrow morning we simply... release it back to its natural form," Lucius expanded, spreading his hands to show the ease of it.

"Hey presto!" enthused Crabbe, grinning for the first time in hours.

"Where would we find a sheep?" inquired Goyle. "I mean, 'round here."

"In a field, I suppose," said Narcissa.

"There are sheep in the paddock near the castle," Lucius informed them. "They keep the lawns looking well."

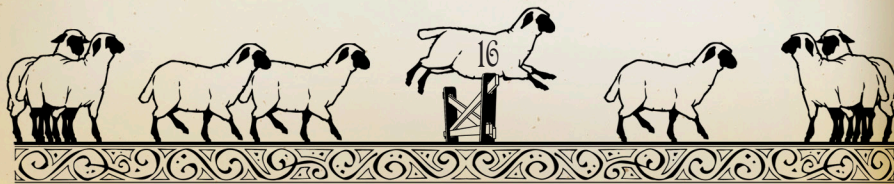
"I thought that was House Elves," said Crabbe in confusion.

"No, they keep the sheep looking well," Lucius corrected him.

"You seem to know an awful lot about it," cooed Narcissa.

"I like to notice things," Lucius returned, casting an appreciative eye over her. "One learns all sorts of interesting things, that way."

She smiled up at him and kissed him sweetly enough to make the other boys pretend to gag, which made her grin.



Stuck in the Muddle with You

Snape bustled back into the room, vial in hand. "Keep your mind on the assignment, will you, Luke? It's nearly three in the morning and we still need a sheep —"

"Good to see you on your feet, Sev," Lucius kept his grip on Narcissa as he greeted the other boy. "It's past three, and we're going to go and get one. You're just in time to help."

"Sorry?" Snape blinked at him.

"We're going to get a sheep from the paddock near the castle," explained Goyle. "Then we'll bring it back here..."

"Turn it into a footstool..." added Crabbe.

"I've got some boots with deliciously wicked heels... they'll convince it nicely," Narcissa interjected with a smile. "Easy as hedgehogs."

"And in the exam we just let it go back to being a sheep," Malfoy finished over Narcissa's shoulder.

Snape stared at them, then cast a calculating glance at the galumphing footstool and stashed away the vial in his robes for another time. "It does seem feasible. Just how do you propose we accomplish this?"

"Simply enough," Lucius took charge. "Here is what we're going to do..."

By four-thirty in the morning, there was just enough light to fly by, and four figures in black cloaks swooped low on their brooms, like a quartet of bats flittering through the pre-dawn haze.

It had taken Malfoy and Snape over an hour to sneak themselves and Crabbe and Goyle out of the school, evading the various nocturnal perils of profes-

Stuck in the Muddle with You

sors, caretakers, ghosts, and accursed Things which prowled the hallways after sunset. Narcissa had opted out, claiming a need for beauty sleep and as usual convincing Lucius to do her work for her.

"Right... there they are!" Malfoy pointed to a fluffy mass roiling up a nearby hill. "We'll grab a small one and be back in no time!"

"Do you actually understand that these are not *really* small animals?" queried Snape, grimly clinging to his broom as they dove towards the rambling flock.

"I'd thought," Crabbe called, catching them up, "that they'd all be asleep at this hour!"

"I thought *we'd* be asleep at this hour," countered Goyle, lagging behind a bit. "Wrong on both counts!"

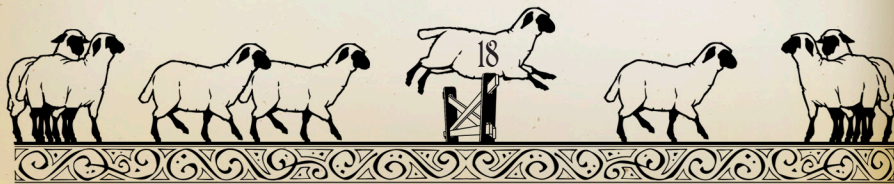
They came in low over the sheep, who were bleating in alarm and trotting in all directions... several of the animals promptly wheeled away from the airborne wizards and commenced hurrying back down the hill.

"Look out!" cried someone from the ground. "They're coming back!"

Malfoy and Snape shot one another a dark look. "Lupin," they identified in chorus.

"There'll be at least two of them," Lucius cautioned, gaining altitude quickly and motioning the others to follow. They convened at about sixty feet, out of the range of spellcraft. "Right," said Lucius, "are there any other sheep near enough?"

Crabbe shrugged, nearly losing hold of his broom.



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"You were the one who knew about these, Luke. I haven't seen any others."

"Not like you'd notice, really," said Goyle, shaking his head. "I mean, until tonight, we've never needed a sheep."

"Tonight is today, gentlemen," Lucius informed them with a grimace. "All right. There are at least two of those wretched Gryffindors down there, and I wouldn't be surprised to find all four of them. Here is the plan: we go in hard and fast, grab a sheep, and get back to the school. Try not to tangle with the Marauders, but defend yourselves if necessary."

"Do you understand that sheep are not really *small* animals?" Snape asked plaintively.

"Do you have a better plan?" demanded Malfoy.

"Look, we'll just levitate the beast," Crabbe said reassuringly.

Snape shook his head. "That's what I'm trying to tell you! If we use *spells* out here at this hour, the *least* we'll do is alert Hagrid, if not half the faculty. We'll be detention bound before you can say 'Quidditch!' We're going to have to *lift* the sheep up somehow... preferably in a cloak, or something, as I've been *trying* to say all alo —"

A rock hit him in the shoulder, startling the lecture to a close and knocking Snape off his balance; his broom rolled over twice before Malfoy caught his cape to stop the momentum.

"Morning, lads!" called Sirius Black, hovering on his broom some thirty feet away and grinning like a fool. "Out for an early flight? Better tie that cloak to his

Stuck in the Muddle with You

broom, Malfoy, before he falls off!"

"Very nice, Black," Lucius returned coldly, "get a bit of murder done before breakfast; start the day right..."

"All right for *your* family, maybe," taunted Black, "but we're a bit better than that!" He laughed and darted away as Lucius took a racing grip on his broom and headed after him like a stooping eagle.

Crabbe and Goyle were left to deal with Snape, who was now swaddled neatly in his cloak and cursing a blue streak as he tried to extricate himself without losing hold or control of his broom. They managed to untangle the furious wizard, and had just got Snape set properly upright again when the sounds of a fight broke out; Black was no match for Lucius's flying skills and had been run to ground.

"That's torn it," Crabbe moaned, then looked startled at the sound of Snape's cloak ripping as the other boy snarled and bent his broom towards the fray, vengeance in his eyes. He looked uncertainly to Goyle, who shrugged and led the way in pursuit of their angry fellows, arriving to the happy sight of Malfoy kneeling Black in the small of the back, forcing the taller boy to arch backwards in pain just in time for Snape to come in low and knock Sirius halfway into next week with the handle of his broom.

Snape halted his broom, turning to enjoy the spreading bruises on his downed rival. "How's that grass taste, Black?" he jeered.



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"Let's find out!" James Potter blurred into the melee, snagging Snape by the torn cloak and yanking it over his head to flip Snape sprawling into the grass and muck.

Snape growled, but had the sense to stay down as the other Gryffindors arrived, grabbing his wand from his pocket and raising it defensively.

"Oh, go ahead and throw a hex, you little greaseball," blustered Peter Pettigrew, who had recently grown into some height, attendant girth, and regrettable attitude. "See what happens next!"

"Don't!" Lupin, who was helping Black pull himself upright, waved his free hand for caution. "We'll *all* get detention, and I mean *awful* detention! We're not just out of our dorms, we're out of the *castle* — !"

"He's right," Potter pronounced, sounding as usual like he was sure he'd been anointed the voice of wisdom. "And we'd have detention *together*, so... best not risk it, gentlemen!"

"You *attacked* us!" charged Malfoy, voice muffled by the bloody sleeve he held against his nose. He had a marvelous black eye coming in.

"Bit of fun," tossed off Black, trying to remain blasé as he wobbled about. He had a terrific goose-egg rising on his forehead, and his eyes looked a bit unfocused.

"Bit of mayhem," grumbled Snape.

"Oh, Snape." Black eyed him unevenly. "Fancy you down in the muck. Expect it'll take a month before you think to wash it out of your hair."

"Now, the really *interesting* thing," intoned Lucius,

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signalling Crabbe to give Snape a hand up, "is that we've discovered no fewer than *four* brave Gryffindors out molesting sheep in these quiet hours before dawn... Seems all those nasty rumors are true, eh?" He'd gotten a grip on his broom, just in case flight might be needed, but with the wall of Crabbe and Goyle's muscle backing him, all the Gryffindors offered were outraged looks. He granted them an elaborate smirk.

"At least we're not inbred," said Pettigrew sourly.

The Slytherins burst into disdainful laughter at his pitiful effort. "Pettigrew," Malfoy opined dismissively, "your so-called family tree is a stunted weed. The sort of thing *better* people step on, and never notice."

Black took a stagger forward, fists cocked. Lupin and Potter hauled him back by the shoulders.

Something called eerily from off in the Forbidden Forest, and all eight boys froze, listening.

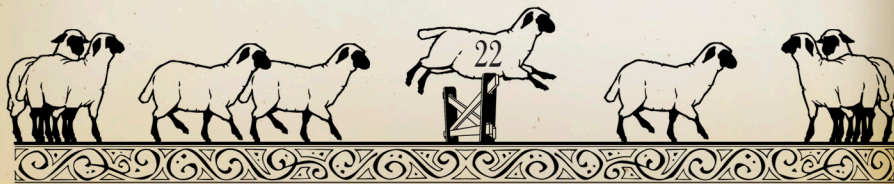
"You know," Lucius said, briskly when the call didn't come again. "As much *fun* as it might be to stand here taunting one another, I'm all for continuing the effort at a later hour. Inside."

"What's the matter Malfoy?" asked Pettigrew. "Afraid something might come flying out to bite you? Don't worry, it would just spit you back out."

"In two pieces if we're lucky," added Black.

"Which would give *us* time to run for it," noted Lupin happily.

"When you're quite finished?" demanded Lucius, impatiently. "We've got some 'business' to attend to..."



Stuck in the Muddle with You

"You can get hung for sheep stealing, you know," said Lupin, with a grin.

"Not anymore," Snape snarled. "And don't start," he snapped, glaring at the Marauders. "You are *also* having difficulty with the assignment, and intend borrowing a sheep for the Transfigurations exam, or you'd not be here."

"We've got... possibilities," said Black vaguely, but he didn't look certain of them.

"Yes, possibilities of failing," sighed Potter, guiding his broom cautiously closer to the line of Slytherins. "Look, here's the way of it. We take a sheep, and you take a sheep, and nobody mentions this."

"Done," said Lucius.

"Right, here we go..." Lupin headed up the hill towards the sheep.

"Careful, Remus! You... you're approaching them wrong, or... something," cautioned Potter. "They get all nervous..."

"Guess we know who's been frequenting the sheep paddock," snickered Crabbe to Goyle as they moved up the hill. Goyle nodded absently, trying to figure out how the sheep could run in all directions and still stay bunched up as a flock.

Black, apparently recovering, smacked Crabbe on the back of the head as he passed by. "Let's get this done, lads!" he exhorted the rest of them. "I'd like to get *some* sleep before this exam!"

The two groups sorted themselves out and started up the hill after the sheep, who milled about anxiously and

Stuck in the Muddle with You

began trotting away in a nervous bunch that parted amoebalike to flow swiftly past their pursuers and escape whenever the boys got them near a fence or a corner.

"Hold still," Lucius crossly commanded the flock.

Crabbe and Goyle stopped. The sheep didn't.

"Get them!" cried Potter, leading an all-out charge.

This was easier said than done...especially without wands.

Pettigrew yelped. "It trod on me!"

"They do worse than that," grumbled Black, shoes squelching as he struggled back up the hill. "Don't grab them 'round the middle."

"The front end bites," noted Crabbe unhappily.

"Maybe if we put a cloak over one's head?" Potter suggested.

"Wrap another around it," added Malfoy.

"Definitely tangle the legs," recommended Lupin.

They attempted this.

Eight of them together could not manage it, although had they been cooperating, they might have stood a chance.

The sky soon pearly silver above a dismal tableau of eight harried boys outnumbered and thwarted by some forty-odd bedeviled sheep – which had definitely had enough of this nonsense.

Sheep did bite. Hard.

"How'm I going to explain this?" demanded Goyle, while Snape wrapped Goyle's injured fingers with a handkerchief.

"Transfigurations accident," Snape told him, firmly



Stuck in the Muddle with You

binding the swollen digits together. "Anyone *else* bitten?" he asked dourly, and then with more hope, "Black?"

"Not yet, Snape," Black assured him, stumbling when one of the sheep knocked him into another, and then barely keeping his feet as he slid sideways across the increasingly slippery mire. "You?"

"Quite fine," Snape replied, smirking.

"Yes, because you're not going *near* the things," whined Crabbe, slogging by.

Snape folded his arms and scowled. "I see no point in wading into chaos. If you'd all just hold still and be quiet for a few minutes, they'd calm down. Then maybe we could break a couple off from the rest of the herd and capture them."

"Spoken like a true predator," Lucius praised, huffing as he trudged up the hill once more. "Well done, Sev." He clapped his friend on the shoulder and stayed there for a moment, catching his breath and getting his bearings.

"It's worth a try," Potter agreed, stumbling over. His shirttails were out and his hair stuck up even more wildly than usual. "We're not having any luck chasing them."

The other hunters wearily agreed, and they tried holding still.

It was boring.

They couldn't even pass the time by trading insults, although they were all just saving them up for later.

At last, the sheep began to settle down. A few of

Stuck in the Muddle with You

the most enterprising bent their heads to graze upon what grass hadn't been churned up by their attempted abductions. The sky blushed rose. The sheep were almost idyllic, wandering peacefully closer to the waiting boys, their woolly coats softly tinted pink by the promise of dawn.

A horrible shriek split the air.

"What the hell was that?" Black cried, looking about wildly.

Everyone was looking about wildly.

"Nothing good," opined Potter.

"*DRAGON!*" screamed Lupin, pointing.

It came spiralling distantly out of the roseate sky, golden scales gleaming in the new light, a hideously beautiful vision of power, soaring on wings of reflected flame... and its lazy path would bring it straight towards the flock of sheep.

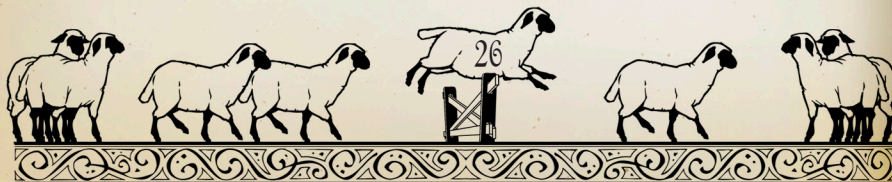
The flock panicked, bunching up tighter around the terrified wizards in their midst and nearly knocking them over as it sought a direction to escape.

"It's after the sheep!" shouted Potter.

"It's after breakfast!" cried Malfoy. "We should *leave!*"

"We'll never make it! We can't outfly that thing!" shrilled Pettigrew.

"*Merlin!* We're trapped like rats!" Black struggled to keep his feet, tugging at the wand that had caught in his pocket, as the sheep pushed on past, leaving the boys between the flock and the dragon.



Stuck in the Muddle with You

"FOOTSTOOLS!" hollered Snape. "It wants the sheep! Turn them into footstools! If THEY DON'T WANT TO CHANGE NOW, THEY NEVER WILL!" he screamed and hit the dirt, hauling his cape over himself and all but vanishing into the muck.

Lucius flung himself flat, only his wand-wielding hand visible from below his cape. "He's right! If it doesn't see anything moving, it should go away!"

Potter swung his wand and transfigured the nearest sheep, "HURRY UP!" he exhorted, watching the dragon. "THAT THING'S JUST LOOKING THE FLOCK OVER, HURRY UP!" He threw himself to ground, hiding beneath his cape and aiming spells at terrified clumps of sheep.

The others followed suit, frantically changing potential meals into furniture as the sheep began to scatter, deeply confused by the appearance of upholstery in their midst. The last woolly lamb was hit by six spells at once, and there was a moment of intense silence. Then they heard the gigantic flap of wings, and the dragon swooped over them, its blast of fiery breath close enough to singe the ground and their sodden cloaks. It let out a horrible bellow of disgust and spiralled away into the sky, moving off in the direction of Hogsmeade.

It was quite a while before the boys collected themselves.

"I'm never sneaking out at night again," said Pettigrew quietly.

"Can't recommend it," muttered Black, prying himself out of the mire.

"Don't see what the problem is," Potter said cheer-

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fully, brushing at the muddy hoofprints on his cloak. "No one's died, after all."

"No one's even been maimed," Lupin said drily. "For a wonder."

"That dragon shouldn't even exist," Malfoy said, charming his cloak perfectly clean.

"Oh, really?" Goyle's voice quavered.

"I mean it," Lucius snapped. "It shouldn't exist. I've never seen anything like it in my studies."

"Tell the dragon that, will you, Luke?" grumbled Snape. "We were better off with my idea. At least that wouldn't have been as likely to get us all *killed!*"

"I don't know about that," Lupin said, surveying the hillside with satisfaction. "Any road, now we've got footstools a-plenty. We'll just take two, change the rest back now, and change the other two to sheep for McGonagall."

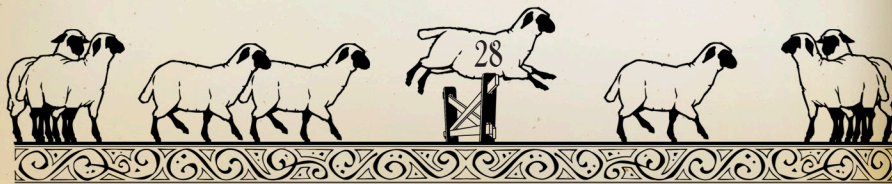
"Hear, hear," sighed Pettigrew. "We might even have enough time for hot baths, before breakfast."

"For once we agree," said Malfoy. "Right. Get that one," he directed his lieutenants.

"There's a nice one," Potter said, selecting a nice pouffe.

The two groups collected their furniture and gazed at the footstools decorating the ravaged hills. At least, most of them were footstools. Some were hassocks, three were wicker moras, two were tabourets and just on the rise was a really fine mahogany credenza.

"Do you suppose we really ought to turn them back?" Crabbe said. "After all, we could get caught —."



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"If no one's noticed us using magic yet, I don't want them coming out here for an early morning constitutional and starting to ask questions," Malfoy said, transfiguring the nearest footrest back into a sheep, which let out an offended bleat and trotted away down the hill.

It took a few minutes, but the sheep were certainly motivated to escape the young wizards, and soon the flock — minus two — had retreated to the valley.

"Right," said Malfoy. "Back we go."

"And quickly," said Potter.

The two groups spared sleepy glares for one another, pried their brooms out of the mud, and raced the dawnlight back to the castle.

Well," Professor McGonagall said thoughtfully to the first two rows of her class, "those certainly are very filthy sheep you've created."

"Added verisimilitude, Ma'am," said Lucius Malfoy.

"I see," McGonagall walked slowly around first one sheep, then the next, wincing as she caught a whiff of unwashed wool, "to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative," she went on, with a sudden wintry smile. "Well, Daisy, Ellie Sue, this seems to happen to you every year."

Five Slytherins and four Gryffindors stopped breathing. Lily Evans shook her head with an "I-told-you-so" air.

"Class," announced McGonagall, "it seems some of your fellows have undertaken the most difficult route to transfiguration of a footstool into a sheep." She smiled at the rest of the study groups, even those whose ani-

Stuck in the Muddle with You

mals were somewhat misshapen or still upholstered. "You will note that this has met with success, but the peril and cost were great...as you are about to observe."

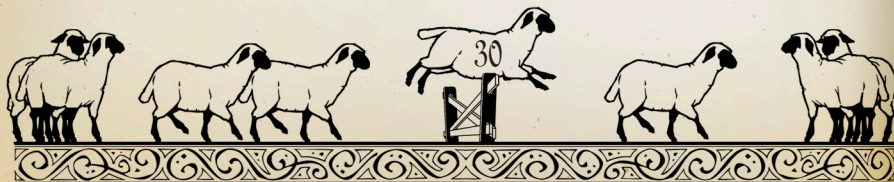
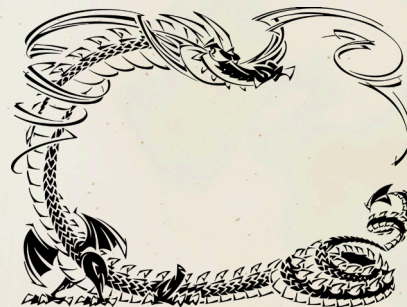
She gestured with her wand, and a disc widened in midair before the class, its surface swirling like a scrying pool.

"Oh, no," moaned Black.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Black. Your little excursion was observed, and recorded for this morning's entertaining enlightenment." She cast a baleful, amused glance over the miscreants. "You didn't honestly think that the faculty wouldn't be watching over the sheep paddock on the eve of this exam, did you, gentlemen?"

Narcissa laughed, since she had excused herself before the trouble began in earnest. Lily Evans put her head down on the desk in despair of her housemates' judgment.

"Now, then," McGonagall invited the class, as the scrying disc smoothed into an image of a darkened hillside, "set down your wands and pay attention to this recollection of the morning's events. I'm sure we'll all find it *most* interesting..."





Ramifications



Ramifications

Actions, even desperately stupid ones, have consequences.

...hence, this sequel to "Stuck" and "Stuck in the Muddle with You"

The characters and places are not our doing, with the exception of Professors Keele and Woodwalker, here on holiday from one of Jinx's tales. The vignette is, as usual, the fault of our overactive imaginations (an entire gallon of Haagen Daz has consequences — especially when eaten with chocolate chip cookies.)

Please don't sue us, we spent all our money on chocolate chip cookies.



F

RIDAY, WHICH HAD BEGUN BRIGHT and early with the disastrous footstools-into-sheep Transfigurations exam, had gone downhill from there... with all the dreadful grace and relentless force of an avalanche.

Bad enough that the entire class of Fourth Year Slytherins and Gryffindors (except for Malfoy, Snape, and Black, who failed to see any humor in the display) had laughed themselves sick over the recorded events of the sheep paddock... but then McGonagall had shown the recording to the Fourth Year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, who had also found it hilarious. And she



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had proceeded, throughout the day, to show it to the classes of Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh years. Every group had delighted in the presentation; evidently it had been decades since the sheep-stealing plan had gone so spectacularly awry, and the fact that the fiasco had involved Malfoy and Potter's interminably skirmishing gangs... together... was just too delicious to be ignored.

And it hadn't been.

The 'Baa'ing in the corridors had started just after Transfigurations, and then trailed the wrongdoers throughout the day. Even the First, Second, and Third Years had gotten into the act.

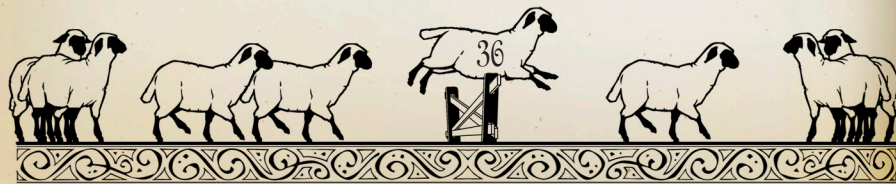
Martin Weasley and his rowdy bunch had kept finding opportunities to race past one group or the other, shouting, "*Dragon! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES – but mind the footstools!*"

Someone charmed Lupin's cape all woolly, which he seemed to find very funny indeed, lowering at Lily Evans and intoning, "I'm really a wolf, you know!"

Somebody hexed a woolly tail onto Pettigrew, who hurried red-faced to the hospital wing to have it removed.

A footstool tap-danced into their afternoon Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Malfoy spent the rest of the session tormenting the thing under his desk, leaving a pile of splinters behind when they were released to go to supper.

When the sheep thieves entered the Great Hall at dinnertime, the baaing was deafening. One wit (probably Martin Weasley) had found a sheep bell and was clanging it with enthusiasm.



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The Gryffindor miscreants grinned and capered like fools, accepting the mockery as if it were thunderous applause; even Pettigrew, now *sans* tail, got into the act and looked pleased with all the attention. The Slytherins went to their places with determined dignity.

Someone had put little sheep dolls on their seats.

Lucius Malfoy snatched up one offending toy and pointedly ripped its head off as a warning to the rest of the table. Mud and grass geysered up from the sheep's severed body, covering Malfoy and his lieutenants Crabbe and Goyle. Snape, who had been trailing sullenly behind, was merely spattered.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I present the stars of the sheep paddock!" roared Titus Maingache, from among the Sixth Years. "Thought you looked familiar!"

Malfoy, muscles working in his jaw, charmed himself clean and cast the wretched doll under the table, where with any luck the cats would tear it apart.

Crabbe and Goyle knocked the dolls on their seats under the table too, where they exploded, calling for another round of cleaning spells. Snape levitated his over in front of Titus, who took it calmly and bounced it off the wall to show that it hadn't been loaded. The disgraced foursome took their seats beneath the general merriment. There still seemed to be a lot of noise over at the Gryffindor table – probably their idea of witty repartee, for it culminated in Remus Lupin hopping up onto the table and shouting, "*All right, all right,*"



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PLEASE! *We can't be any more sheepish about all this!*"

For some insipid reason the Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables applauded. And some of the younger Slytherins.

Up at the Head Table, Professor Woodwalker tapped his glass for silence. "It's good to see you all so cheerful on a Friday evening," he greeted the student body, in his warm, rolling lilt that blended the Caribbean with the North Country. "I've trust you've all had a pleasant day, and are looking forward to the trip into Hogsmeade tomorrow."

Beneath the general cheering, the apprehended wrongdoers scowled at one another; they had detention tomorrow, seven o'clock sharp and expected to last all day.

Woodwalker droned on interminably, citing the usual caveats and last minute assignment changes, before finally turning to the center of the table, "Would you like to do the honors, Professor Dumbledore?"

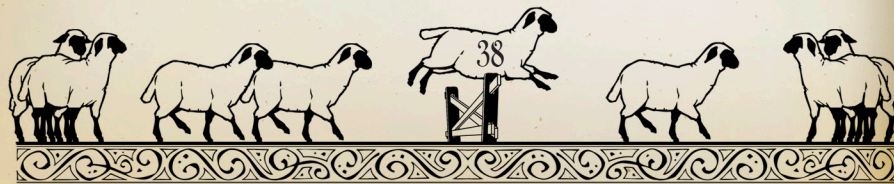
"Indeed," the Headmaster smiled, eyes twinkling, and summoned dinner.

It was lamb chops.

Eight heads ducked beneath the wave of howling laughter that rolled through the hall. Even the teachers were laughing. McGonagall had to wipe tears from her eyes as she caught sight of the mortified sheep rustlers.

"You know," muttered Snape through clenched teeth, arms folded, staring fixedly at his boots, "I really am not hungry. I think I will go to bed."

"You're going to walk out of here, right now, all



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alone?" murmured Malfoy, cheeks burning.

Snape shrugged. "Why not? I've done it before." James Potter and his crew had an uncanny knack of making things go horribly wrong at dinnertime on Fridays.

"Actually," Gavin Goyle said in muffled tones of encouragement, "they're quite tasty!"

"We stay together," commanded Malfoy, watching his duller lieutenants munching on lamb chops. "Stay put, Sev. If you walk out, you'll only miss dinner as well."

Grumbling, Snape complied, tearing angrily into a chop.

At least the chops *were* very good.

"What do you suppose we'll have for detention *this* time?" asked Crabbe, after a while.

"Something closely supervised," Snape said at once, "seeing as it's us *and* Potter's gang together." He scowled and speared a pile of green beans with particular viciousness.

"Something messy, I'll bet," Crabbe offered. "Make us show up in our best robes and then have us get all mucky." It was a safe bet. Since Dumbledore wouldn't let Filch hang students by their thumbs anymore, most of the detentions had involved some kind of demeaning physical labor.

Lucius looked down the table to where Narcissa Beauregard and her girlfriends were Pointedly Ignoring Those Who Got Caught. He sighed and pushed mint jelly about his plate. "You don't think they can make us repair the sheep paddock, do you?"

"No need," Snape told him. "I saw Woodwalker and his greenhouse groupies out there this afternoon."



Ramifications

"Good old Huffies, always there to clean up the mess," sighed Lucius. "So... what... you don't think he'd actually send us into the Forbidden Forest, do you?" he ventured, gray eyes gleaming like a falcon's as he looked to Snape.

"Nice try," Snape returned drily. "Luke, you've been hauled out of there eleven times! You're personally barred from going within fifty yards of the Forbidden Forest! No one, for any reason, is going to let you go in there and nose about!"

"Pity... those were brilliant excursions," reflected Malfoy, sipping his pumpkin juice.

"All right for you," Snape grumbled. "I didn't wake up for two weeks after the *last* little holiday jaunt you took us on in there..."

"I told you to dodge *left*, Sev," Malfoy returned easily.

"Yes, and you meant *your* left - "

"Ridiculous - "

"True!" snapped Snape. "No I do *not* think we are bound to venture into the Forbidden Forest. Or *anywhere* that they can't keep an eye on us *and* the Gryffindors. It'll probably be something tedious, humiliating and -"

"Oh, no! Not bedpans again," Crabbe groaned.

Lucius impaled a bit of lamb with his fork. "Probably."

Goyle looked glum. "All right for you, Luke," he sighed, "you got out of it last time."

"Can I help it if my father called me home suddenly?" Lucius looked angelic as he recounted, "Family emergency, simply dreadful business, cousin Lucrecia was frightfully ill..."



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The others cut their eyes disbelievingly at him. Lucius switched from angelic to martyred in a blink. "...and, yet, incredibly, when I came back to school, I *still* had to shelve books in the library for *hours*!"

"That would be nice," sighed Snape, resting his chin in his hand and idly eating green beans. "Unfortunately, given the infractions of which we're guilty, we'll be lucky to *only* be cleaning the bedpans. It'd be more like the entire hospital wing." He shrugged unhappily, resigned to his fate. "We've been caught out of bed, out of our dorm, out of the castle, which implicates us for roaming the halls at night... vandalism to the paddock..."

"That was the sheep's doing!" said Lucius angrily.

"Not without our help," Snape said. "And then of course there's unauthorized and unsupervised use of magic, our only saving graces there being that we were on school grounds and we were attempting to complete an assignment... Let me see," he mused, sitting back to thoughtfully tick off transgressions on his fingers. "Oh, yes, flying without permission or supervision, fighting whilst airborne, fighting in general with blood drawn during the fray... all of which contributes to conduct unbecoming Hogwarts students... and of course there's always failing to obtain proper authorization to bring animals other than familiars into the school."

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were staring at him.

"Isn't that enough to get us expelled?" Goyle asked hesitantly.



Ramifications

"Not with Luke's dad on the Friends of Hogwarts Committee," Crabbe reassured him. "I think we've outdone ourselves, gentlemen!" He raised his glass in a toast, which was matched by no one.

Malfoy cast a baleful, calculating gaze at Snape. "Wretched little rule-minder, aren't you?" he sneered. "You'd be an absolute martinet as a professor. Can't wait to see you as a Prefect next year." He scowled wryly. "We'll be sick of your voice in two weeks flat."

"Well, actually..." Goyle began, and was silenced by a glare from Snape.

"So, do you think they'll expell the Marauders?" asked Crabbe in an excited undertone.

Malfoy snorted. "No such luck. With all the events recorded for posterity, they can't expell them without expelling us... and that's *never* going to happen."

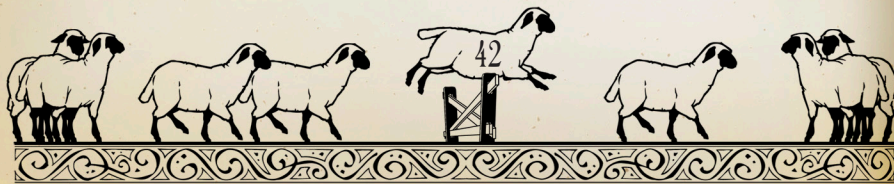
Crabbe looked disappointed, then shrugged and returned to his meal, cleaning his plate just in time for dessert to appear.

Fluffy balls of meringue baked into sheep shapes came gamboling down the table, pursued by a very elegant marzipan dragon.

Beneath the sea of laughter, the transgressors took out their aggressions on the sweet beasts, dismembering the sheep and carving ruthlessly into the dragon's tail.

It helped.

A little.



Ramifications

RAMIFICATIONS CHAPTER 2

Canon characters and places are all, of course, JKR's. Please don't sue us. We spent all our money on chocolate chip cookies.

Have you tried those new chocolate chip cookies with the thick layer of vanilla crème layered between each pair? We have. The following is a direct result.

AFTER DINNER, AND HOMEWORK IN the library, the four disgraced but sleepy Slytherins headed for their dorm room.

As they reached the door, Lucius suddenly held up a warning hand. "Wait."

"Whyever for?" Crabbe whined. "I'm done in, Luke."

"You don't think they've done anything to our room, do you?" Goyle asked. "They wouldn't dare. I mean, Luke's father and all that."

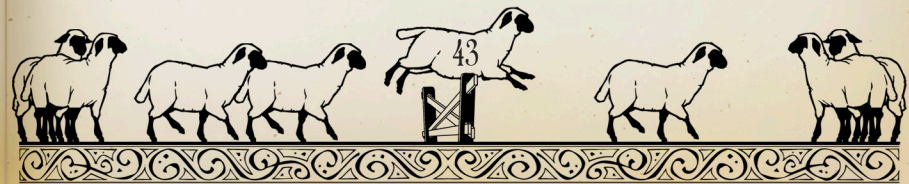
Snape sighed and drew his wand. "*Which House* are we in?" he asked flatly.

Crabbe sighed and drew his own. "Must be restful, being a Hufflepuff."

Lucius clapped Goyle on the back. "Since you're so sure it's safe, *you* go first."

The Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Years *had* been there, probably let in by the Prefects, who had all heard more than enough about Mr. Malfoy's wealth and power and how Lucius would escape the usual punishments.

The quartet of Fourth Years gazed around them with dismay.



Ramifications

All of the fabrics in the room – bedcurtains, blankets and tapestries alike – had been changed into cheery childish prints of fluffy, smiling sheep. The pillows had been turned into overstuffed sheep dolls, and were leaping happily from bed to bed. All but one, which was contentedly eating a scarf.

"Hey, that's mine!" Goyle hurried over to his retrieve his garment, and almost immediately lost a tug of war as the scarf vanished inside his opponent. "Give it back!"

Malfoy stalked to his bed and shoved a sheep off of it, flipping back the blankets to survey the pyjamas which had been neatly stored beneath where his pillow usually rested. The pyjamas were now sunshine yellow, and printed with the same chubby cheery sheep as the room's décor.

"That's torn it," growled Lucius. "My best silk pyjamas."

"They're not torn," encouraged Crabbe, looking a bit bewildered as he approached his own bed. "And they're still silk. They're just... yellow... and they've got sheep on, now."

"*They were black, and they HAD dragons!* HAND-EMBROIDERED DRAGONS!"

Crabbe turned away from Malfoy's anger, and rummaged about to produce his own pyjamas, now bright red and covered with happy sheep. "Well, at least you're not alone, Luke," he ventured, gaping at his sleepwear.

Goyle's pyjamas were sky blue and heavily clouded with sheep.

"I don't even want to know," growled Snape, flinging himself into his favorite chair.



Ramifications

Goyle grinned and turned to Snape's bed, rummaging under the blankets. He pulled forth a woolly button-up sleeper complete with a hood with pink-lined ears, and a bright blue ribbon reading "First Prize" sewn round the collar.

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle burst into howls of laughter, collapsing onto their respective beds.

"Oh, that'll look precious on you, Sev!" chortled Crabbe gleefully, clutching his own sheepwear.

"Oh, *absolutely*," intoned Lucius, tears trailing down his face. "Severus Snape, bellwether of the ball!"

"Hey, look! *It has* got a little bell, as well!" Goyle tinged the tiny golden bell, making it jingle merrily.

Snape flew at him, screeching, to snatch at the offending garment. He tripped over a gamboling pillow, and sprawled beside the bed, hands catching only blanket hems as he went down. He abruptly scrambled to regain his feet, jumping up onto the bed just before a small stampede of crudely transfigured slippers came charging out from under the bed, across the rug, and out the door, bleating, "Caaaan't caaatch meeee! Caaan't caaaatch meeee!"

"Those were our slippers," Crabbe said with dismay, looking out into the stairwell. Peals of laughter drifted up from the common room below, and he shut the door hastily.

"Which were *also* hand-embroidered silk," Malfoy seethed. "They've bespelled *everything*."

Snape collected himself, and his dignity, hopped off the bed and stalked over to the fifth bed, which had once belonged to chatty little Hugh Fortinbras. Hugh



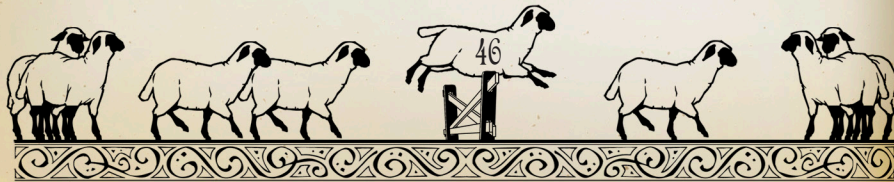
Ramifications

had managed to offend Malfoy before they'd even put the sorting hat on; after a very long first semester, Fortinbras had scurried home for Christmas Break and had mysteriously failed to return. Now his bed served as the repository for all the other boys' oddments. Snape pushed back the hideous purple be-sheeped bedcurtains and pulled out his cauldron, inspecting it carefully. It did not seem to be a sheep. It did not seem to have any inclinations to become a sheep. He didn't trust it. With a sigh, he collected an armful of books instead. "Good evening, gentlemen," he bade his comrades. "I'll be in the dungeons, doing extra credit work. Don't call me. See you at seven tomorrow."

Kicking a frolicking pillow out of the way, Snape hauled open the door, sidestepped the returning flock of bedslippers, and left his fellows to a long night's work of shepherding.



They had to improvise pillows, using their second-best school cloaks. Whatever enchantments held the pillows in sheep form, they were too strong for even very determined Fourth Years to break, and the sheep got very cranky about their attempts. Simply blasting away left the boys with a pile of scorched feathers, a charred pillowcase, and Goyle's somewhat lacier scarf. They put the ruined pillow bits under Snape's blankets, as a sort of thank-you for his support.



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Trying to improve matters by changing the various colors of the fabrics only made them more garish, and the trio gave up when Goyle's pyjamas achieved a nice shade of maroon with aquamarine sheep. In a strange way, they looked rather well on him.

The only thing that really improved the colors was dousing the lights, which mercifully also made most of the sheep settle down, bleating softly for a while before subsiding into relative silence.

"What's that sort of... *chewing* sound?" asked Crabbe into the darkness.

"The sheep are eating the carpet," answered Malfoy. "Let them. It's hideous, and they're almost quiet."

"You don't think they'll try to eat *us*?" worried Goyle, pulling his bedcurtains tight.

"Sheep aren't carnivorous. They don't eat meat," Malfoy assured him.

"I've been bit twice now!" Goyle protested.

"Yes, but they didn't tear off chunks and swallow, did they?" Malfoy pointed out.

"Well... no..."

"Stop worrying," Malfoy commanded. "And go to sheep... *sleep!*"

Crabbe and Goyle obeyed as usual; Malfoy stared into the darkness for awhile longer, contemplating revenge until he drifted off with visions of thumb-screws dancing in his head....



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They were woken a while later by the conveniently-numbered sheep.

The creatures were little, but they were loud.
And nimble.

Each sheep was about the size of a bludger, and bore a glowing number on each flank. The fluffy things moved in a determined line, leaping and scrambling up the side of a bed so that each sheep could bleat its assigned number repeatedly as it hopped onto and over a sleepless student, before jumping off that bed and racing to another.

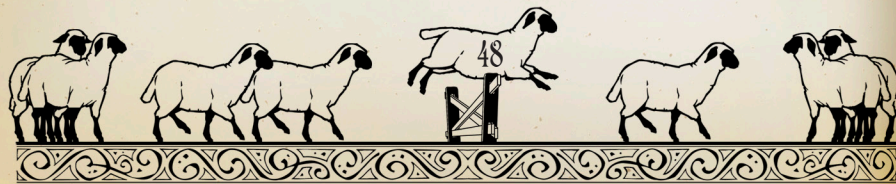
Presumably, the spell's authors had run out of ingredients, time or interest, for the sheep stopped at seventy-three and the lot of them began to repeat their path precisely, starting with Sheep One, which, when finally caught, was discovered to have a little blue collar and a bell. Malfoy used the tiny bellwether to lead the lot into Goyle's trunk and slammed the lid on them.

After that the soft scattered baaing and quiet munching could well be ignored by three exhausted boys who had been up most of the previous night.



Promptly at midnight, Snape's cauldron turned into a bewildered ram with magnificently curled horns, which began a low, loud, insistent bellowing.

Ignoring school policy, the beset boys had been



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sleeping with wands held ready, and they startled out of sleep and beds, already uttering defensive spells against whatever was making the horrible loud noise.

Several of their spells actually hit the ram. Some of the hexes bounced, and most of them failed. They did, however, succeed in changing the noisy ram into an *angry* ram.

"Where is it?"

"I can't see it!"

"Lumos!" Malfoy cried, and then, "Look out, you're —" as he was hit by a Petrificus Curse of such desperate force that it blew the illuminated wand right out of his hand in the instant before he toppled over like a felled tree.

The ram, now able to see its tormentors, lowered its horns and charged.

Crabbe, who was now glowing a particularly bright shade of blue, showed great initiative in a crisis, grabbing his fallen captain and using Malfoy as a barrier against the ram as he and Goyle slid hastily under Goyle's bed.

There was a thud, and an ovine moan, and the ram retreated in stunned confusion, shaking its head to clear it.

Goyle and Crabbe looked in utter dismay at their inert and fortunately quite petrified leader. There was only one thing for it, now.

"Sev!" Crabbe shouted in a cracked soprano as he threw an unaimed levitation charm over Malfoy's elbow. "Sev! Help!"

"He's not here!" Goyle reminded him, half an octave higher, working up his nerve to peek out into the room.

Silence met his plea, punctuated ominously by the ram's



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angry huffing which seemed to come from everywhere.

"He left us! He left us!" Crabbe hyperventilated.

"Wait! Where's the goat? What happened to the goat?" Goyle shrilled, then screamed when the ram slammed back to the floor in a clatter of hoofs, its beady eyes glowing with fury, its snorting nose not six inches from Goyle's.

Crabbe yelled and flattened himself behind Malfoy, throwing another levitation spell that sent the ram sailing upwards long enough for him to grab Goyle and retreat with him to the farthest corner beneath the bed, awkwardly wrestling Lucius along in tow.

They huddled together, catching their breaths.

And then shrieked as what felt like a thousand caterpillars ran all over them, and it was not for a long minute that they realized that the dustbunnies had been transformed into teeny sheep, which now were running riot because of all the fuss.

"It never ends," moaned Crabbe, watching them with a stunned expression. It was getting harder to see them, as his blue glow was fading.

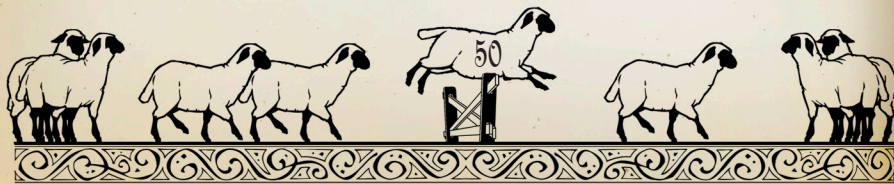
Out in the middle of the room, shadows moved curiously around Malfoy's illuminated wand; the bedslipper sheep had come to investigate this new apparition in their grazing pasture.

"Do sheep eat wood?"

"Goats do," Goyle said unhappily.

"What goat?" asked Crabbe, peering about nervously.

BLAM! The ram hit the floor again. It wasn't pleased.



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"That one!" Goyle crammed himself backwards as the angry ram slammed against the side of the bed, shifting it all the way to the wall. The boys retreated, Crabbe hauling Malfoy.

Goyle was more concerned with the large, unfriendly ram. He pulled at Crabbe's sleeve, earning a yelp from the other boy. "Wait, look, Vince," he said happily, "it can't fit beneath!" He pointed to the encouraging sight of the ram, unable to wedge its huge horns under the bed and come after them. "It's all right! We're saved!"

Crabbe returned his smile, nervously. The dustbunny sheep tickled, but were not a threat. The ram was bolluxed.

But...

Lucius was still petrified.

And the sheep might be eating his wand.

Uneasily, Crabbe looked into his captain's unnaturally still face. He tapped Goyle's shoulder and asked quietly, "D'you remember what happened, when you come out of a Petrificus curse? I mean, to put you in it?"

"I didn't, the last time," Goyle answered, frowning.

"But then, I hit my head on all those stairs.... "

"Well... I mean... if you *do* remember..." Crabbe swallowed drily. "He'll be that angry — "

Goyle paled.

"Wait, wait," Crabbe fumbled for salvation, "maybe we can blame it on the Sixth Years! Titus! He's always making trouble!" Titus had actually once called Lucius a Pompous Git, and survived, although Lucius swore it was



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only due to the excruciatingly slow action of the poison.

"That might work! Worth a try," offered Goyle. "Anyway, we've got to do *something*... we can't just leave him like that 'til morning! We probably wouldn't last the night, and if Professor Keele has to come in here and un-hex him —"

"And sees the room," moaned Crabbe.

That would be BAD.

They thought of Fortinbras. They didn't want to go the same way as their ex-roommate. They'd always figured Sev would be the next to disappear for *Irritating Lucius*.

Crabbe aimed a hasty spell. Malfoy's pyjamas turned chartreuse.

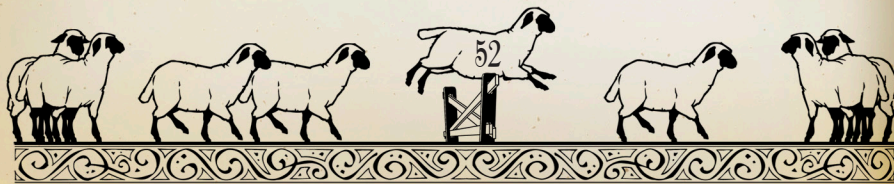
Flustered, he bit his lip and tried again. The muffled incantation turned the sheep on Lucius's pyjamas puce.

"Oh, give over! Let me show you how," blustered Goyle, aiming his wand and successfully turning Malfoy puce. He stared at this result, and desperately hoped it was a trick of the light from Crabbe's fading glow. "Well, they match..."

"Remind me to beat Sev up, will you?" growled Crabbe, pushing Goyle aside. He managed to turn Malfoy back to his usual color, except for the hair.

"Right, now I've got it," insisted Goyle, aiming round Crabbe and determinedly casting another countercharm onto Malfoy, whose pyjamas turned yellow, with hand-embroidered black sheep.

"Better," murmured Crabbe. "Keep at it!"



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Four aggressive spells later, Lucius jerked alert, shouting, "*going to hit ME!*" He banged his head on the bedslats and curled up, cursing volubly but emptily.

The ram charged the new strange noise, rocking the bed up slightly as Malfoy flipped over to find himself staring at a furious animal bent on his destruction. The bed slammed back down.

Crabbe and Goyle grabbed the bedslats and hung on, counterweighting the bed. Malfoy backed into them, clutching his head. "*What happened? What happened to ME?*"

"Titus Maingache," said Goyle and Crabbe, too quickly. "One of his specials," added Crabbe, figuring he might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. "Really obnoxious curse, just froze you right up... we've got the ice off you, now...."

"Where's my wand?" demanded Lucius.

Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other, and then across the room to where Malfoy's wand lay mostly unattended. One of the bedslipper sheep was mousing it thoughtfully.

"That *thing* is not eating my wand," growled Lucius, snatching Crabbe's wand from his hand. "*ACCIO WAND!*"

Malfoy's wand leapt from the carpet and hummed through the air, fetching the ram a sharp crack just behind the ear as it dove towards its owner's hand.

Chaos ensued.

Even Lucius's spells couldn't stick to the ram for more than a minute. They had to give up and concentrate on



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not letting the creature knock the bed out of the corner.

Eventually it gave up. With a disdainful snort, it jumped up onto the wreckage of Snape's bed and settled down for a nap, just where it had the best view of every possible escape route.

The slipper sheep, which had been disturbed by the fray, settled back down to demolishing the carpet, with only an occasional nervous "baa," coming as counterpoint to the ram's snores.

After awhile, Malfoy crawled forward and glared from under the bedskirt at the dozing ram, trying to ignore the shrill bleating of the tiny dustbunny sheep that refused to be shooed out from under the bed and had taken to gamboling lightly over the rolling hills which had come to their underbed pasture. With a grimace, he plucked two of the things out of his sleeve and softly ordered, "Crabbe, see if you can't sneak out, very quietly, and get the door open without waking it up. We can go sleep in the Common Room."

"What, with Titus and everybody?"

"They'll laugh themselves sick!" whispered Goyle, dismayed.

"Would you rather be out there, or in here, amid the fall of Rome?"

"What?"

"Do it!" Malfoy hissed, shoving his lieutenant forward. The ram was a very light sleeper.

After the third attempt to sneak out from under the bed,



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they gave up and dragged Goyle's blankets down, to make nests where they might be able to snatch a few hours of sleep.

The dustbunny sheep were delighted, and got absolutely everywhere. Crabbe got one lodged in his ear.

The bedslipper sheep discovered that they liked to eat pyjamas.

The irritable ram didn't change back until dawn.

RAMIFICATIONS CHAPTER 3

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Chocolate chip cookies: they're not just for breakfast any more!

AT HALF PAST SIX IN THE MORNING, the survivors of a very long night straggled towards the Great Hall, to attend the Detention Breakfast.

The school handbook called it the Early Breakfast, but everyone knew: it was the Breakfast of the Doomed.

There was only one table around which to gather, and only one choice of entrée.

They were getting very tired of porridge. It was wholesome. It was beige. It was... uninspiring. Perhaps most importantly, it was *not* rashers of bacon and eggs.



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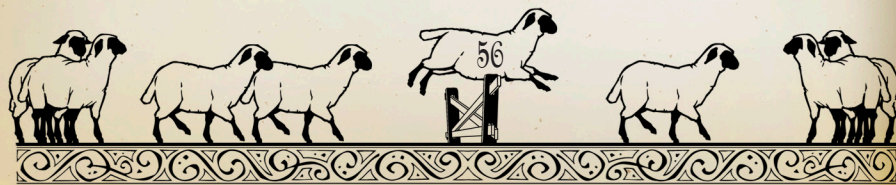
The house elves, fanatically eager to please even the Disgraced, always provided an exhaustive cruet of condiments, including honey, butter, cinnamon, sugar, marmalade, applesauce, Tabasco sauce, tartar sauce, fish sauce, piccalilli, horseradish, cactus mince... and other things, which no one had ever dared eat. Even Goyle had not risked the lumpy blue-green stuff, particularly not since Crabbe had sworn he'd seen it twitching.

In lieu of salvation, there were eighteen kinds of jam to smear upon the multitudinous racks of toast, which were arranged like sympathy cards at every place, as if to apologize for the wholesome porridge.

Add to all of this a motley array of offenders, guaranteed to be waspish and disgruntled, and the day inevitably got off to a rousingly dismal start.

Well. At least one could walk the plank with one's dignity intact. Lucius Malfoy straightened his spine, thought of his heritage, and lifted his pointed chin high, determined to maintain strict decorum... even if anyone *did* have the temerity to inquire why his hair was puce.

He spared a suspicious glare for Crabbe and Goyle, who were trailing woozily after him, allegedly doing their best to stay awake. Crabbe was mostly intact – except for his socks, which resembled mummified Swiss cheese – but Goyle was definitely looking the worse for wear. His hair had been nibbled away in patchwork clumps all along the left side, and he'd had to squeeze himself into Crabbe's second-best uniform



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because everything in his own wardrobe had been chewed into hair nets by the sheep they'd locked in there; even his boots looked ragged.

Idiots. They probably were to blame for his hair. They certainly hadn't been able to help him change it back, and Sev hadn't shown up yet to help. Not that he was going to entrust any matter involving *hair* to Severus Snape. But Sev was really good with countercurses, and might have some insight into whatever the twin lumps had done with their careless wandwork. Whatever kind of hex had hit him, it was so stunningly inept that he couldn't comprehend it, let alone counter it.

That could be useful, if either of the fools ever admitted to knowing whatever they'd done during last night's ovine onslaught... which had ended only with the sunrise, perhaps twenty minutes ago.

It had been a long and singularly miserable night. And the ram hadn't gone quietly.

Malfoy stopped abruptly and signalled his weary lieutenants to attention. "Stand up straight," he ordered, "and no talking." The other two nodded obediently. "If anyone asks, one of Sev's experiments went wrong."

His minions nodded, looking somewhat relieved. Lucius granted them a curt nod of approval, and waited.

They looked at him dully.

Goyle got it first, and hurried to grab one of the iron handles to the huge wooden doors of the Great Hall; Crabbe scurried into place a moment later, and they hauled open



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the doors so that Lucius could stride briskly forward.

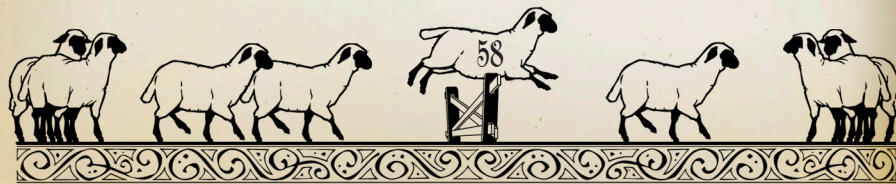
He was greeted immediately with a rousing chorus of song. "*When I'm calling ewe-e-e-e-e-e-e!*" trilled nearly the entire Gryffindor Quidditch team, who had laid claim to one end of the table. The idiots were grinning as if they'd just won a finals match, watching eagerly for the Slytherins' response.

"Got dismissed from the Quidditch team and joined the chorus, have you?" Lucius asked coldly, his tone carrying cleanly through the near-empty hall. "I must say, you're failing miserably at this new endeavor, as well... "

They burst into another merry chorus, louder, hoarser, and brutally off-key. Malfoy, patently unscathed, led his companions to the end of the table farthest from the supposed serenaders, using the time to inspect his fellow detainees.

There was a larger crowd assembled than he'd expected: the annoying Gryffindors, as well as three of their younger Housemates (but no sign of the Marauders, as yet)... several interHouse couples, engaged in the sort of activity which had gotten them detention in the first place... two older Slytherins (unjustly not including Titus Maingit) (and no sign of Snape, either)... a mortified Ravenclaw, hidden behind a thick book... and at the very end of the table, in Malfoy's intended seat, a confused Hufflepuff, who no doubt had wandered in because his alarm clock had gone off early.

Lucius strode over and leaned in a distressingly



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friendly manner against the table, holding a knife of a smile over the intruding boy. "Give over," he ordered.

The little Hufflepuff blinked up at him. "I'm supposed to be here," he squeaked. "I've got detention." He looked like he was going to cry.

"Oh, have you? Well done," Lucius encouraged, nodding. "Now move!"

The Hufflepuff froze. Lucius sighed; his weariness had got the best of him, and now he'd terrified the boy. How tiresome. Scowling, he snapped his fingers to summon Crabbe and Goyle, who lifted the Hufflepuff right out of his chair and deposited him into a seat beside the Ravenclaw girl, who kept her gaze fixed upon her book.

Malfoy seated himself neatly, setting aside the Hufflepuff's abandoned breakfast. Crabbe and Goyle returned, rather scanting their Intimidating Glares at the rest of the company as they dropped into their places and dove into the fare, Goyle taking possession of the Hufflepuff's orphaned porridge.

Lucius served himself a clump of the porridge that was *good enough for me, boy, and if you don't like it, then don't earn detention* and sniffed disdainfully. Gruesome stuff. Fortunately, with enough milk and a pint of honey on it, it became nearly edible. Grimly, he pried up a spoonful and began *Building Character*.

Maybe if he wrote to his father about the horrid dry toast...

Or the appallingly seedy character of the blackberry jam...

Voices came softly from the corridor, and Genevieve



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Goldberg, Hogwarts's *other* resident Potions Swot, entered the hall; the Sixth-Year Prefect had striped her black hair with brilliantly sparkling gold, in celebration of Hufflepuff's thus-far excellent Quidditch season.

Lucius thought she looked like a badger with no fashion sense, but at least she had Snape with her. Goldberg had her arm snugly round Snape's shoulders, clearly steering him to his place at the table. "...really interesting results, yes," she enthused quietly, smiling down at her companion. "I wouldn't have thought to add snarkskin instead of boojam, but you were right, it balanced it right out during the seventeenth test, and it turned a perfect shade of lavender!"

"Dandelions," said Snape, staring at nothing in particular as the Prefect settled him into his chair.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Goldberg saluted Snape's roommates with cool politeness. "I thought I'd better escort him from the Student Potions Lab... he's had three tumblers full of Up All Night potion, by my count, which seriously exceeds his height and weight requirements, and he's acting a bit... odd," she admitted.

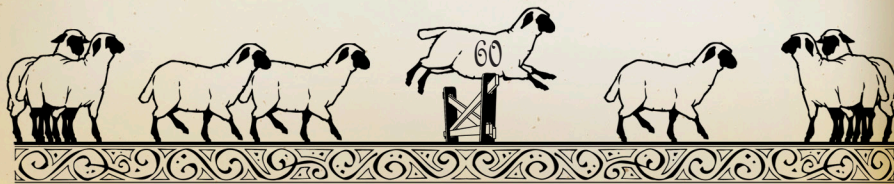
Crabbe and Goyle groaned. Malfoy rolled his eyes.

Goldberg leaned over so that her face filled Snape's field of vision. "All right, Sev?" she asked encouragingly.

Snape smiled at her. "Hi, Jenny!"

"Hi, Sev," she replied amiably. "Listen," she went on, clearly and slowly, "you've got detention, remember?"

"I've got detention at seven," he announced, sounding like a trained budgie.



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Come to think of it, the resemblance was striking, beak and all.

"Yes, seven this morning. Here, Sev, eat something, it'll do you a world of good." She set some porridge before him, placing the spoon into Snape's hand. He looked at both with a faint glimmer of understanding, followed by a thoughtful frown. "There you go, Sev," Goldberg encouraged, drawing back. "All right, now. Good luck. And thanks for your help! That really worked!" She offered him a cheery, supportive smile. "I've got to get back to that Bracing Cold Brew before it thaws! Bye, Sev!"

"Hi, Jenny!" Snape said brightly.

Malfoy sank his head into his hands, all the better to glare through his fingers at his supposed intellectual support. "All right there, Sev?" he asked bitterly.

No answer.

"All right there, Sev?" Malfoy repeated, ramming an elbow into Snape's ribs.

Snape looked vaguely down, then blinked at him, then smiled. "Hi, Jenny!"

Malfoy glared at him. "Are you in?"

"In?"

"Are you there?"

"What?"

"You're out," sighed Lucius. "I'll call again."

"Not *again*," moaned Crabbe, scooping up wobbling heaps of porridge.

"He was like this *last week*, as well," groaned Goyle.



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"Wish he'd get that stuff right.."

"I'm not sure there *is* a way to get it right," Lucius snapped, buttering his toast 'til it tore. "Up All Night Potion is probably just a myth, something they talk about in class but no one can really make... probably it's a ploy to cause headcases like *him* to obsess over something harmless, so he can't be mixing up Balefire or Rotstone or the Draught of Living Death...."

"...but the liquorice acts a stabilizing element, you see," muttered Snape, stirring his porridge widdershins with careful, steady movements. "Horsehair, maybe...." He added cinnamon to the gruel, delicately tapping the container to sift its contents into the bowl.

"I thought Goldberg knew how to brew it, though," offered Crabbe. "I think it is possible."

"Anything's possible," Goyle allowed, "given that Sev's actually got a girl to talk to him."

"Arm round his shoulders, and all."

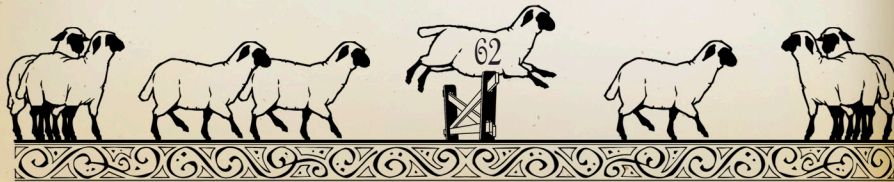
"Maybe there is something to this distracted aspect," muttered Malfoy.

"I just don't get it," grumbled Goyle, through a mouthful of toast. "I mean, *look* at him, he's pathetic."

"Oh, yes," muttered Malfoy. "Drinks whatever falls into his cauldron, just to see what it does... then wanders around looking bewildered and woebegone, with a nebulous air of inscrutable misery... "

"And girls like that sort of thing?" queried Crabbe.

"Guess so," mused Goyle, trying to look woebegone.



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"She's the third one who's walked him home this month."

Crabbe attempted to look woebegone.

"Slug spit," said Snape, and attempted to pour his toast into his porridge.

The others looked at him. Snape raised the toast and peered into it, frowning, then lowered it again and began tapping it to improve the flow. He seemed to think this was working.

Lucius sighed and snatched the toast away, flinging it down the table and demolishing the castle of toast that some of the younger detainees had started to build.

"*Here they come!*" One of the Gryffindor beaters hurried into the hall, looking delighted as he joined his fellows. "One! Two! One, two three, four!" he cued.

"WHEN I'M CALLING EWEEEEEEEE-E-E-E-E-E!" the team bellowed, even more off-key than before as the Marauders stopped, appalled, in the doorway.

"Eighty-three choruses," sighed Pettigrew, in put-upon tones.

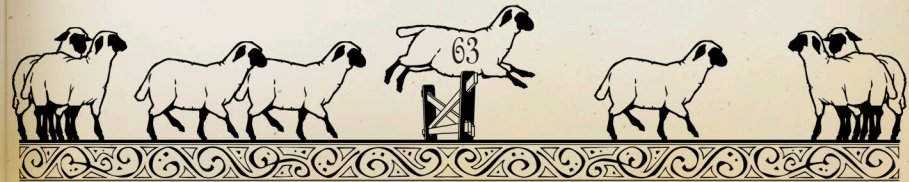
"Eighty-four," corrected Lupin. "You missed one when you fainted."

"Oh... too bad it was only one." Pettigrew looked disgusted.

Having failed to get a better reaction, the team tried again, "WHEN I'M CALLING EWEEEEEEEE-EE-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E!!!"

"Don't call us," said Potter flatly. "We've been called. We're here."

It gave Malfoy a certain pleasure to note that even



the daring and ever-capable James Potter sounded and looked exhausted. In fact, all told, the Marauders looked worse off than Lucius and his lieutenants.

Malfoy smiled.

The four Gryffindors trudged to the table, delightfully lacking their usual rambunctiousness. Lupin was best off, other than a pattern of hoofprints deeply embossed into the wool of his cloak. Black and Potter looked they'd been caught in a stampede. Again. In a closed room. Pettigrew was limping like he was in the Christmas pantomime, and one of his sleeves had been partially consumed. In spite of an obviously recent scrubbing, all four Marauders had a distinct air of the paddock about them when they passed by.

"Interesting new cologne, Potter," Lucius purred snidely.

"Shut up." Potter led his gang as far down the table as they could get from their Slytherin nemeses.

"Who did your hair, Malfoy?" inquired Lupin, grinning.

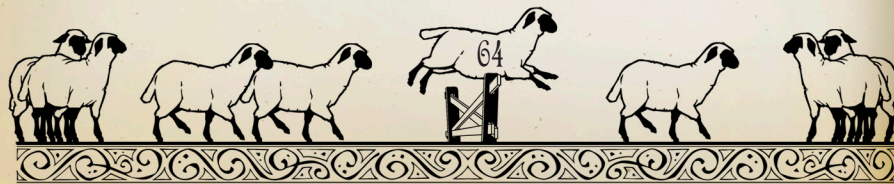
"Maybe he tried Snape's shampoo," said Pettigrew.

"No," Potter said. "That would be Goyle. Nice new look, Gavin."

"Thanks," said Goyle in surprise, reaching up to feel his hair and looking alarmed as he discovered the bald bits.

The Marauders slumped into their seats. Atalanta Finch, the perkier of the Gryffindor chasers, dropped bowls of porridge in front of them and asked loudly, "So, Black, we're dying to know — is it true that you dumped a whole bucket of sheep shit on top of McGonagall's head?"

Black glared at her.



"Oh, well done!" lauded Malfoy, saluting him above the various howls and hoots of laughter.

"How was I to know she was prowling beneath the window?" Black demanded hotly as if he'd said it before, several times.

Even the other Marauders were grinning into their porridge. "You couldn't have made a better shot if you'd tried," sniggered Potter, and collapsed into insomniac giggles with Lupin and Pettigrew.

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle raised their glasses in a toast. "Huzzah!" Snape looked up in vague alarm and tried to adjust the volume on the toast rack.

"Wasn't she angry, though!" trilled Fiona Wood, grinning. "I thought she was going to turn you all into soap!"

"And start scrubbing the walls with you!" added Martin Weasley. "Shame she didn't, it would have saved us the trouble!"

"You wouldn't have *had* to trouble yourselves, if you hadn't turned all our beds into sheep," pointed out Potter.

"And our wardrobes," said Lupin.

"And trunks," added Black.

"I still say it wouldn't have been that bad if Remus hadn't frightened them," muttered Pettigrew.

"It wasn't intentional," snapped Lupin.

"Hoofprints healing up all right, Pete?" asked Black.

"No." Pettigrew sulked.

Black smirked, and directed an interested gaze down the table. "So, Malfoy, how was your evening?" he asked brightly.

"Nothing special." Lucius poured himself more juice. Snape



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took it and poured it into his overflowing porridge bowl.

"Really," said Potter. "Just stayed in, did each other's hair..."

"... tried on each other's clothes," added Black. "That's Crabbe's uniform you're wearing, Goyle. I recognize the teeth marks from the paddock."

"Sounds very cozy," Pettigrew said. "Nice little pyjama party."

Crabbe shot a worried look at Malfoy. "How does he know about the pyjamas?" he asked under his breath. "He can't have gotten into Slytherin."

"It occurs to me that..." Snape announced loudly.

They waited.

After a minute they went back to their breakfasts.

The toast racks began to disappear as the house elves started to clear the tables. Goyle grabbed the nearest serving bowl and dished himself another lump, then groaned with dismay as the milk pitcher disappeared.

Lucius seized the serving bowl from Goyle, commandeered Snape's hand and dug his spoon into the glue. "Try it," he directed, aiming the spoon up towards Snape's face. "See if it's ready."

"There's no milk in that!" Goyle exclaimed worriedly. The cruet vanished.

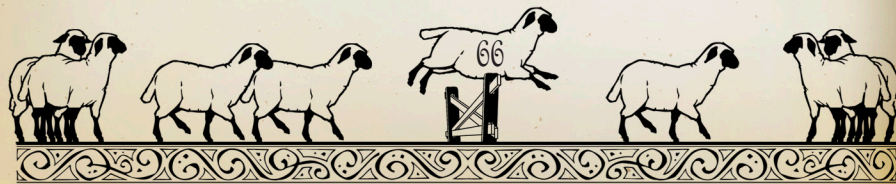
"Fiddlehead fronds," Snape said thickly, trying to chew.

Lucius pantomimed adding another ingredient to the mix. "This should do it," he said enthusiastically. "Try now."

"It's true," murmured Crabbe. "He *can* digest anything."

"He hasn't succeeded, yet..." Goyle returned dubiously.

"Shouldn' be this crunchy," Snape muttered, jaws



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snapping as he gnawed the goo.

"Almost a sentence, very good, Sev," encouraged Malfoy.

"Come on, third time's the charm — "

Snape looked puzzled as he desperately masticated the mouthful. When he swallowed it looked like it hurt.

"Beeswax," he coughed, tears gleaming in his eyes.

"Just the thing," Malfoy agreed. "How are you, Sev?"

"I've got detention at seven."

"Yes! Very good! And it's just seven now, aren't you lucky?!" Lucius sat back with relief; he wouldn't have to rely on Crabbe and Goyle as his only support during this incarceration, and by noon Snape might be nearly coherent.

From somewhere high above, the Great Hall's clock began clanging out their final moments of liberty.

The interHouse couples began to untangle themselves, and realize that they'd missed breakfast.

Uniforms were adjusted, hair shoved into place, and Good Student expressions put on just in time as the professors overseeing today's detentions filed in executioners' silence onto the stage and formed a line like a wall of granite facing the Doomed.

The last chime died away, echoing faintly. It was like watching the last butterfly of summer flit away into eternity.

"Goldfish gills and coffee grounds!" Snape exclaimed delightedly.

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle clapped their hands over his mouth.

It was going to be a very long day.



Ramifications

RAMIFICATIONS CHAPTER 4

Rabbit, striking Shakespearean pose in supermarket check-out line: "Is that — ? Why, yes it is! What a glorious sign! 'Two for one sale on chocolate chip cookies!' Go get another bag!"

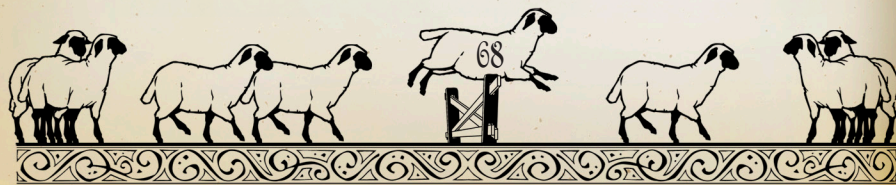
WjinxW: "'kay!" Darts toward display, ponytails bouncing merrily. Innocent bystanders prudently scatter.

Weeee'reee Baaaaack! And it's really not worth suing us, all the money's gone for chocolate chip cookies... If you recognize it, it ain't ours.

(Professor Keele is here on holiday from one of Jinx's tales.)

MUCH TO THE DISAPPOINTMENT of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, the professors had effectively cancelled the morning's entertainment by exiling the sheep-thieving octet to the farthest end of the Great Hall, where they would be the last group dealt their detentions. This had really dampened the mood among the rest of the Disgraced, and by the widespread slumping of shoulders, it was clear that the teachers were completing their quest to bring morale to its nadir.

While they awaited execution, the rival gangs were marooned on a pair of high-backed benches running along opposite walls. Between them lay ten yards and their warden, everyone's least favorite Prefect, Loud-



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mouth Lockhart, who was pacing back and forth in a state of decidedly anxious vigilance.

He looked like a bunny who'd gotten into the tigers' cage and knew perfectly well how things were going to go.

Lockhart had a white-knuckled, two-handed grip on his wand and had been yattering on steadily for fifteen minutes: "...so there's no point, d'you see, all of you, in pulling anything funny, or starting a row, because half the faculty's here — " the lanky Ravenclaw indicated the stage with a kind of forbidding flourish, "and they'll be all over you in a thrice if you step even an inch out of line! So, you see, it's in *your best interests* to just *sit quietly* and *accept matters gracefully*..."

He stopped and whirled, perhaps in a bid to look impressive and intimidate his audience of notorious reprobates.

Seven of them were asleep, five of them drooling so.

Snape cocked his head quizzically, then broke into a grin, and applauded. "Daring revival of Coward!" he chirped. "Diamond perfec — "

Malfoy woke up long enough to cuff him, smacking Snape's head against the bench with a loud crack.

"Oh, now — now — I say — stop!" protested Lockhart.

Malfoy opened his eyes, and gazed at the Prefect with the look of a bear who'd been disturbed in February. "I've finished."

Snape didn't seem to have noticed the blow. "Penguins," he said, happily, and then sing-songed, "I should like some coffee too, please."

"But — look — er — Five points from Slytherin!" decided Lockhart.



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Malfoy stared at him calmly, waiting for the git to realize his error.

But Lockhart took a stance of inflated dignity, and lifted his chin. "Fighting is against the rules. Page one of the *School Handbook*, in case you've forgotten." He wagged a cautionary finger at Malfoy.

"Ah," breathed Lucius. "But we weren't fighting. Were we, Sev?" He got a grip on Snape's necktie, and tightened it slightly to get his attention.

"Huh?"

"We weren't, were we?"

"Huh?"

"You slipped."

"Huh?"

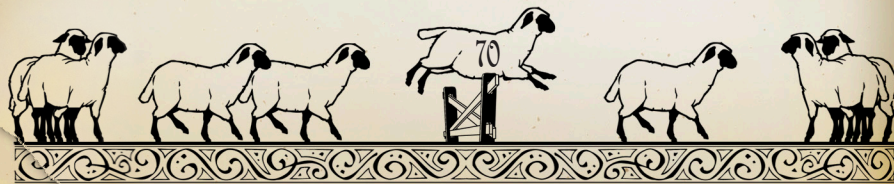
"There. You see?" said Malfoy, releasing Snape with a pat on the cheek. "Good boy."

"Hi Jenny!" Snape said amiably. He leaned against the back of the bench, blinking slowly.

"I — no, that's not how it looked to me — " ventured Lockhart.

"You were mistaken," said Lucius, lightly, with impeccable forgiveness. His gaze flicked to the impressive gilded plaque affixed to the bench, which commemorated a fantastic amount of money given to Hogwarts by the good family Malfoy.

Lockhart glanced at the plaque. "Oh." He cleared his throat and got a better grip on his wand. "Oh, yes... yes, I was mistaken... light's not very good in here, is it? Really,



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it is early... " Looking flustered, Lockhart distanced himself from his *faux pas*, neatly resettling his cloak upon his shoulders and making certain that his Prefect's badge showed clearly. "Er... ahem... all right, there, Snape?"

Lucius elbowed his confused lieutenant, who had become entangled in his own bootlaces. Snape emitted a sound that one could presume to be affirmative. "He'll be fine," Malfoy assured their keeper.

Lockhart nodded gratefully and moved back towards the very center of his patrol area, looking for rescue towards the stage, where the professors were sending the Gryffindor Quidditch team off to their hopefully unpleasant fate.

"Sparrow legs," said Snape.

Lockhart whirled. "Oh, now, there's no need to get nasty!"

"Whitlock terriers?" Snape looked at him in faint alarm. He gave Lucius a worried glance. "You've not let it burn, have you?"

"No," said Lucius, because sometimes it was just easier, and yanked Snape free of his bootlaces.

Snape nodded in relief. "Pigeon feathers, that's what does it... but the smoke should be *blue-gray*, with a greenish cast.... " Mercifully, he subsided into contemplation of this problem, shaking his hands absently to restore the circulation.

Lucius tried to go back to sleep.

Snape looked at an unremarkable brick on the far wall and announced in stentorian tones, "Kind of like a ravioli."

Crabbe sat up, said, "Oh God, he's still at it," and went



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back to sleep. Goyle snored determinedly.

Lockhart hurried over and looked down with concern at the two wakeful Fourth Years. "Um... when he slipped," the Prefect whispered, "how, ah, hard did he hit his head?"

"He's fine." Malfoy swatted his tame swot. "Just a bit overwrought. Detention, you know."

"Oh. Oh, yes, I certainly understand. Public humiliation and all that. Dreadful." Lockhart spared them a dubious glance, went pale when he saw Malfoy's expression, and moved away, towards the safely insensible Marauders. He paced the length of their bench, slipping a bit in the little puddle of drool that had collected on the flagstones beneath the quite unconscious Black. "Eugh." With a grimace, the Prefect flourished his wand and murmured a cleaning charm.

There was a bang, and a flash, and the whole bench upturned.

"*Too much frog powder!*" cried Snape. Lucius howled with glee, wishing he had his camera. Crabbe and Goyle woke up and laughed too, as soon as they saw the knot of swearing Marauders on the floor. Snape kept on looking vaguely about in alarm until he spied a stained glass window. "Oooh... pretty...."

Lockhart was backing away from the disgruntled and disoriented Marauders as they attempted to disentangle themselves; he donned an alert and vigilant expression as he saw the professors headed his way.



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"Honestly! Can't you behave yourselves for five minutes altogether?!" he demanded loudly, glaring in distaste at the bleary Gryffindors. "And during Detention, as well! You're a collective disgrace!"

"That will do, Mr. Lockhart, thank you," said Professor McGonagall, sweeping in to check on her errant charges. Protests of innocence rose from her sprawled and sleepy sheep-thieves as they got to their feet and lined up properly.

Crabbe and Goyle grabbed Snape and stood him in place as the four Slytherins fell beneath the icy gaze of Professor Keele, Head of Slytherin House. She was a cool and uncompromising vision of elegance draped with indigo robes; her blue eyes glinted like chips of arctic sky, and her silver hair seemed frozen crystal-line into its elaborate braids... and both these features looked considerably warmer than her expression.

There was no messing with Professor Keele.

Rumor had it that her mother had sunk the TITANIC.

Raptorlike, she eyed her quartet of Slytherins. "Did you have aught to do with that?" she demanded quietly.

"No, Ma'am," answered Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle promptly, keeping quite still. Sudden movement would attract her attention and she'd likely hunt you down and have your throat out before you could explain that you'd merely panicked.

Her cold gaze flicked to the student who had not responded. "Mr. Snape?"



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Under his cloak, Crabbe crammed an elbow into Snape's ribs.

Snape looked at him in surprise.

"Mr. Snape!" snapped Keele.

Hers was a voice you'd answer from a fever dream, or the throes of torture. "Yes, Ma'am?!" Snape asked, looking bewildered.

"Had you aught to do with that?" she pointed towards the scorched patch on the floor.

On his third try Snape focused on the damage she was indicating. He frowned in puzzlement, and shook his head. "Should've used the bitter butterbeetle wings, Jenny," he opined.

Then he grinned encouragingly up at Keele. "Still, it turned orange, and that's good! You're definitely onto *something*!"

Keele stared at him.

After a few moments, she turned a be-migrained look to Malfoy, "Up All Night Potion?" she inquired drily.

"Up All Night Potion," sighed Lucius, lobbying for a sympathetic look which he almost got. They had all endured three and a half years of Snape's whacked-out weekend behavior, as he wandered from Friday nights' brews to Saturday night's second tries and on to Sunday afternoons' moaning regrets. "It'll wear off soon, Ma'am."

"I should hope so." Keele frowned, illuminating the tip of her wand. "Mr. Snape," she began, "pay attention..."

He was. To a bumblebee that no one else could see.

Professor Keele intercepted its path with her lighted



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wand and smiled faintly when Snape belatedly noticed the new object.

Lucius turned away from the familiar ritual, and looked to see how McGonagall was dealing with the Gryffindors, all of whom were still shaking their heads in confused denial. She looked freshly scrubbed, and he bit back a grin, thinking of Black's well-aimed bucket.

Lockhart was trying to fade into the wall, which he was surprisingly good at doing, for someone notoriously obsessed with attractive glamours, attention and glory. Malfoy watched the procedure, taking mental notes. He grew really interested when the Prefect actually took on the coloring and apparent texture of the wall, and scuttled away like a chameleon.

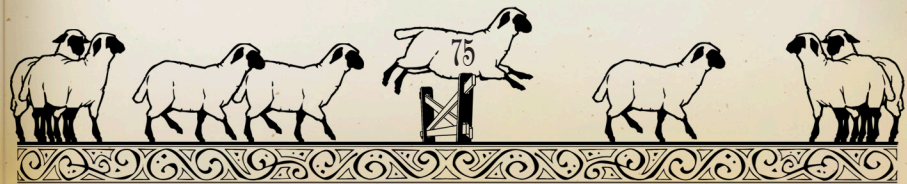
Which might have worked out very well, had Professor Dumbledore not been making his way towards the group, and had the Headmaster not called out a cheerful, "Good morning, Gilderoy!" to the petra-fied Prefect.

Lockhart froze, but Dumbledore strolled right past him and joined the gathering. "Good morning, all, good morning," he greeted the assembly. "A beautiful day, is it not?"

"It is indeed, Professor Dumbledore," agreed McGonagall.

"Very fine," concurred Keele.

"Lovely day, for a trip into Hogsmeade," Dumbledore mused, earning nods from the two professors. He turned an amused gaze upon the collected boys. "Alas, the eight of you have other matters to occupy your time, today... which seems only fair, as you have been



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indulging in so many extracurricular activities during hours in which you ought to have been studying, or sleeping. Really, you have had as much free time as your fellows, if not more." Dumbledore shrugged lightly, hands spread like scales to show the equity of it all.

The sheep-thieves looked at the floor.

Except for Snape, who was staring intently at Keele's dimmed and motionless wand where it rested in her folded arms. "You have to poke holes in the jar, though."

"Yes, that's most important," Dumbledore agreed. "Though I've found it works better if you poke the holes in the jar lids." He smiled. "We have a rather instructive detention planned for all of you today."

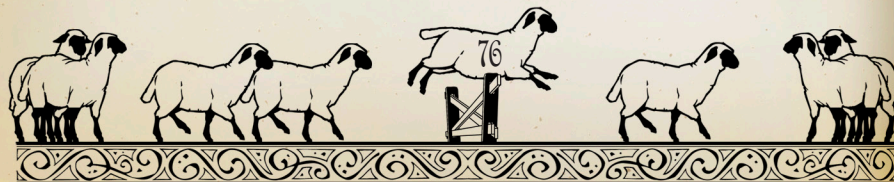
Oh God, not another *Learning Experience*...

Most of the miscreants tried bravely to look appreciative, or at least not insulted. Snape blinked and transferred his stare to the charred spot on the floor. "Oops."

"Well," Dumbledore sighed, spreading his hands in amiable resignation, "first things, first." The light glinted sharply off his half-moon spectacles as he studied the wrongdoers, one by one.

Potter, Black, and Lupin actually smiled in an effort to look abashedly accepting of what their lovable naiveté had brought upon them. Pettigrew flinched. Malfoy assumed the unassailable perfection of Austrian crystal. Crabbe and Goyle hunkered down. Snape had gone back to watching the invisible bumblebee.

Dumbledore took a scroll from his sleeve, and let it



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unroll to the floor. Pettigrew bit his lip. Clearing his throat, he read this list of infractions, which was a good ten feet and nearly identical to the one Snape had rattled off over dinner last night. None of the wrongdoers really listened, until the Headmaster got to the important parts:

"All in all, I make that out to be... one hundred and thirty points, each, lost by Mist'ers Potter, Black, Malfoy and Snape... and one hundred points, each, lost by Mist'ers Lupin, Pettigrew, Crabbe and Goyle."

There was a long silence.

McGonagall and Keele did not look happy.

"That's..." Potter began, looking dazed.

"Four hundred and sixty points, total," Malfoy supplied bleakly. "Lost by each House."

"Hufflepuff'll be thrilled," remarked Black in a growl. "They're in the lead, now."

"Is that... a new school record?" asked Potter, almost hopefully.

"No," McGonagall informed him through gritted and rather pointy-looking teeth. "And don't bother trying to set one, Mr. Potter. I've had quite enough trouble from you and your friends!"

"Likewise," intoned Keele, glaring at her charges, who were still as statues. Every Slytherin knew to hold still (or better yet lie low) when Keele's voice cracked like a lake in Spring.

"Now," Dumbledore recommenced lightly, "as to the matter of detention." He looked happier to announce,



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"The eight of you will be spending your day helping Mr. Hagrid in cleaning out the stables."

Lucius nearly strangled holding back comment.

Dumbledore merely nodded at the inarticulate sounds drifting from Malfoy's direction, as if he'd noticed a distant, pleasant tune. "Having witnessed yesterday's early-morning attempt at teamwork," the Headmaster continued, his smile widening with delighted memory, "we have chosen to encourage this more positive trend among you, by setting you to working as a united group, towards a common and mutually beneficial goal." He glanced at the stricken faces upturned to him, and his smile became benign, in reassurance. "We understand that this will not be easy, and so we are prepared to save you from temptation... as well as the potential for serious injury."

Once again the light glinted coldly off the half-moons of Dumbledore's spectacles — really, he must have bespelled them to do that on cue — as he intoned gravely, "You will not be permitted to use any magic in this endeavor."

"There you are," Lupin sighed.

"Don't you get tired of being right all the time," said Black.

Crabbe nudged Snape. "You got it right too," he said supportively.

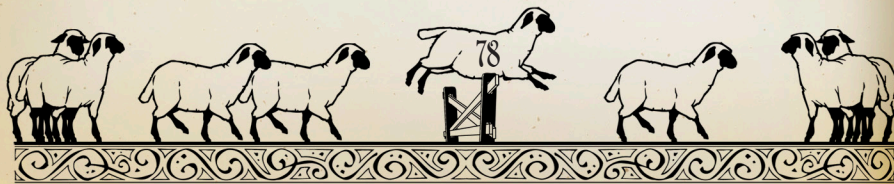
"I really dislike jubbub birds," commented Snape.

"Gentlemen, if you please," prompted the Headmaster.

They quieted, looking resigned.

"Bit more orange juice."

Malfoy kicked Crabbe, who kicked Snape.



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Dumbledore surveyed the subdued assembly, nodded fractionally in contentment, and ordered quietly, "You will now hand over your wands to your respective Heads of House."

Seven pairs of eyes widened in horror.

And *then* it sunk in.

Pandemonium broke out, nearly overridden by Malfoy's outraged explosion: "*You're joking!*"

"Us, and them, with just our claws and teeth?" demanded Black in the ensuing hush, and then was silenced by a swift elbow to the ribs from Lupin.

"The eight of you," McGonagall nodded regally in affirmation, "with mops and buckets and non-flying brooms. Let's have your wands, gentlemen."

Potter reluctantly stepped forward, and almost decorously placed his wand into her waiting hand. Lupin followed suit, then Pettigrew, and with great hesitation, Black.

"Thank you." McGonagall grasped the wands firmly and turned expectantly to watch as Keele extended a hand to collect her charges' wands.

"This is madness!" hissed Lucius, knuckles white as he gripped his wand defensively. "When my father hears about this —"

"I'll be pleased to inform him myself, Mr. Malfoy," stated Keele. "I should delight in showing him the recording of your little adventure in the sheep paddock... particularly the part where you're down brawling in the muck, earning yourself a blacked eye and bloodied nose. I'm sure he'd be most keen to see that." Implacable as a glacier, she



stared expectantly down at Malfoy.

Lucius gave in, controlling his fury and elegantly placing his wand into her palm. He turned brusquely and ordered his comrades, "Hurry up, gentlemen."

Crabbe uncertainly surrendered his wand; Goyle followed suit. Snape was watching the persistent phantom bee. Lucius collected Snape's wand from its pocket and handed it over.

Keele sighed through her nose. "I swear," she muttered, glaring archly at Snape, "if they gave him access to stronger ingredients, he'd turn himself into a Jabberwocky."

"Hope not," Goyle said. "He's in *our* room."

McGonagall came over, looking concerned. "How is he, Veronica?" she inquired quietly.

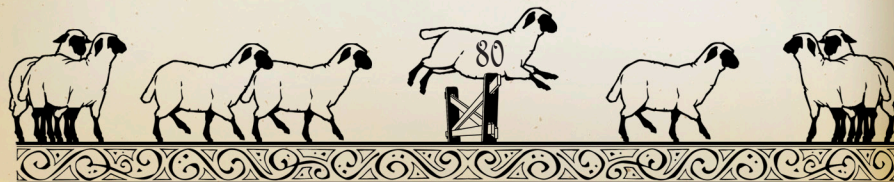
"Oh, he'll be fine... nothing serious, nothing lasting... honestly, boy, why can't you test your concoctions on mice?"

Malfoy sighed, and volunteered martyrishly, "He finds their reports unreliable, Ma'am."

"And my owl got that sick, first year, when it ate some —" Goyle whuffed as Crabbe and Malfoy elbowed him from either side.

"Perhaps he ought go to the hospital wing," said McGonagall.

"Oh, no, please!" exclaimed Lucius, his expression reaching new depths of concern as he threw his arms protectively about his bewildered comrade. "He'd feel just *awful* if you sent him off, and he discovered later that he'd missed helping us atone for our misdeeds! Really, he'd not forgive himself, you know Sev — in for



the destruction, in for the restitution! He'd *want* to be here," Malfoy averred. "He really would!"

"Walnuts," cheeped Snape.

McGonagall looked dubious, but Keele wore a confident expression. "He'll be all right, Minerva," she assured her colleague. "Hagrid can keep an eye on him, but Mr. Malfoy and the others well know what to do. I expect it should wear off by lunchtime."

McGonagall accepted this, and turned back to glare at her snidely whispering Gryffindors.

Keele looked narrowly at Lucius, and leaned down to breathe into his ear, "You would be outnumbered... and no wands..." she said.

Lucius nodded.

"Mind you look after him," she warned. "This isn't a task for Goyle or Crabbe. See he stays in one piece."

"Of course, Ma'am." Lucius agreed with alacrity. It was worth having to watch over the abstracted git until his brains came back; he'd make sure that Snape duly thanked him for his custodial diligence. Potions homework for the next month. That ought to do for starters.

Keele straightened up and turned to her colleagues. "He'll be well enough. The fresh air should help bring him out of it, in time."

Maybe two months.

"Yes, fresh air does wonders to restore one," agreed Dumbledore pleasantly. "And here comes Mr. Hagrid, who has just been enjoying its benefits, to take charge of you."



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Hagrid, by the smell of him, had been enjoying the benefits of something a lot more fragrant than fresh air. "Good mornin', Professors," he nodded to the teachers. "I got the horses out to the paddock, Professor Dumbledore, sir," he told the Headmaster. "And Mr. Filch sent out those cleaning supplies you arranged for. Just need the hands to use 'em now." The gamekeeper grinned down at the condemned.

Malfoy glared at him. The man was dangerously jovial, and had no sense of decorum.

The Marauders were grinning like idiots. They liked the gamekeeper.

They'd never been hauled out of the Forest slung over his shoulder like a brace of dead rabbits. Lucius's stomach had ached for days last time.

"This way, gentlemen," Hagrid invited, striding towards the side door.

With sighs and grumbles and a little bit of shoving, the Gryffindors fell in behind their gigantic chum.

Malfoy waited, not wishing to stroll along with all four Marauders at his back. As for his cronies... "Oh, bring him along!" he ordered Crabbe and Goyle, who each seized one of Snape's arms and propelled him rather stumbingly along as the rearguard of their dismal morning constitutional.

The whole semester's worth of Potions assignments. Hagrid was holding *the servants' door* open for them. And Herbology.



Ramifications

RAMIFICATIONS CHAPTER 5

rabbit: "It's really too hot to do anything but curl up in a shady room and torment the Slytherin Study Group.... "

Jinx: "Oh, say, look here... chocolate chips come in ice cream, too.... "

rabbit: "And the cookies make excellent garnishes.... " (upends bag over bowls)

Jinx: "Well, yeah, but what could be more appropriate than MORE chocolate chips, as garnishes?" (upends larger bag over bowls)

rabbit: "Oh, how true! And relentlessly thematic, as well!"

Both: "munch munch munch mmmMMMMmm munch munch MWAHahahahaaaaa... "

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL DAY. THE SKY WAS an irreproachable blue. The birds were singing madrigals. The sun was shining incandescently. The Gryffindor Quidditch team, under the supervision of Caretaker Filch, was engaged in some kind of heavy lifting... and the lawn looked like a misdirected rummage sale. Shirts, socks, unmentionables, chairs, cushions, tables, nightstands, lamps... and off in the distance, a bed... were scattered across the grass. The Gryffindors were collecting these items, none too carefully.

"Hey!" Pettigrew shouted. "That's mine!"

"Not sure I'd admit that," said Robin Bonhomme, casting a dismissive look at the damp and grass-stained footstool



he held before throwing it in a neat arc to his fellow Chaser, Atalanta Finch. She caught it one-handed and popped it atop a mound of bedding from which emanated two legs and the unfortunately bright voice of staunch Gryffindor supporter and inexorable team mascot, Martin Weasley: "Hey, don't leave that footstool on top! They attract dragons, you know! Someone pass me something else, *quick*, before I'm *devoured* where I stand!"

"If only," muttered Pettigrew.

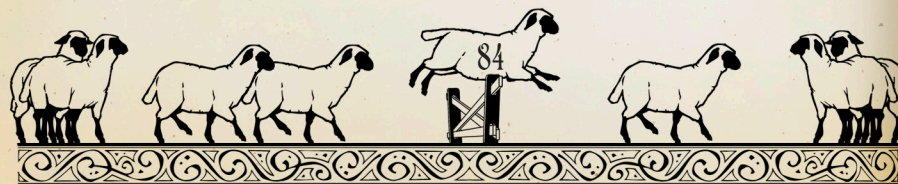
"He never stops," noted Black, with a kind of grudging respect.

Lucius sniffed dismissively. There was no need to comment, really, on the kind of person who'd paint his face red and gold to sit in the stands and bellow instructions at Quidditch players too high aloft to hear him.

Darius Thompson and Justin Chandler, the team's Beaters, came trudging along with a mattress slung between them. "Here, Martin, set it on this and give us a hand, will you?" huffed Thompson.

"This one was almost to the lake!" Chandler said with a weary grin. "Some of them really ran for the hills once they hit the ground!" he observed, looking about at the far-flung lawn ornaments. "Maybe you should've conjured a fence, first!" he suggested to the Marauders, who scowled up at him.

Weasley dumped his collection onto the mattress. He had tied a red and gold kerchief round his head; against his coppery hair and flushed face, the rag



gave him the look of a diseased strawberry possessed of an irrepressible grin. "I can't believe you levitated *everything* out the window!" he marvelled. "I mean, look, *this* wasn't even transfigured!" He held up a lamp, wagging it for attention.

"You break it, you fix it," warned Potter.

"Oh, there's plenty to fix... you are four stories up, after all!" chirruped Finch, adding several throw pillows to the pile.

"I still think we should have let them down the stairs," grumbled Black, "to trample everyone who was camped on the steps, *giggling*."

"Oh, that's *right* — " Chandler cast a bright-eyed, secret-keeping glance round his ring of accomplices. "They never *did* try the door — "

"No, right, McGonagall came through the *other* way, and then they were in Cooper's room — "

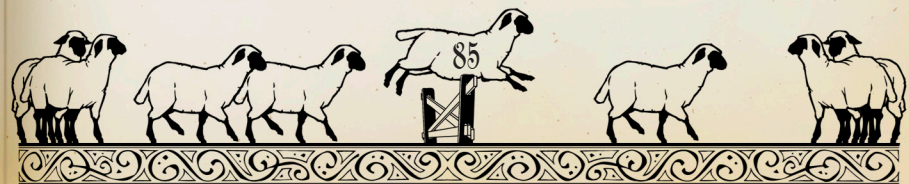
The quintet looked up towards one of Gryffindor Tower's windows. "Wonder if Tabitha's remembered about that?"

"Haven't heard her scream, yet... "

"Put it back," ordered Potter tiredly. "Whatever you did, undo it. We've suffered. We've been called. We've gained a healthy respect for sheep. We've learned our lesson."

"Not by half!" offered Finch. "I *saw* those sandglasses plummeting as we passed by! You four lost about five *hundred* points!"

"And they're only Fourth Years," intoned Weasley proudly.



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"Yes, well, the lot of *you* must have been good for at least a hundred and fifty," theorized Lupin. "Changing everything into great bumbling, incontinent sheep – "

"Oh, now, we never made them incontinent - " remarked Bonhomme.

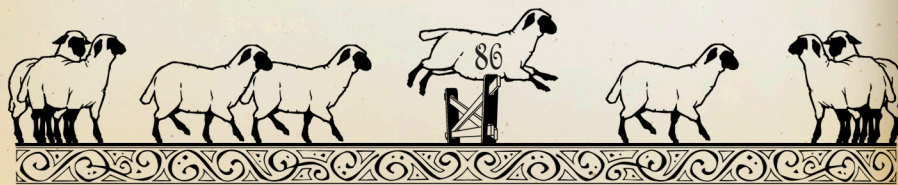
Potter glared at him as if he were a complete dun-
derhead, and said as if explaining to a three-year-old,
"Sheep don't like surprises. And when one sheep gets
surprised, they *all* get surprised. When sheep are sur-
prised, they panic... in the most disgusting manner
possible." He set his jaw and glared up at his teammate.
"You *will* be scrubbing the floor," he directed, "*twice*."

"Especially you, Weasley," added Lupin, standing at Potter's elbow, "seeing as you were so thoughtful as to witch my lamp to cast dragon shadows all 'round the walls." He showed his teeth. "Which reminds me, you *will* be scrubbing the walls, as well –"

"And the ceiling," growled Caretaker Filch, stumping up behind the Quidditch players. He caught Weasley by the collar, and over the boy's protests announced rustily, "But you'll be washing those blankets, first." Filch jerked a thumb towards a row of wooden wash-tubs filled with steaming soapy water. "Be about it!" he snapped, badgering his charges on their way.

"Wish we had our wands," muttered Potter to Black. "Be a great time to transfigure all those things into sheep."

Goyle scratched his head. "But didn't we cheat on the test? I mean, that's why we're here, isn't it? Because we



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couldn't figure out how to turn things into sheep?"

Black sniggered, and was rounded on by Filch, who shot him a scouring look. "Think all of this is funny, do you, boy?" demanded the Caretaker, coming near as if he would be happy to box Black's ears. "If the lot of *you* had stayed in bed where you belonged at night, all of this mess wouldn't have to be cleaned up!" He shot a glance up at Hagrid, who had thus far been enjoying the morning's festivities, and his grimace deepened. "Don't know what you have to look happy about," Filch grumbled. "They tore up that paddock somethin' awful... and they'll probably turn the barn into a pile of splinters, by nightfall...."

"Oh, Snape's going to do transfigurations?" inquired Black.

"'Tis no laughing matter, boy," Filch warned. "You're a pack of destructive bandits, is what you are!" He shook a finger at the collected criminal scum.

"Ah, now, they're jus' learnin', is all — " began Hagrid supportively.

"They'd learn faster with a bit of torture to encourage 'em," opined Filch, a nearly happy gleam entering his watchful eyes as he surveyed the potential candidates.

There was a moment's apprehensive silence. Dumbledore's prohibitions against torture were fairly recent innovations. Filch was living on memories, now... but his fond recountings could generate nightmares that would steal a fortnight's sleep.

Hagrid was trying hard not to laugh at the miscre-



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ants' expressions. He coughed into his hand. "Well, now..." he began.

Filch transferred his Medusan glare to the Groundskeeper. "Thought they were going to do some cleaning, not stand around in the sunshine. They're not out here on holiday, man!"

Goyle turned an enlightened look upon Pettigrew and asked, "They turned all your stuff into sheep?"

"This wrack and ruin is all *your* fault!" Filch rasped, stepping so close that Goyle and Crabbe had to back up, instinctively shielding Lucius. "If I had my way, the eight of you would be hanging in the dungeons upside down for the next week!"

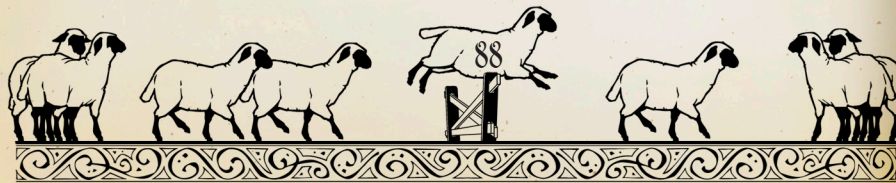
"How do you like your new office, Filch?" Lucius inquired sharply, trying to ignore the pain in his foot, which was mashed beneath Crabbe's boot.

The Caretaker snorted. "With the 'Gift of Aurelius Malfoy' plaque on the door I have to polish? It's drafty and there's no mice for my dear old Mrs. Beasley. I'm movin' back down to the dungeons."

Lucius paled and wisely refrained from swearing. So much for convincing Filch to go easier on him when he had detention.

"Bumbershoots," said Snape, companionably throwing an arm round Lucius. "And green," he added consolingly.

Filch glowered at Snape, eyes narrowing. "Not again," he growled in disgust. "I swear, boy, next time I find you wandering around the dungeons with no



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idea where or who you are, I'll leave you to it!"

Hagrid, perhaps sensing old tension, gathered his charges together. "Well, we'd best be gettin' on our way..."

"Muck-meddling maniac!" Filch continued to grumble as they moved away. "I saw him! Eying my sweet cat like she was a... an *ingredient*!"

"Well done," Lucius murmured. "I'll help you hold her under."

"Tadpoles," Snape said, agreeably resting his head on Malfoy's shoulder.

"Eeugh!" Lucius shoved Snape back to Crabbe and Goyle, who held him at arm's length between them, where he marched along amiably. He glanced at the grease spot now marring his cloak and wished for his wand, or anything of a strong cleaning charm. Good job this wasn't his *good* cloak.

Hagrid led them to the fence enclosing the horse pasture, and unlocked the gate to usher his charges through so they could follow a winding dirt path. Excited whinnies shrilled through the air as the gate clopped shut, and soon from all directions came galloping several very large equines, all eager for petting and lint-encrusted sugarcubes from the depths of the Groundskeeper's coat pockets.

At least, some of them got sugarcubes. Lucius backed away from a massive roan that was happily crunching down a strip of bacon. "But... I thought... Father told Mother they'd been destroyed!" he stammered, getting



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a glimpse of the larger horses' dagger-sharp teeth and retreating to the center of the rapidly-coagulating defensive knot of boys.

"Isn't that the one that nearly took your arm off when we were seven?" Crabbe asked nervously, peering over Black's shoulder at a wintry palomino.

"Hello, Pestilentius," Hagrid greeted the beast, and tugged a dead pheasant out of his pocket; he held it out to the horse, which bit into it with a wet crunch and a satisfied whicker. "Aren't they beautiful?" the Groundskeeper said proudly to Snape, who was the only one still standing at his side. "Takes a bit o' gettin' ter know them, but we all understand each other now," he added, firmly extracting the roan's teeth from the shoulder of his coat. "Easy, there, Incendium!"

Lucius counted Hagrid's fingers. They were all there.

Magic could make things grow back.

Snape's shoulders slumped. "They're still not footstools," he sighed. "That one's moving."

"Handsome, ain't he?" Hagrid beamed down at his small companion. "He likes it that yer not afraid o' him."

"Yes, it's always better when the meal comes willing to you," muttered Lucius, and more loudly said, "We should be moving on, shouldn't we?" Magic couldn't make everything grow back. Heads, for example. And he was supposed to be looking after Snape.

"Yes," piped Lupin decisively. "Yes, we should."

"Get an early start," added Potter with zeal.



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"Yes, start scrubbing and sweeping, all of that healthy, rewarding exercise, honestly, Hagrid, we just can't wait!" enthused Black.

"Have to make good, and all," offered Crabbe.

"Yes," said Goyle. "That's right!"

"Soonest begun, soonest done," threw in Pettigrew.

The Groundskeeper shone a wide grin down upon them. "That's the spirit!" he lauded. "Glad ter hear yeh all wantin' ter —"

"I didn't do it, Mr. Filch!" yelped Snape.

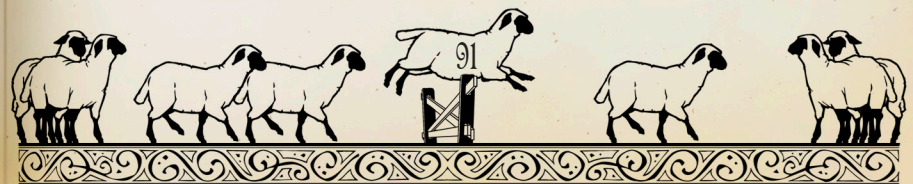
Hagrid glanced back and hastened to wrestle Snape out of the roan's grip on his cloak. The animal snapped at the boy's head and Lucius shut his eyes, knowing Snape was dead and Keele was going to end the Malfoy family line for it.

"Stoppit, cat!" protested Snape.

Lucius peeked. The roan had a mouthful of Snape's hair, which it chewed thoughtfully for a moment and then spat out, doing no apparent harm. With a snort, the creature snapped again at the boy's cloak, and a brief tug-of-war ensued before Hagrid set Snape safely aside while the roan thoughtfully chewed a swatch of wool. "Whups! Really friendly t'day, I see.... Ah... yeh... well, let's move on, shall we?"

Boisterous agreement met this suggestion, and the boys clustered closely around Hagrid as the group made their way across the pasture towards the haven of the barn.

"Hagrid?" Potter asked as they hurried along. "Are



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all the horses out in the pasture? I mean, they won't be in the stables, while we're cleaning them, right?"

Alarmed looks were directed up at the Groundskeeper.

"Naw, they're all out gettin' some fresh air. Does 'em good." Hagrid watched a fine gray canter by.

Pettigrew shivered, watching the animal's teeth. "I thought horses ate grass," he mumbled, pressing closer against his fellows.

"Most do," Malfoy muttered. "The... imported ones, though... they only eat grass after they've eaten someone who doesn't agree with them."

"I'm surprised they don't eat the other horses," said Lupin, interested enough to stare, but not so interested that he didn't do it through the crook of Goyle's elbow.

"They're carnivores, not cannibals," said Hagrid. "And Professor Dumbledore bespelled the other animals ter look like they'd taste bad if they was still breathin'."

"And... students?" asked Potter, eyeing Snape's cloak.

"Oh, yeh'll learn how in Seventh Year, I expect." Hagrid waved a quarter of a ham at another massive horse that was coming over in search of a treat.

Goyle wistfully watched the ham vanish. "I hate porridge," he sighed as the other boys condensed defensively and propelled him along toward the looming safety of the stables. Surely stone and wood could keep the horses out.

Hagrid continued dispensing treats from the larder of his coat along the way. By the time the tight-knit band reached the barn doors, a nervous imagination had nearly



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driven Pettigrew to faint, while extensive knowledge had nearly done the same for Malfoy. The other boys were fairly holding them up, one way or another; when they got to the center of the group, they couldn't fall anyway, and when they were shifted to the edges they got used as shields until the next nervous reconfiguration. Even Snape was getting anxious, although he seemed to believe he was still in the paddock amid frantic sheep.

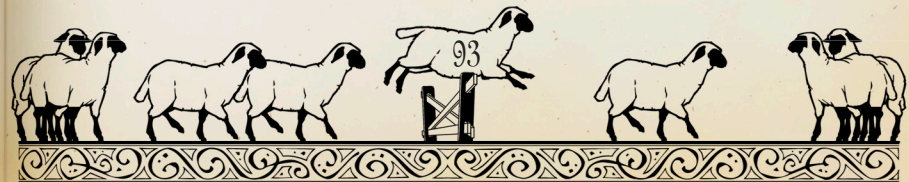
Gusty sighs of relief saluted Hagrid as the Groundskeeper hauled open the huge double doors of the barn. "In yeh go!" he directed cheerfully, herding them as if they were ducklings.

His effort was unnecessary. In perhaps the first truly coordinated and peaceable, mutual act of their lives, the Marauders and the Slytherin study group bolted into the sanctuary of the barn.

"That's the spirit!" encouraged Hagrid, and with a reassuring THUD! he closed and bolted the barn doors, confining the miscreants safely within the warm, hay-scented dimness.



"Right, let's get yeh started," said Hagrid, clumping through the dim room to throw open the upper half of another door, which let a stunning amount of light into the chamber and set something to squealing. Lucius assumed it was Pettigrew until vision returned and he could see pigs in a low-walled enclosure near the door.



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Eyes streaming, the sheep-thieves blinkingly inspected the illuminated portion of the building.

It wasn't worth the looking at.

The stables were horrible. And they *stank*. And there was hay absolutely *everywhere*, not just on the floor the way it was shown in rustic paintings, but actually drifting like sweet-scented dust through the air, settling onto clothes and getting under collars, making everyone itch and setting Lupin to sneezing frantically.

"Tch. I was afraid o' that." Hagrid frowned sympathetically and caught hold of the suffering boy as a tempestuous sneeze nearly took Lupin off his feet. "Let's have yer kerchief, Remus," he requested, rummaging in his pockets. He pulled out another deceased sparrow, shrugged, and fished in another pocket to produce a small green bottle. "Here we are, jus' the stuff!" He plucked Lupin's crumpled handkerchief from the gasping Gryffindor's hand and sprinkled some of the bottle's contents onto the fabric, wadding it into a ball and working the liquid into the cloth. "There," Hagrid said after a few moments, "that oughtta do it. Remus, you tie this 'round yer head... cover yer nose and mouth," he directed.

Eyes streaming, Lupin did so.

Malfoy snickered. "That's one gagged, any rate. The day's improving."

"It'll never be enough to shut *him* up," sighed Crabbe.

Lupin drew a shaky breath, looked alarmed, and com-

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menced a flurry of sneezes that sent him reeling into Potter and Black, who caught him and turned concerned looks up to Hagrid. "What is that stuff, Hagrid?" asked Potter.

"*Hahh-ahh-ahh-annnh-*" gasped Lupin.

The Groundskeeper shrugged easily, but his eyes held a light of concern. "Well, it's hayfever remedy, o'course... made up of all the stuff that sets folk ter sneezin' an' coughin'... it's really good," Hagrid promised, reaching out a hand to stop Lupin from losing his balance to another typhoon sneeze. "Gets it all over with at once, like..."

Lucius laughed gleefully, and stood back to watch the miserable Marauder suffer. Crabbe and Goyle joined him, instinctively flanking him as they enjoyed the show.

"Cinnamon sticks?" queried Snape, looking puzzled as he stared at Lupin's spasms of sniffling sneezes.

"How long does this last, Hagrid?" asked Potter, clinging onto his convulsing comrade.

"'Til he stops breathing altogether?" growled Black, grimly hanging onto Lupin's other arm.

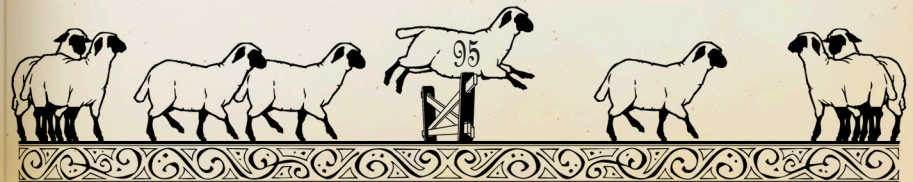
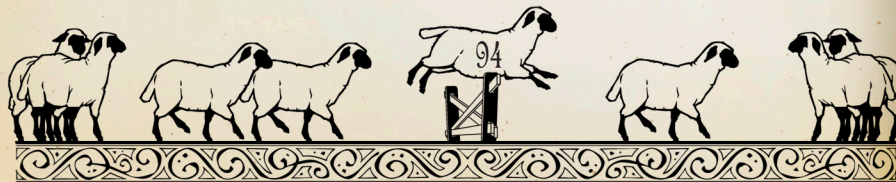
"No, no, it won't be like that," Hagrid reassured them hastily.

"Pity," breathed Lucius.

Crabbe blinked at him, and after a few moments observing Lupin's distress, he murmured, "But, Luke, if he's dead, how would we make him do our share of the work?"

Lucius stared at him.

Clearly the natural order of things was collapsing. Crabbe was thinking. Snape was not. He, Lucius, was expected to do servants' work. Things fell apart. The



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center could not hold. On the up side, Hagrid apparently fancied himself a Potion Master and, hopefully, would be sent off to Azkaban for murdering a student.

Malfoy was composing the distraught and revelatory letter to his father when Lupin folded over with one cataclysmic sneeze which took him to the floor, and his allies with him.

It was quiet.

"That's it, he's dead — " started Black, scrambling around to his knees to listen at Lupin's chest.

"Remus, talk to me — " began Potter, pleadingly, waving a hand in front of Lupin's fixed stare.

Lupin slowly blinked his swollen eyes and said weakly, "Help me up, fellows. The ride's over and I'd like to throw up, now."

His comrades looked relieved and with encouragements helped him to his feet; looking damp and ragged, the smallest Gryffindor let himself be escorted towards the half-door.

"Wait — the horses — " said Pettigrew nervously.

"They'll bite his head clean off," realized Black, hesitating.

"Naw, that door goes ter the pigyard," Hagrid said reassuringly. "The horses can't get in it."

Lupin merped. Then he made a singularly sick sound, the kind that comes from deep in the belly and means a mess all over the carpet.

Hagrid stepped towards him, but Snape was closer and quicker, moving fluidly, grabbing Lupin, whipping

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the kerchief off the smaller boy's face and neatly bending Lupin over a pile of hay in the nearest corner. He supported the Gryffindor while Lupin retched, then propped him against the wall and shook his head. "You mustn't drink it when it's teal," Snape cautioned, frowning intensely. "You have to wait 'til it's quite blue and clear."

The other Marauders were staring, while Hagrid collected their queasy comrade and led him towards a washtub. "Did... Snape... just do Remus a favor?" stammered Potter.

"Yeah." Black nodded dazedly.

They thought about this for a few seconds. Then Potter theorized, "Probably just instinctive, really... he and Jenny Goldberg must hold the school record for excruciating self-induced ailments."

Pettigrew laughed. "Probably." The pudgy Gryffindor grinned wickedly and sneaked with the grace of an under-inflated dirigible over behind Snape, to tap the smaller boy on one shoulder before hurrying back to his fellows.

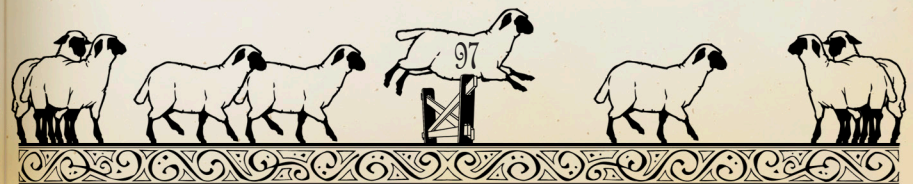
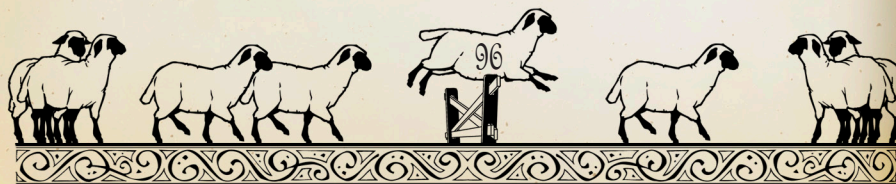
Snape began shuffling in compulsive circles, staring apprehensively at his shoulder. "Roquefort's loose again. Fetch me the net, will you?"

"If only we could find one large enough," muttered Lucius to Crabbe with disdain. It wouldn't be long before the idiot boy got dizzy and keeled over.

Keele.

"Come on, Sev," Lucius commanded, gathering Snape in before he did himself a damage.

"Hi, Jenny," Snape said happily. "Have you seen where



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I put the #3 copper ladle? The one with the ding in?"

"Dingbat," muttered Lucius.

Snape blinked and started looking around overhead.

Hagrid had returned a damp, but calmer Lupin to the Gryffindors and was clumping around again. A row of clerestory shutters suddenly folded back, yawning like a luminous abyss and letting the boys get their first really good look at their prison. Snape, who had been looking intently upwards, yelped and went down in a heap, throwing his cloak over his head against the glare. Lucius left him there while he tried to absorb the dimensions of the stable.

It was *huge*.

It was actually larger than anything at Malfoy Manor.

He hadn't thought that was possible.

Oh, Hogwarts, of course, but that was a *castle*, which had been undergoing perpetual creative renovations for centuries.

"How do you think the teachers have managed to hide *this* from us for four years?" inquired Potter in a speculative tone.

"Yeh haven't needed ter know, have yeh?" said Hagrid with a grin. He seemed to take a proprietary pride in the stables. "Besides, it mostly only gets used when we have visitors, or when the Centaurs need an inside place ter have a meetin'."

"Centaurs, like in th-oof," Black doubled over Lupin's elbow.

Centaurs? The only Centaurs to be seen for leagues lived deep in the Forbidden Forest, and they were dis-

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tinctly antisocial. Black could know about them only if the Marauders had *also* been undertaking midnight sylvan excursions...

How were they getting away with it?

They weren't cleverer. They must have something, some kind of magical device.... That, or they were bribing Hagrid. An intriguing idea. Lucius wished Snape were coherent; Snape was really good at discovering things people would rather keep hidden.

Maybe he *wouldn't* ask Snape to do the Herbology assignments, as well.

"It's going to take us *years* to clean all this," Goyle groaned, right in Lucius's ear, bringing him back to the current problem.

Dilemma.

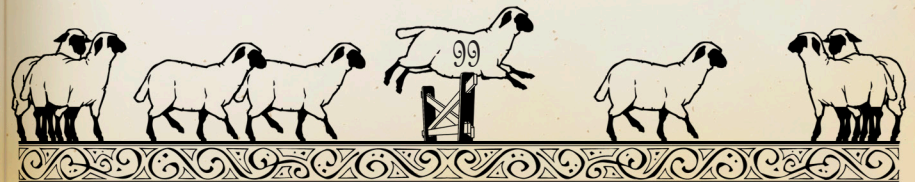
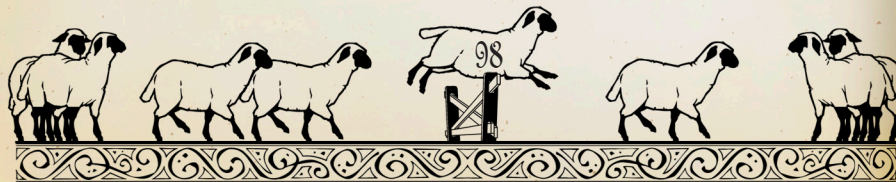
Bleak tableau.

Pity Goyle wasn't bright enough to exaggerate.

Lucius bit back a filthy word and resolved to remember this place as he grew into a proper Dark Wizard; he could use it as an *abattoir* for his errant minions.

What other use could there be for all those stalls, but to contain the condemned?

The nearest stalls would serve for inept House Elves; they were low enough for ponies even a goblin could ride. Receding off into the distance were stalls and box stalls of increasing size, useful for First through Seventh Years as well as uncooperative Faculty members. Along and supporting the far wall was a stall



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that looked large enough to hold a horse Hagrid could ride... or, much better, an elephant that could flatten Hagrid, perhaps in a large Coliseum-like event.

Lucius was interrupted in his plans by a noisy, dusty hysteria of chickens. Disturbed by the influx of light, the parti-coloured flock scurried out of the nearby stalls to investigate the new arrivals – especially about the bootlaces, which they seemed to think were worms.

He kicked a chicken aside and continued to survey his future domain.

It needed work.

A lot of work.

Suspicious stains darkened the wood of the floor, and the rich scent of animal presence was rising as the sun warmed a pile of dung in one corner. On the walls hung items which held promise of use as instruments of torture, although they lacked vision and efficiency of design. Overhead, a hayloft lowered like a thundercloud, sifting down a jaundiced miasma of haydust.

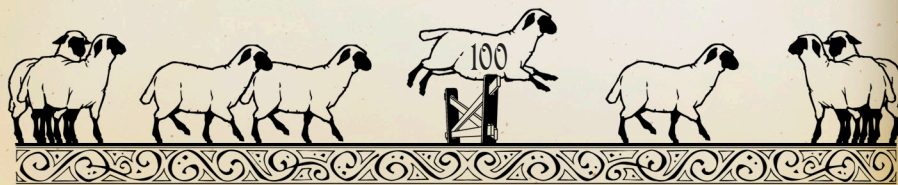
Snape sat up, still blinking. "First," he said, "we divert a river..."

Goyle sighed and threw Snape's cape back over the befuddled boy's head. "Go back to sleep, Sev."

A barn owl came swooping in through the opened upper windows, and deposited a white trail down the shoulder of Sirius Black's cloak before disappearing into a hole in the wall.

"Oh, I say, don't tell me there are *wild* owls in here!"

Black protested, while the other boys laughed at his



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misfortune. "Those things have no manners at all!"

"Cert'nly they do," corrected Hagrid. "They've got perfect manners... yeh don't know that, 'cause they're owl manners, is all. If yeh learned how ter talk to 'em, Sirius, you'd find they're marvelous conversationalists... though yeh do have ter keep steerin' the topic back from mice."

"Bit like Sev," breathed Lucius, glancing at his dazed associate. Snape had put his grievously tousled head out like a turtle and was staring at a rooster, which was staring back aggressively. "All right there, Sev?"

"Does that owl... look funny to you?" Snape queried.

"Well done, Sev, at least you know it's a bird. Yes, the owl looks funny because it's a chicken."

"Oh." Snape blinked a couple of times. "So why has it got horns?"

"It's a basilisk," grumbled Lucius.

"Aw, now, there's not a basilisk within a hundred miles o' here," Hagrid declared.

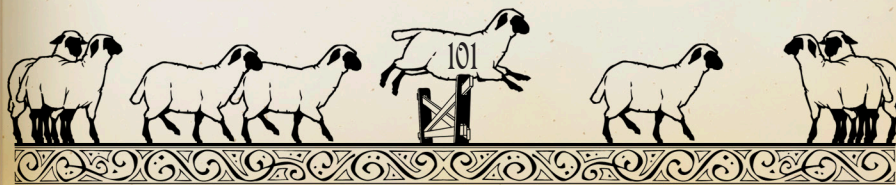
"...and parselmouth, sage, rosemary, and thyme..." recited Snape, sitting back on his heels and looking up again. "The butterflies are pretty, don't you think?"

For a wonder, there actually was a small moth fluttering through the vicinity of Snape's gaze.

"Yes, indeed, Sev," Malfoy said, pleased at this sign of Snape's increasing usefulness.

A barn owl popped its head out of the wall and ate the wanderer.

Snape kept watching the moth. It was apparently



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travelling the length of the barn.

Lucius sighed. And then started at the sight of Hagrid bearing down on him with a pitchfork.

"Now then," Hagrid announced, shoving the implement into Malfoy's hands. "The first thing ter do today is get the hay outta the loft." As the Groundskeeper moved aside, Lucius noted apprehensively that the Marauders had already been armed. Perhaps fortunately, so had Crabbe and Goyle.

Hagrid was looking down at Snape, a last pitchfork looking like a lobster fork in his huge hand. "Well, maybe not you..." He held out the pitchfork. "Can yeh tell me what it is, then?"

"The number three copper ladle with the ding in!" With a grin, Snape reached for it. "Well done, Jenny!"

"Guess not," Hagrid said, holding the pitchfork over his head.

Snape looked around to see where the ladle had fallen.

A loud clang drew everyone's attention to Sirius Black, who was sprawled on the floor, a pair of dark iron manacles joining his wrists and weighting him down past all hope of rising. He looked stunned. Gavin Goyle was standing over him and laughing raucously. Crabbe looked amazed, and then joined in the merriment.

"That's the thing about these pitchforks," rumbled Hagrid, over the rising chatter. "They're charmed so's yeh can't use 'em... inappropriately, like." He cast a stern gaze down at Black, then directed it round the assembled sheep-thieves.



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Easily he lifted Black to his feet, and drew from his seemingly-bottomless coat a small stone which he touched to the manacles, transforming them back to a pitchfork, which caused Black to overbalance and drop startled to his knees. "Third time yeh misuse one o' these, it'll change past anythin' I can fix, an' yeh'll be scrubbin' the floor in chains fer th' rest o' the' day... *with the sure promise o' Sunday detention ter follow.*"

"So we get two swings. Let's not waste them," murmured Lucius to Crabbe, who nodded seriously.

Black stood up, sulking as he took hold of the pitchfork again. "Catch me wearing those things again..." he growled.

"Right, now, up there is the loft... No wait," Hagrid scratched his bushy hair. "If yeh start droppin' hay down here, yeh'll scare the chickens...."

"And bury Snape," said Goyle.

"Let's get started!" Potter and Black chorused, racing for the ladder.

"No! Wait," Hagrid directed. "Wait. Get the chickens out inter the yard first. There, the door by the pigpen." He looked over the armed group. "Maybe I should have yeh take the pigs out, too."

"Couldn't you have done all that before?" asked Malfoy crossly.

Hagrid stared at him over the chickens' heads. "Then what'd be the point of this detention, hey? Supposed ter be teaching yeh ter care fer animals and their homes, and treat 'em both with respect!"



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"Do we have to move the barn owls outside?" asked Crabbe, looking unhappily into the rafters.

"Nah, jus' keep out o' their way," Hagrid advised. "And try not to look like mice."

Crabbe spent far too long considering how not to look like a mouse.

"Well, go on, put those pitchforks inter the corner fer now."

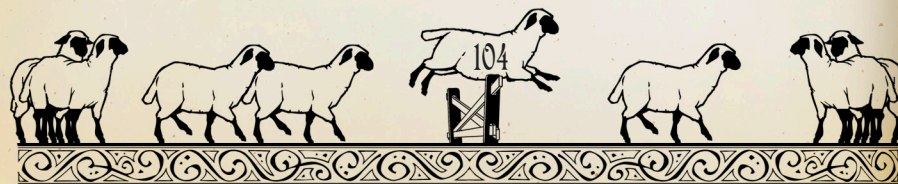
There was a wary disarmament. Lucius picked a different corner than Potter had. He wasn't about to get his pitchfork mixed up with Black's.

"Now then," Hagrid directed, "grab a chicken — here, see how yeh do it, you scoop 'em up 'round the middle, gently, so's not ter hurt 'em, and out over the half-door — whoops, shut that, will yeh, Remus? Ta very much." The Groundskeeper gently deposited his chickens outside, and turned expectantly back to his wards. "Well, what are yeh all waitin' fer? Go on!" he encouraged.

The boys looked around the stables. By a fast count, they were outnumbered five to one.

Potter moved towards a couple of hens, who scuttled clucking away from him. Black tried to head them off, and they ran straight for Lupin, only to squawk and wheel in another direction when they got within two feet of him. Pettigrew made a grab at one hen and came up with a few feathers and a pecked hand. "Ouch!"

The watching Slytherins laughed, enjoying their rivals' antics as the four Gryffindors struggled to catch a single chicken, which Black and Potter together



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heaved — gently — over the door into the sunshine.

Potter turned back to the room, panting, hay in his incredibly messy hair. "First point to Gryffindor," he challenged.

Malfoy scowled. "It's not Quidditch, Potter."

"No, but it'll go faster if we make it a game," Potter proposed, grinning. "Come on, lads, let's have another go... that one, in the corner, right... on three...."

Malfoy rolled his eyes, stopping their orbit as he saw Hagrid looming over him.

"Be about it, Mr. Malfoy," directed Hagrid, picking up Snape.

"Honestly! We weren't even *in* the forest!" Snape protested as Hagrid deposited him on a bale of hay. The Groundskeeper settled alongside him, pulling out a round of cheddar to munch on as he watched the proceedings.

"Oh, for — all right, Vic, Gav," summoned Lucius, "we'll back that one into a corner, and you two come at it from either side. Let's make this quick." With a scowl, Malfoy entered the fray.

A terrific amount of dust, hay, feathers, squawks and nipped fingers ensued.

"I've never really *liked* Quidditch," commented Snape, watching with wide, dark eyes. "Can't see the point in it all." A rooster scrambled to a landing in his lap; Snape stared at it. "Snitch seems a bit bigger this year," he noted.

Hagrid scooped up the bird and sent it back into the scrum. "Look at it this way," he offered to the dazed boy,



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"at least we've got good seats!"

"I could be studying," sighed Snape.

"No, yeh couldn't, yeh've got detention," Hagrid reminded him.

Snape nodded. "I've got detention at Severus."

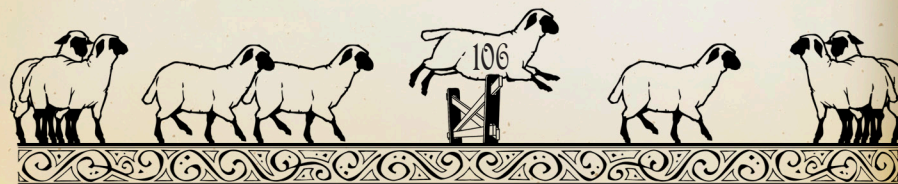
Hagrid patted him on the shoulder, provoking another search for Roquefort, and returned his attention to the *melée*, which indeed had begun to borrow heavily from Quidditch as Potter and Malfoy directed their lieutenants in scooping up and passing the chickens Quaffle-fashion from one boy to another and almost gracefully out the door. "Oh, now, hold on, yer scarin' them!" Hagrid protested.

"Not a bit! Look for yourself, they're fine!" Potter released a rather rumped hen over the half-door. Relieved clucking drifted up from outside.

Malfoy shouldered past him, dropping a kicking rooster into the sunlight and turning back with a stormy look as he daubed blood from a scratch on his cheek. Teeth bared, Lucius stalked back into the arena for another go.

Potter grinned and shrugged at Hagrid, spreading his hands as if to say, "Well, you know how *he* gets." A chicken flew at him from Black's direction and Potter seized it expertly, boosting it up and over the half-door; it gave a surprised squawk and fluttered to safety. "That's eleven, lads! We're leading!"

A hen nearly hit Potter in the face as Malfoy hurled it out the door. "Eight for our side," Lucius noted. A moment later a little brown hen came flapping frantically right at



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his head and wound up tangled in his hair, necessitating rescue while Black laughed with his cronies.

"Yer not ter throw the chickens about!" hollered Hagrid. "And certainly not at each other!"

"Sorry, Hagrid, it slipped loose," apologized Black, grinning.

Hagrid frowned, and lumbered to his feet. The grins faded. "Maybe I should take care o' the pigs meself," the Groundskeeper decided. He went over to the pen, sweet-talked the hogs for a moment, picked up one under each arm and strode outside, leaving the boys unsupervised.

There was the customary moment of silence that generally precedes open hostilities.

The Slytherins and Gryffindors stared with cold, wary eyes at one another, sizing up advantages of terrain, searching for weaknesses.

"Does anyone else see these?" asked Snape, from the corner. The worried tone in his voice made Crabbe and Lupin risk looking over, and they burst into laughter at the sight of Snape keeping quite still beneath the considering gazes of a chicken on his knee, a chicken on his shoulder, and a chicken worrying at his sweater.

"Don't worry, Snape!" called Black, going over to collect his pitchfork. "Give 'em a taste of your hair, they'll leave you well alone!"

"Three for a girl, Sev!" noted Pettigrew.

"That's crows, you fool," snapped Malfoy, heading for his own weapon.



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"Yeh, and it's always only the one that follows Sev about," Crabbe mentioned, collecting his.

"Only I can't find the mail," said Snape, grasping at one hen's leg and earning himself an offended peck. He looked startled and snatched his hand away.

"It really is too easy," murmured Potter.

"But entertaining nonetheless," said Black.

Potter grinned and tossed a bit of wood at the wall near Snape, startling the chickens and causing a regrettable incident.

Snape was not too addled to seek refuge in the nearest corner, shivering and darting his gaze about nervously. "R-really have to add fewer batwings... or at least less fresh..."

"Watch this!" Pettigrew said, moving like a lacrosse player as he headed towards a chicken, lowering his pitchfork with the clear intent to collect and catapult the bothered bird towards Snape.

Well, anyone could play at *that* game. And there were still plenty of chickens available to be flung. Even Crabbe and Goyle got the idea.

Hagrid returned for more pigs and found seven chained boys sprawled and swearing amid scolding chickens, while feathers drifted down like new snow.

Snape was perched atop a haybale, clutching his knees to his chest. "Now you've done it, it's boiled over."

Hagrid started laughing.

"It's not my cauldron, Mr. Filch!" Snape called.



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"No 'tisn't," Hagrid chortled. "Told yeh not to misuse those things," he said, pulling out his stone and starting the round with Potter. "Maybe I oughtta hold onto 'em until yeh've got all the chickens out." He collected each pitchfork as it transformed.

He grinned at the boys, and shuffled the pitchforks around. "Now, one of these," he intoned jovially, "has been changed twice. Next time it'll take yer Head of House ter change it back."

There was a subdued and thoughtful silence. The animals were removed without further ado.

But when the time came to start pitching down hay from the loft, Lupin turned red, pleading eyes up to Hagrid. "Ca'd I do zubbidig eldtze?"

"Ohhh... you need another dose of hayfever potion on that kerchief. Give 'er here a sec," said Hagrid, rummaging in his pocket.

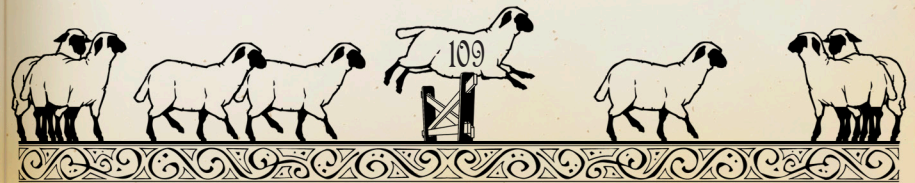
Lupin backed away, eyes wide and bright and wet. "I do'd wadda die," he said pitifully.

"Ah, now, it's not so bad — "

"I dig by ribs are brogen."

"No, never, not from such a light dose... why, yeh'd hafta use five *times* as much - "

"Do dang yu." Lupin shook his head. "I dingk I'b allergik du de pozion. Ca'd I pleadze du zubdig eldze?" He cast his bleary, watery gaze about the barn, looking for an alternative task. "Lug. I cad lug abder Znabe. He'z ztill oud ub hiz bind."



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"Well... yeah..." Hagrid allowed, watching Snape, who had settled into a corner with a bit of tarp and seemed annoyed that his chicken feather wouldn't write. "But yer meant ter be cleanin'."

"Zo gib be zubdig du klead!"

Hagrid pondered this, looking about the barn; suddenly he brightened. "I know jus' the thing! You two can clean the tack! That always takes a while." He waved Lupin toward the door and collected Snape by the shoulder. "Come along."

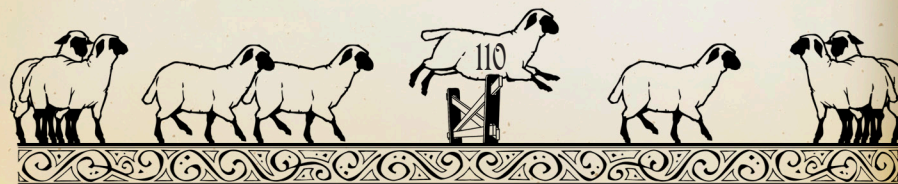
Lucius stared after them, feeling abandoned and oddly circumvented. Snape might not be much use now, but in principle — !

Absolutely inhuman, leaving that poor, addled creature defenseless in the hands of a Marauder! A disabled one at the moment, but that would change....

A horrible protracted clang reverberated from outside. *Keele*. Lucius hurried to the door, almost running into Potter who was doing the same. "He can't have manacled them to the barn!" the Gryffindor exclaimed. "They're not *half* the trouble we are!"

They went outside to see.

Lupin was sitting in the shade against the barn, still miserable, but breathing a little more easily. He had a snarl of straps and buckles in his hands and was polishing the metal parts with a rag. Nearby, Hagrid was piling more tack into a huge wooden tub which was filling itself with water while Snape stared keenly into



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it, bouncing gently on his toes.

"You sure you hit the squid hard enough?" he inquired. "I think it's moving."

"Jus' hang the bits yeh've finished with on the fence," Hagrid told Lupin.

"Wo'd de horzez ead deb? Or be?"

"Hey?" Hagrid said. "Oh, no, they're off grazin'. And they don't much care fer the metal bits." He looked up and saw the rest of the boys watching from the doorway. "Now, what're yeh all lookin' at?" he growled. "Yeh've got work ter do! Up inter the loft with yeh! I'll be up in a minute ter show yer what ter do."

Lucius shot a glare at Lupin, trying to convey exactly what the Gryffindor could expect if anything happened to Snape. It would have worked better if Lupin had been in any condition to notice.

Snape was tugging on Hagrid's pocket as the others filed inside. "You'd better hit it again," he said, casting a nervous glance into the tub. "The last one bit me. Twice."

RAMIFICATIONS CHAPTER 6

rabbit: "Awww... it's so blazing hot outside, the chocolate chips are all melty."

Jinx: "So we'll use 'em in Banana Boats."

rabbit: "Banana Boats?"

Jinx: "Sure! Made 'em in scouts! Here, you scoop out the middle



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of a banana, so it's like a little canoe... load it up with chocolate chips and mini-marshmallows... wrap it in aluminum foil and put it on the barbeque when the coals have burned low, and check on it frequently... when it's all lovely and melty, it's ready!"

rabbit and jinx: mmmmmMMMMMMMMmmmssssiqhhhh....

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize is not ours, and we intend no profit or fame or anything like that from this playful use of others' toys. If you make Banana Boats, please, do not leave food or fires unattended and remember that things just taken off the grill are hot (but heavenly!), so be careful!

GRADUALLY, THE HAY DESCENDED FROM
the loft.
Gravity helped.
In fact, Gravity was probably making the
most consistent effort.

There was a terrific amount of hay, which seemed intent on defeating its unenthusiastic opponents by demonstrating Inertiative.

The most cooperative hay was in bales, which could be pushed to the edge of the loft and left to their fates. The less tractable hay was heaped into stacks, the looming mother of which scarcely seemed to shrink or change despite the boys' grumbling efforts. It was a moment of victory when one side of their nemesis collapsed, burying Pettigrew to the knees.

The condemned laborers would have cheered, or at



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least grinned, except for the omnipresence of the most contumacious hay: the aforementioned jaundiced miasma, which they had now met up close and far too personally. The dense, amber nebula was made up of wretched, free-floating, wicked and determined threads of hay which drifted along upon the slightest breezes, before plastering themselves onto sweaty, grumpy faces.

Lucius Malfoy, glowing with exertion, found the whole situation dismally... rustic. A Malfoy, reduced to lumbering about like a stablehand! Not to mention trying to work with dozens of little strands stuck all across one's face —

Lucius had an unfortunate insight into what it must be like Being Sev.

Itchy.

And maddening.

Which explained so much, really.

Sirius Black, bristling golden with chaff, staggered past with a forkful of wobbling hay. He was losing half the burden as he went, and gritting out a bitter mantra: "This. Would. Be. Much. Easier. If. We. Had. Our. Wands."

"*Wingardium Leviosa*," intoned Potter, waving his pitchfork hopefully. There came a loud clang, accompanied by Potter's cry of dismay. "It was a *joke*!"

"And it was very funny," Malfoy reassured him, leaning on his own pitchfork to fully appreciate the happy sight of Pestilential Potter in chains.

"D'you suppose that's the second or the third time?" Goyle rumbled, frowning. "He's not going to be able to help if his



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pitchfork's changed into manacles for good, is he?"

"Ah, but think of how he'll add to the ambience," Lucius said expansively.

He waited.

Crabbe and Goyle waited.

Lucius sighed and wondered if Snape would still think it funny six hours from now. Well, he would if Potter were still enchained... they could hang him on the wall, have a little hexing practice....

Hagrid's head appeared through the trapdoor in the center of the loft. He raised a hedgerow eyebrow. "I'm surprised at yeh, James."

"I'm surprised myself," Potter admitted, cheerful now that rescue was at hand.

"These things can't take a joke," Black complained, gingerly hoisting another forkful of hay.

"Should think not," Hagrid said, reaching one long arm over to touch the chains with his stone.

To sighs of relief, and disappointment, the pitchfork resumed its proper shape.

"Anyone else?" invited Hagrid brightly. There were no takers. He smiled approvingly and looked around the loft. "Yeh're makin' good progress," he encouraged them, ignoring the reality of the situation. "Yeh'll be able ter mop up this end, soon and get in ter muck out the upper stalls, like."

"Upper stalls?" repeated Lucius, in tones that his father would use on a prevaricating House Elf.

"Yeah, right through that door, there," Hagrid waved at

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a half-buried door in the far wall that Lucius had thought must lead outside. "Stalls for the pegasi, like. Don't throw any of the mess down on the clean hay, mind. There's a door fer that in the east wall of that part o' the barn."

"What clean hay?" asked Pettigrew, peeling some off his face distastefully.

"The hay yeh been workin' with. Yeh didn't think it looked like this after the horses got done with it, did yeh?"

Black stared at the Groundskeeper, indignation reddening his cheeks. "It's not as if we *cooked* and *ate* the sheep!" he protested.

"Sure y'did. Had some of 'em for supper las' night, didn't yeh?"

"Do you think it was Daisy and Ellie Sue?" Goyle asked in a worried tone. "We were just getting to know them!"

"rrrReally?" purred Potter. Goyle blinked at him.

Hagrid chuckled. "Come on, now," he chivvied his charges. "Jus' finish shiftin' this lot and yeh can start on the stalls and the moppin'. I'll go an' get the buckets ready." He started back down the ladder.

"Any chance Remus and Snape can come and help?" Pettigrew asked, staring at the remaining heaps of hay.

Hagrid shook his bushy head decisively. "Naw. They're better off with the tack. Some o' that stuff hasn't been polished in years, so the repeat scrubbin's are actually helpin'. Mind, they might end up polishin' some of the metal bits a bit thinner..." He shrugged and vanished downwards again.



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The Disgraced recommenced their labors in low humor, manipulating the pitchforks as if performing an underwater ballet.

After several minutes' digging and hefting, Sirius Black cleared the hay away from the door Hagrid had indicated. "Let's see how bad it is, lads... 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here,'" he intoned, and then stopped. "Oh, sorry, that's the motto over your dormitory room, isn't it Malfoy."

It was, actually. He'd put up a little plaque to celebrate Hugh Folderol's departure. Lucius met Black's impudent grin with serene disdain. Unfortunately, Black grinned all the wider as Goyle and Crabbe looked at each other in alarm, though, so the disdain was wasted.

Setting his pitchfork aside, Black hauled open the door and looked into the next room.

The gangly Gryffindor promptly reeled gagging to one side. A flurry of barn owls flapped past him, indignant at being disturbed. Black came up from the drift of hay coughing, with more straw in his hair and a scowl on his face as he glared at his laughing companions. "It's not funny, lads, you should get a whiff of that! It's as bad as the basin of the Owlery... if something'd *died* in there!" He shut the door firmly with his foot. "Died a month ago," he added tartly.

Goyle frowned. "Smells like cheese." He looked around for support of this observation, and discovered Pettigrew crouched behind a haybale, cramming bits of cheese into his mouth. "Hey! Where'd you get *that*?" demanded Goyle,



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striding over to appropriate the treat.

"Mmh!" Pettigrew protested as he was upended, and a third of Hagrid's neglected cheese round rolled to a wobbly stop beneath him.

"Look, fellows, *food*!" Goyle cried happily, shaking Pettigrew in celebratory emphasis.

"Careful, you're not supposed to abuse things up here," growled Black, advancing.

"Aw, but he doesn't turn into anything," said Goyle cheerfully, "except a snivelling lump!" He waited 'til Crabbe scooped up the cheese before thumping Pettigrew to the splintery floor.

"That was *mine*!"

"Thieving from the Groundskeeper, dear, dear..." Lucius shook his head, accepting his king's share of the spoils from Crabbe. "No wonder you've got detention. Bad element, and no mistake."

"You'll come to a bad end, someday," warned Crabbe, around a cheekful of cheddar.

Goyle was busy wolfing down his bit, but managed a supportive smirk while he chewed.

Potter came over warily and pulled his friend to his feet. "Honestly, Pete, you could've shared!"

"H hadn't had a chance yet, had I? They come over here, on our side of the loft, bullies as usual... you *saw* him, he *took* it from me..."

"Took what?" asked Hagrid from the trapdoor.

Yelps and loudish swallows greeted this query, as



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the Groundskeeper clambered into the loft, carrying two huge, brimming buckets and a pair of mops.

"Everything all right, up here?" Hagrid asked, peering down at his detainees.

The Slytherins all nodded angelically.

"Just fine, Hagrid," Potter reassured him, kicking Pettigrew in the ankles. "Goyle's being a nit, that's all."

"Coming over to our side of the barn," grumbled Pettigrew, nursing his shins with his opposite feet and nearly tipping over.

"There's no one got a *side* o' the *barn*," Hagrid pointed out. "Yer meant ter be cooperatin'."

"We are," soothed Malfoy. After all, Pettigrew had shared his cheese.

"Glad ter hear it. How are yeh — oh, yeh got the doorway cleared! Well done! Now, there's four stalls in there, so four of yeh can go and muck 'em out while the other two mop in here — "

"I'll mop," Black volunteered.

"So will I," said Lucius. Even if it meant having to work with Black to remove the eternal haystack, it would be better than mucking out stalls.

The four slower boys slumped towards the door, vanishing through it with grimaces and quickly muffled wails of dismay. "How can we clean if we can't breathe?" Pettigrew wheezed.

"Shurrup!" Potter squeaked. "D'you want him to get out that hayfever stuff – ?!"



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Goyle's voice came back haltingly through the closing door. "Smells better than burnt mangos, anyway..."

"Yeah," choked Crabbe, "it does that...."

Hagrid followed the quartet into the next room. Malfoy and Black waited a while, and then sat down to rest on opposite sides of the enormous motherstack, eyeing one another drowsily while they listened to Hagrid's cheerful burbling, the hasty banging of shutters and gradually diminishing chorus of complaints.

Lucius stifled a yawn. Perhaps sitting down had been an error. Still, one could rest, so long as one *Remained Vigilant and Kept the Enemy Under Scrutiny*. Lucius struggled to keep his eyes open, and forwent the pleasure of goading Black into misusing his pitchfork; Black would manage that soon enough, all on his own.

Hagrid returned, to rouse them with a thunderclap of his hands and an undaunted smile. "On yer feet, now! Jus' a li'l bit left!"

The enduring mound of hay loomed monstrously over the two boys.

"Well, go on!" Hagrid bade them cheerfully. "It'll only take a li'l bit longer."

He wasn't joking.

Reluctantly, Lucius and Black heaved themselves onto their feet and started digging and lifting. Hagrid busied himself with the buckets and mops, clattering and sloshing and humming a little tune. After a couple of minutes he turned with a jovial grin — which



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faded as he blinked disappointedly at the unperturbed mountain of hay. "Oh, dear."

The boys froze, each warily eyeing his pitchfork in case it should do something new and unpleasant.

"Hadn't thought o' that..." murmured Hagrid, causing more worried looks. He shook his bushy head dismissively. "Yeh jus' don't have the height, yet... haven't got the heft..." The Groundskeeper strode to the far wall to collect a weatherbroken old door. "Clear the way," he advised. Standing the door on end before him, he advanced like a Roman legionary towards the massive stack of hay... which crumbled before this onslaught, the great bulk of it sliding smoothly to tumble over the edge of the loft. Four more quick sweeps with the door held lengthwise cleared the loft entirely.

"That's better," Hagrid approved. "That'll give yeh some room ter work."

Crammed into a corner refuge with Black, Lucius stared at the broad, hay-free floor, and opined quietly, "He *could* have done that two hours ago."

"Play nice," Black murmured, "and maybe he'll help us mop, too."

Lucius nodded curtly. *Alliances of Necessity* were permissible. Brief ones. One could always backstab after the blisters had healed.

Hagrid waved them over and exchanged their pitchforks for mops, mixing up the pitchforks again as he set them aside. Lucius bit back a sigh; he'd tried mark-



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ing his with a pocketknife, but the wood had healed itself before he'd finished the first cut.

Hagrid handed him a bucket big enough to drown a lamb in, leaving Malfoy staggering to keep the contents from slopping onto the floor. God knew what was in there. Lucius had learned not to let *anything* spill.

He got it settled and cast a wary glance inside. The liquid was a reddish lavender, a color he associated with the acidic demises of a series of small Persian carpets. "What's in this, Hagrid?" he demanded suspiciously, edging back.

"Mostly water," said their warden, as he steered Black and his bucket to another section of floor. "An' a bit o' help."

Lucius, who had swabbed up many a midnight flood from Snape's unsupervised cauldronwork, swirled his mop uncertainly through the stuff. A bubble drifted upwards, containing the image of a charwoman, whose song of sweet nightingales trilled thinly into the air.

"Ella's Enchanted Everkleen?" Black moaned, swatting at another bubble to stop the descant. "Hagrid, that stuff's horrible!"

"Aw, naw it ain't, it's really good!" Hagrid assured him. "Smells nice, works great, an' gives yeh a bit o'company as well!"

The bubbles had multiplied into a rather shrill chorus, and were arranging their song into a larkish round. The scent of primroses began to hang heavy in the air. The song only had eight words. The repetitions loomed.

They were on the fifth chorus already. Black boggled at



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Malfoy, with the unmistakable air of a befuddled minion. Lucius thought desperately and heard himself cry out, "We're not permitted to use magic during this detention!"

Black stared at him. Lucius glared back. Even *Muggle* soap had to be better than the insipid singing bubbles.

"No, yer not, Hagrid agreed, "but *I* didn't go stealin' sheep in the middle o' the night, an' so *I* can use a bit o' Ella's Enchanted Everkleen if I like. It'll get the barn clean as a whisker," he assured them. "It's workin' great on the tack."

Lucius bit his lower lip, then stiffened the upper. All right. At least the chirping chorus was less annoying than Sev's ramblings or Pettigrew's whining.

"That should be plenty fer yeh ter do the hayloft," judged Hagrid. He listened for a few moments, then smiled as he heard nary a clang and only a few rude words from the other room. "I'll be back in a bit," he promised. "Set to it, then."

Lucius sighed and plunged his mop into the primrose-scented mixture, giving it a good swirl. A flurry of bubbles rose up like a giddy opera chorus, imploring yet another sweet song from the uncooperative sweet nightingale.

"That's the trouble with this stuff," cautioned Black cheerfully, hauling a dripping mop out of his bucket and considering where to start. "The more you stir it up, the more bubbles you get. They'll drive you mad, eventually."

Lucius tried stirring more gently, incurring fewer bubbles. He wrung the mop by neatly twisting it against the side of the bucket and started over to a corner to begin.

He looked up sharply as his boots were spattered by



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a spray from Black's mop. The Gryffindor was sloshing water and bubbles around like he cared nothing for the consequences — he'd be soaked to the knees, soon.

His clumsiness could be entertaining, if it weren't so noisy. Five hundred charwomen demanded another blasted song from the blasted sweet nightingale. Lucius imagined the wretched bird had been terrified into silence... or, more likely, the stupid scullions couldn't *hear* it over their own mewling....

Black splashed another hundred and fifty sopranos into the din.

Really, this was intolerable. And there was a lot of loft to be washed. Lucius shouted over the crescendo at Black, "*You're doing that all wrong!*"

Black grinned like the fool he was. "No, I'm not! You've got to get the soap onto the floor in order to get any cleaning done! Besides, since when did a Malfoy even know what a mop is, much less how to use one?"

Since January of their First Year, actually; Snape had wasted no time in setting up the self-heating traveller's cauldron Lucius had given him for Christmas... and promptly surpassing its limits.

You got so that you could hear that quiet "oops" even from the depths of a really good dream.

Lucius scowled at the Gryffindor's sloppy efforts. If you waved a sopping mop around the way Black was doing you'd lose half the carpet and some of the tapestries, not to mention pitting the windowpanes.



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Idiot.

"I'll show *you* how to use a mop!" Lucius vowed as he advanced, spinning smoothly as a ninja, the dripping end of the mop aimed perfectly at Black's startled face. Mid-arc the mop curled itself back about its wielder's neck and wrists and transformed into a heavy oaken stock. Lucius crashed to his knees in a fit of outraged fury while Black threw his head back and howled with laughter.

Naturally, everyone came running to see the spectacle. Some of the laughter above Lucius's head sounded suspiciously like Crabbe and Goyle's.

Lucius struggled into a more upright sitting position and subsided into dignified grinding of his teeth, fuming, waiting for Hagrid. Really this wasn't fair. If Sev had been here this would have happened to *him*. That was how it was *supposed* to go. Sev excelled at being a *Cautionary Example*.

Goyle and Crabbe stumped over, presumably to help, and stared expectantly down at their leader. They had kerchiefs tied over their mouths and noses, and Malfoy noted with exasperation that the polka dots on them were all tiny chubby cheery sheep. "Er. All right there, Luke?" asked Crabbe hesitantly, when enough bubbles had popped to make conversation possible.

Malfoy granted him a petrifying glare.

"Whatever did that to you?" queried Goyle nervously.

"The mops," supplied Black gleefully. "They're like the pitchforks."

Groans met this revelation. "Well," sighed Potter



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through his harlequin kerchief, wandering over to inspect the stock, "at least we know about it, now, so hopefully we'll keep our necks free... touch wood." He grinned and knocked on Malfoy's imprisoning collar.

Lucius hissed, and spat at him.

Potter dodged neatly. "You're going to have to mop that up, you know."

Goyle and Crabbe were just starting to upend Potter over the bucket when Hagrid thumped back through the trapdoor, carrying an even larger bucket and four mops. "An' how's it goin' up — oh, dear."

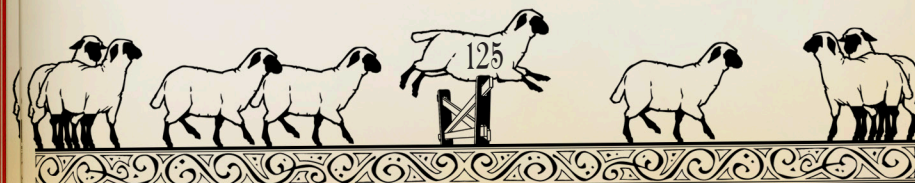
"He was choking," said Crabbe, deftly dropping begrimed crumbs of stolen cheese as he shook Potter.

"Yes... very bad, that," agreed Goyle.

Hagrid took Potter from them and gave him a thump on the back, sending his glasses flying.

Black made a handsome dive for them and slid almost to the edge of the loft in the soapy water; he came up half drenched and surrounded by chirruping bubbles, clutching the glasses in his teeth. He spat them into his hand and returned them to their owner, swatting idly at a cluster of bubbles; his grin faltered as the thin wire frames divided the bubbles in half instead of popping them, and the octave rose. "Whups."

"Thanks, Sirius." Potter took his glasses back, restored them to a semblance of their former shape, wiped them on his shirt, and set them into place so he could glare at his assailants. "I *wasn't* choking."



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"Well, I thought so," blustered Crabbe. "You were all red in the face, like... "

"Because you were holding me upside down," Potter reminded him.

Lucius cleared his throat. "Ahem."

Goyle, who was leaning on the stock, glanced down idly and then startled, quickly distancing himself a couple of paces. "I say," he called, "I say, could we let Lucius loose?"

Hagrid clumped over and rummaged through his pockets to produce a twig, which he touched to the stocks to change them back into a mop.

"Thank you," Malfoy clipped, regaining his feet and his dignity. He gazed darkly up from hooded eyes at the Groundskeeper, which was uncomfortable but intimidating. "How many times do the mops transform, before the stocks become permanent?"

Hagrid matched his cool stare. "Keep at it, I expect yeh'll find out."

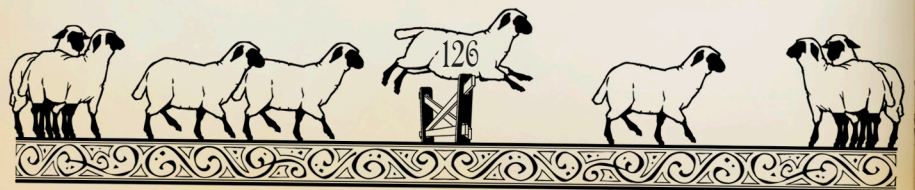
Malfoy scowled at him, then wisely transferred his wrath to Black, who was a manageable target. Perhaps he could drown him in the bucket.

What could a bucket turn into?

Probably some combination of covered bath and iron maiden, like the one in the green parlor at home.

Too messy. And Black would go into his I've-Been-Wronged act.

"If yeh can't mop properly, switch with one o' yer friends," said Hagrid. "No point ter draggin' the work out."



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"I slipped." Lucius reclaimed his mop.

Crabbe and Goyle sighed resignedly, tightening their kerchiefs.

Potter did likewise. "So, Hagrid," he inquired casually, "when's the last time those stalls got cleaned?" He nodded towards the other room, which had been airing out during this diversion.

"We-ell... it *has* been awhile," admitted the Groundskeeper.

"Yeah — centuries!" piped Pettigrew, retying his striped kerchief as he glared back through the door.

"Naw, jus' long enough to ripen, like. Woulda dried out if it'd been centuries. I'd've mucked them out meself, but I had some things to tend ter in the Forest," he said, eyeing the Slytherins. The Gryffindors snickered and Hagrid wagged a remonstrative finger at them. "And *then* I had ter help calm down all those sheep yeh frightened... one of the poor lambs wouldn't stop cryin' till we fetched it a footstool ter settle up against, poor li'l mite." Hagrid sniffled and pulled out a handkerchief the size of a young flag, blowing his nose noisily before glaring at the miscreants. "Go on, then. Back to work," he said firmly, shooing the stall cleaners like chickens towards the door.

"An' you two," warned the Groundskeeper, returning his attention to the swabbers. "Mop properly, unnerstand? This oughtn't take all day!" Plucking Black's mop from his hands, Hagrid gave each bucket



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a really good swirl. "That's better... gotta mix it up," he approved, through a cacophony of bubbles. "Go on, now!" he ordered and left.

All right for him. Lucius and Black mopped quickly, hoping to speed their escape from the incessant tune.

During the two hundred eightieth chorus, Black trudged over to Malfoy's side, leaned on his mop, stared blearily at his companion and shouted, "THIS MUST BE WORKING AFTER ALL!"

"WHY'S THAT?!" asked Lucius guardedly, wishing that leftover cheddar crumbs made better earplugs.

"BECAUSE THEY'RE TRYING TO GET US TO AGREE, AND I'LL BET YOU WILL: NEXT NIGHTINGALE I HEAR, I'M GOING TO HUNT IT DOWN AND HAVE IT FOR SUPPER!"

Lucius nodded. "I KNOW JUST THE RECIPE!" he offered. The nightingale would look well *en sarcophage*. Then he smiled, not nicely. "BUT I'D POISON YOURS!"

"ALL RIGHT THEN!" Reassured, Black went back to mopping.



At some point, Lucius realized that he had been mopping in his sleep.

He'd acquired the talent thanks to his roommate's overflowing curiosity, yes, but it was still disconcerting to discover that someone had piled bales of hay along the brink of the loft to keep him from mopping off the edge.

This was bad. One was supposed to *Maintain Vigilance*. That meant noticing things. Everything.



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Lucius noticed that he was humming along with the bubbles.

With an effort he stopped, and looked around to discover the floor quite clean. Excellent. And it was almost quiet. Except for the shouting.

"No! Absolutely not!" Black was over at the door to the upper stalls, facing off with Crabbe and Goyle, who looked overheated and cross. "I tell you, no!" Black insisted. "You're *not* going to come traipsing through here with that bucket of slop when we've finally got the place clean! Don't swing it about, it's full to the brim, you'll spill it! Dump it out the side window where you dumped the rest!"

"This one's got the Bubble Stuff in it!" protested Crabbe. "Toss it all that way down onto the dungheap, and we'll wind up completely surrounded by miniature musical muckmaidens!"

Goyle blinked at him. "Oh my God," he moaned, "now it's happening to you. I told you, *never* drink anything Sev offers, even if he *does* take a swig first!"

"Let us through, Black," threatened Crabbe tiredly. "Anything spills, you'll just have to mop it again. Keep in practice, like." He nodded to Goyle and they braced to bull forward.

Lucius appeared at Black's side, remembering just in time not to raise his mop like a *katana*. "We've mopped enough," he said flatly. "You only had *one* bucket of Bubble Stuff in there. Take it the other way."



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"But, Luke," started Crabbe unwisely, absently nodding towards Black, "he can just mop up the spills - "

"I don't want to listen to the bubbles!" snarled Lucius, in a high, aggrieved tone that startled even himself.

"S'alright," Potter stumbled out of the nearest stall, glasses and kerchief askew, as if he were just recovering from an involuntary nap. "S'alright... The bubbles stop, once the water's dirty enough. Girls don't like it."

"Really?" Goyle gave the water a bit of a swish with the end of his mop. Half a dozen bubbles appeared, but their resident songsters intoned their chant like a dirge, and the tiny, begrimed charwomen were quick to push elbows or feet through the transparent skin of the bubbles and vanish. The last and littlest one looked up at the boys and blew a raspberry at them before extracting a hairpin from under her scarf and popping herself out of existence.

"At least they don't sing as long," offered Potter.

"Outside," directed Lucius. "That way. Now."

"Come on, Gav." The two blocky Slytherins retreated back down the aisle, being very careful not to spill on the floor *they* had been cleaning.

"And then you'll have to clean those footprints you've left," Lucius added peevishly. "There aren't any house elves up here to do it for you."

"Do house elves work in barns?" asked Pettigrew, sleepily. He started to rub at his eyes and stopped just in time, inspecting his hayflecked knuckles with a sigh.



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"No, that'd be barn elves, wouldn't it?" Black said.

"There's no such thing as *barn* elves," Potter scoffed.

"Damn shame, really," muttered Black.

"Aren't there, though?" Lucius frowned. "I assure you, *I* don't muck out the stables at Malfoy Manor." His frown deepened, and he shook his head distractedly. "So they'd be, what, stable elves? But one never says, 'manor elves'..."

"What did he give you?" yelled Goyle, dropping the emptied bucket as he hurried over to check on Lucius. "What did you drink?"

Lucius ignored him. One should not encourage *Panicked Minions*, unless one had incited the panic.

"It's all right, Gav," Crabbe said wearily, nursing the foot the bucket had landed on. "Lucius always gets magniloquent when he's tired."

"Malevolent, you mean," Goyle replied.

"No, he starts that first thing in the morning," Crabbe told him.

"Well, all right, supposing they're domestic elves," muttered Potter thoughtfully.

"Domesticated, you mean," Malfoy corrected. "Someone must have tamed them, obviously –"

"Look out, it's a wild elf!" cried Black, leaping forward to menace Potter, who screamed on cue and scurried away, leaving a trail of footprints.

“Boots!” shouted Lucius. And when Potter and Black didn’t stop, “*On the clean floor! Leads to footprints, leads to mopping, leads to BUBBLES—*” Angrily he charged



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after Potter, swinging like a samurai – His mop transformed again. He went down in a whirl of invective.

Black immediately came bounding over, all sympathy and grins. "Is you being stuck, Mr. Malefactor, sir? Does you not know how to be using a mop?"

"Get him," directed Lucius.

Crabbe and Goyle carefully set aside their mops, and advanced.

"Now, what's all this, then?" boomed a voice from the trapdoor, and the miscreants froze as Hagrid lumbered towards their less than innocuous tableau.

"Boots," Lucius snapped. "On the clean floor." He nodded towards the evidence.

"Oh... well, those'll come clean," Hagrid stated soothingly.

"I was defending my clean floor. I think I have every right to defend my clean floor."

"It's not *your* clean floor," corrected Black. "It's half mine."

"Fine. Clean your floor, then."

"Fine. I shall," returned Black, retrieving his mop.

Hagrid cleared his throat. "Sounds t'me like yer all gettin' jus' a mite touchy," he observed.

"Oh, they're just getting warmed up," said Potter, who with Pettigrew had taken a ringside seat upon a haybale.

Hagrid hesitated, then shook his head. "Well, listen, lunch is on the way out from the castle —"

"Lunch!" cried Goyle and Crabbe and Pettigrew joyously.

"Jus' let me check an' see if everythin's all finished up," Hagrid said happily, striding past Malfoy.



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Lucius settled into a mildly less uncomfortable position and hoped that Hagrid wasn't just assuming that the stocks wouldn't transform back. It was going to be bloody difficult eating lunch like this.

His stomach growled. It didn't even have the grace to sound predatory.

Crabbe and Goyle took up positions guarding Lucius, but Potter and Pettigrew were content to sit on their haybale, watching Black reluctantly try to coax a few more bubbles out of his bucket to clean the floor.

"Very nice work in there as well, boys!" Hagrid lauded, smiling proudly down at his grubby crew when he returned. "Really well done! That Ella's Enchanted Everkleen is first rate stuff!" He produced the twig and liberated Lucius.

"Yes, if you enjoy the sounds of opera singers being tortured," mumbled Potter.

Lucius frowned. "No, it sounds nothing like," he said, getting stiffly to his feet.

Hagrid leaned down and pulled Pettigrew up from the haybale where he'd curled up to sleep. "C'mon, now, Peter, on yer feet!"

"Izzit lunch?" the chunky Gryffindor blinked hopefully up at their warden.

"Yeh, it's on its way up from the castle," Hagrid assured him, earning another round of weary cheers. "Yeh should have jus' enough time ter clean up in the tub outside before it gets here. I'll take these," he said, collecting



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the pitchforks from the corner and starting back down through the trapdoor. "Yeh'll be usin' 'em after lunch ter pitch the clean hay back up into the loft.

Lucius halted in his tracks, envisioning coaxing the fallen motherstack back up into its lair. Forkful by forkful. "You know," he said loudly, "I thought we were here at Hogwarts to learn to be wizards, not... drudges!" But Hagrid was already gone.

"Hey," said Black, who had finished up near the edge of the loft. "Watch this!" With a wide grin he set his mop aside, dashed at the haybale wall and did a somersault over it, diving down into the stack of hay below. "Come on in!" came the muffled invitation a moment later. "The water's fine!"

Crabbe looked at Goyle. Goyle looked at Crabbe. "Aim for him," Crabbe said, and they hurtled over the edge together.

"Wha—ouph!"

Lucius strolled over to survey the damage. Crabbe and Goyle were sprawled on the hay, laughing. Black was completely buried. A lovely thought, that.

"Come on, Pete!" Potter launched himself backwards into space, executing a double somersault and completely missing the previous divers.

Pettigrew landed atop Goyle. Black, who had nearly fought his way up to daylight, vanished beneath the hay again.

Lucius looked down upon them. They had hay in their hair, and by the way that Gav was scratching, in their clothes as well.

"Well, look at that!" Potter reclined cheerfully on his



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patch of straw, grinning up at Lucius. "We've been remiss. There's still a chicken in the loft."

Pettigrew supplied a medley of nervous chicken sounds.

Lucius launched himself, boots first, straight at Potter's supercilious smirk.

Potter rolled out of the way.

Lucius sank like a dagger into the loose hay. In a trice, he was buried all the way up to his chest, and hay had forced itself all the way up his trouser legs. He hadn't a hope of dodging the handful of hay that Potter jammed down his collar.



The battle was brief. The hay won.



When Hagrid had fished everyone out of the haystack, he marched the six itchy scarecrows outside, leading them around the barn.

"This way," the Groundskeeper directed, leading them toward an exultant froth of euphonious bubbles.

"Oh, *no*," moaned Black, speaking for everyone.

Haplessly they waded into the pink fog of bubbles, instinctively gripping one another's cloaks so no one would be left behind in the disorienting din.

They were all together to confront the horror at the cacophonous cloud's core: a giant tub overfoaming with syrupy sirens. Marooned amid a panoply of gleaming



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tack were the two other boys. Four hours of incessant pleas to the bedamned nightingale had clearly taken its toll. Lupin had tried to save himself, using a pair of horse blinders as earmuffs, but now he was simply howling along desperately with the relentless round. Snape wore a strange smile as he sang along, unable to find the bucket in which to carry the tune.

"HELLO, LADS!" Hagrid boomed. Lupin jumped. Snape kept singing. "TIME TER WASH UP FER LUNCH! NOW, WHERE'S THAT BOTTLE O' ELLA'S ENCHANTED EVERKLEEN GOT TO?"

Lupin presented him with a fixed grin and an empty bottle. "IT SPILLED!"

"OH, DEAR!" Hagrid fretted. "THAT WAS MEANT TO LAST YEH THE REST O' THE AFTERNOON! I'LL HAVE TER FIND YER SOMETHIN' ELSE TER USE!"

"THAT'D BE FINE!" screamed Lupin.

"YOU DO THAT!" shouted Potter, clapping Lupin on the back as if the little Gryffindor had caught the Snitch.

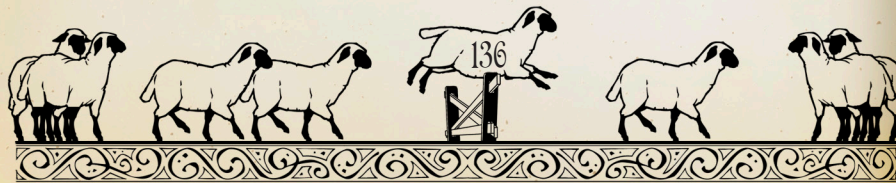
Hagrid waded away through the harmonious haze.

"GET THEM," bellowed Lucius.

Malfoy, Black, Potter and Pettigrew began zealously popping bubbles. Crabbe and Goyle grabbed Lupin and Snape and cast expectant looks at Lucius.

"THE BUBBLES, YOU CRETINS!" yelled Black.

Crabbe and Goyle verified this with a glance at Lucius, and hastily changed targets. Lupin scrambled up to help break bubbles. Snape kept singing contentedly, in the key of skeleton.



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The bubbles, perhaps realizing their peril, began to drift away in droves, moderating their tones as handfuls of dirt and well-aimed swats obliterated swaths of chamber singers at a go.

"SEVEN AT ONE BLOW!" cried Pettigrew exultantly, wreaking general havoc.

"GOING TO MAKE A COMMEMORATIVE BELT?" shouted Potter, grinning.

"THE BELTS!" Black and Malfoy nearly knocked heads grabbing up pieces of tack; they came up back to back, swinging with purpose.

"It's working!" There was a general round of vigorous bubble-belting.

When the froth had cleared, one lone ragged voice remained: "Hiiiiiiigh above meeee..."

Lucius wasn't close enough to hit Snape; he nodded to Goyle, who seized their roommate and shook him. "Sev! Stop it!"

"When I'm calling eweee," wailed Snape, bewildered.

"STOP IT!" screamed the Marauders.

Lucius laughed. Goyle flipped Snape's cape over his head, the way one might quiet a budgie.

"Sun ain't gonna shine any more," sang Snape through the cloth, "moon ain't gonna —"

"Oh, no," said Crabbe. He intercepted Snape with a large fist, "SHURRUP! D'YOU WANT KEELE TO HEAR?"

Snape spat out mud. "Blue-green circle on the violet diagonal," he lilted thoughtfully from the ground.

Crabbe stood on him.



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"Di-ag-ag-ag-ag-o-nal-nal..."

Lucius strode over to loom above Snape. This was pointless, so he crouched down *In A Companionable Manner* and said very precisely into Snape's ear, "Sev. I'm growing vexed."

Snape boggled up at him, then broke into a grin of recognition. "*Even louder! WE'LL SHOUT IT! Worse than those widows and orphans you drowned? Oh, Rat —*"

"Drown him," commanded Lucius coolly.

Crabbe and Goyle were lifting Snape into the tub when Lupin intervened. "*See, Sev?*" he cried anxiously. "*It's gone rose, just like you said it would! Is it time to add the minced snails?*"

Snape hushed and studied the water inches beneath his nose. "That's not rose," he averred. "That's cerise. It won't be rose for hours yet."

"Oh, right, right," Lupin said hastily. "And the minced snails?"

"Mint snails," Snape echoed.

"Are we drowning him or not?" asked Crabbe.

"Gingersnapes."

Goyle's stomach rumbled. "Maybe after lunch?" he suggested. "You're not supposed to eat for an hour after drowning someone." He cast an imploring look at their leader. "And I'd like to get the hay out of — all the places it's got into."

"Seconded," said several voices.

Lucius *Magnanimously Relented*. "Very well." Snape didn't need a bath, *he* hadn't been in the hay. And once

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that hair touched the water, there'd be a rainbow film of oil ruining the water for everyone else.

Snape clung to the side of the tub, mesmerized by the water as the others scrubbed the worst of the barn off themselves. Lucius hoped the scent of primroses would wear off before too long. Then again, he'd hoped the same for Up-All-Night Potion. Wearily, he watched his incoherent lieutenant study the floating bits of straw.

"Oh," Sev intoned softly, "klahoma..."

Lucius decided it wasn't worth the effort of drowning Sev when he wouldn't even notice. At least he was focusing on real things now. Give him an hour and he might even be coherent. Lunch might revive him —

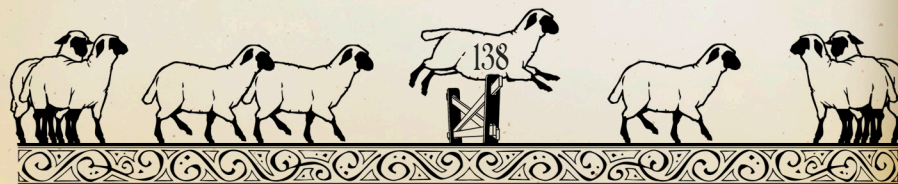
Lucius paled. Food didn't *always* help.

THE HAGGIS INCIDENT.

Lucius steadied himself resolutely. Nothing could be as bad as *The Haggis Incident*. Nothing could rival chasing haggis off the ceiling of the Great Hall at midnight, with the constellations wheeling all about and Sev clinging stubbornly to the rafters. Even *this* miserable ordeal of a detention didn't stand much chance of getting *that* bad....

"HELLO, THE BARN!" a far too cheerful voice rang out across the barnyard.

...unless, of course, some idiot had sent Loudmouth Lockhart out with their lunches.



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RAMIFICATIONS CHAPTER 7

“Jinx!”, bent double and pinning her own trouser cuffs into place while constructing her Snape-from-the-films costume for Hallowe’en: “THAT’S IT! THAT’S HOW THEY WORK! HA! I’VE DONE IT! I’ve figured it out!”

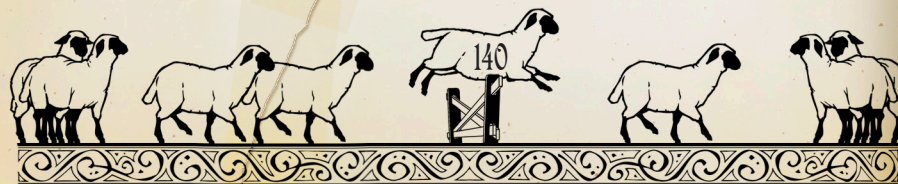
rabbit, during a pause in the celebration: “Oh, so you’ve finally succeeded in getting into Alan Rickman’s trousers, then?”

(What, you haven’t started making your costume yet? How-ever-will-you-finish-in-time???)

Seven pairs of eyes turned toward the barn door in the desperate hope that Hagrid would emerge and save them from the worst of Lockhart’s good mood.

Momentarily forgotten, Snape shuddered from tawny top (his hair was utterly coated with the dust and flecks of hay that had drifted free as the others washed themselves) to mucky toes (his boots were covered with other barnyard incidentia) and demanded shakily “DID YOU FEEL THAT - ?”

He shivered and muttered through clenched teeth “That felt like the passage of two years, two family crises, and two arduous sequels...” He shook his head as if that could clear it, sighed, “Bit like Noah’s Ark gone horribly wrong...” His wandering gaze lighted



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briefly on Sirius Black, “You’re well out of it.”

“They must have gone round back,” the cheerful knell sent adrenaline through the coherent members of the cohort, banishing the last vestiges of their exhaustion as they reckoned up their chances of coping without wands at hand.

Goyle grabbed Snape’s collar and shook him, pleading in a thin whine, “Shut up shut up shut up, here comes Lockhart!”

The eight miscreants gathered ’round the washtub braced, like any other creatures anticipating mayhem and mischance.

James Potter proposed, “I say we throw Snape at him and run for it”

“You can’t!” Crabbe protested, “He’s completely defenseless!”

“Yeah,” Black muttered, sounding disappointed. “Be no contest, really.”

Pettigrew sighed and shook his head, looking as if he’d dropped his ice cream into the sand.

“Not another word,” Malfoy warned his minions, and Crabbe and Goyle nodded hastily. The Slytherins had learned the hard way that loud noises and sudden movements were likely to catch Lockhart’s attention and once that happened it was all over but the reconstruction and the Ministry inquiries. Let the Gryffindors take the risks. They were noted for that sort of thing.

Pettigrew whined plaintively, “Why isn’t he in Hogsmeade? He should be in Hogsmeade, swanning about in all his fancy clothes - !” He looked rather envi-



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ous, which was interesting given that Gilderoy Lockhart's going-to-Hogsmeade wardrobe was the inevitable result of a terrific excess of personality loosed from the confines of a school uniform: one could liken it to Oscar Wilde as costumed by Siegfried and Roy.

Most of the girls loved it.

Most of the boys thought he looked like a parade float which had wandered off on its own. Unfortunately, Lackwit Lockhart had proved to be just as attractive to giggling young things in search of an afternoon's exciting diversion.

"He never misses a Hogsmeade weekend!" Pettigrew sounded almost insulted. "They're the only chance we have to get blamed for our own disasters – !"

Black's well-placed elbow silenced him, as a stack of wooden boxes drifted languidly around the corner of the barn.

Lupin moaned faintly "Oh God and us with no wands —"

"And here we find our pertinacious penitents!" pronounced Lockhart, strolling into view. He was swathed in robes of forget-me-not blue and a scintillant smile. "Good afternoon, all! Respite is at hand! We've come bearing some delicious distraction from your detention!"

He had Narcissa Beauregard on his arm.

Lockhart's magniloquence continued, its author oblivious to the fact that his audience wasn't paying any attention to anything but the vitreous silence spreading around Lucius Malfoy, who was staring at his Fiancée with a kind of fascinated horror, as if he'd



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just realized how deadly poisonous she actually was.

"Let him have her," Black recommended in a fit of male camaraderie.

NO. Lucius shut his jaws with a creak, drew himself to order with the poise of a duellist saluting a challenger, and coolly studied his Sweet Intended.

She smiled at him, her eyes gleaming, showing quite a lot of very white little teeth. She was perfect.

She had arranged her hair in complicated curls, and small sapphires glittered at her ears and throat to compliment her diaphanous robes of –

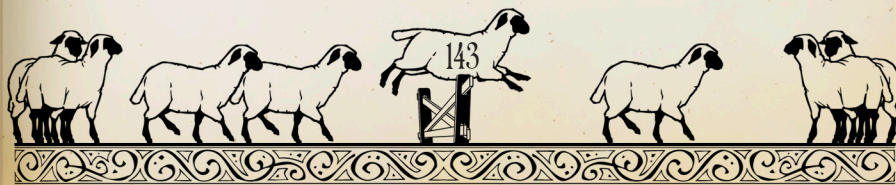
forget-me-not blue.

Lucius realized with an icy congelation of his innards just how deliberately she'd done this. *That's her jade ensemble, bewitched to match his.* She'd even added tiny golden bows all along her sleeves, in thorough imitation.

The vexing, detail-attentive, calculating, exquisite little minx—

Someone was tugging insistently at his cape. Snape. Lucius, concentrating on the tableau before him, realized belatedly that he had forgotten to muzzle the deranged idiot and turned to do so only to be asked excitedly, "Is it the ice dancing finals?!"

Lockhart's grip on his levitation spell slipped at the same time as the smile on his face, but he was still safely distant, and Lucius could enjoy the spectacle. As laughter drenched the air, he awarded his tame swot an approving smile and went so far as to sigh fondly, "This is why I let you live."



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Sev grinned at him, announcing, "I quite liked the French girl! Pity about the dragon, though — "

Lucius turned back to find Narcissa departing the danger zone with delicate haste, picking her way across the barnyard like a heron intent on a frog.

He composed himself and pretended to study Lockhart's frantic efforts to collect the lunchboxes now whirling through midair in eight different directions.

Really it was funny —

Narcissa came to a halt before him. Lucius deigned to notice.

She studied him coolly for several heartbeats and then said,

"That's... really *interesting*, what you've done to your hair, Luke"

Oh, damn it.

He'd forgotten his hair had been turned intransigently puce.

And now she knew that. And the wretched Marauders were howling. Crabbe and Goyle were making themselves suspiciously busy with towels and things at the washtub. Even Lockhart was laughing.

Admit nothing. Blame others, who will suffer. Lucius shrugged as if reshouldering some great burden, and explained graciously, "Well, you know, Sev got his hands on some weed or another... there was a sizzle, and a mist, and, well..." There was no need to explain further.

"Oh," said Narcissa, perfectly neutrally.



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Her gaze ran pensively over Snape. "It seems to have improved Sev's hair."

"Anything would," clipped Lucius.

"Mmhmmm... nice highlights... texture's a bit... uneven, somehow..." Frowning, she reached up and delicately caught ahold of Snape's chin so she could better inspect his blonded mane. "Nice bright shine, though..."

Lucius snipped, "It's hay."

"Yes," she agreed, "but with some Transfigurations spellcraft it has definite possibilities..."

Snape blinked at her, jolted to a halt and peeped, "Hi, Lily..." James Potter choked.

So did Sirius Black. Which was fine with Lucius. Let Sev be the epicenter of attention for awhile.

"Oh, I say," Lockhart intoned solicitously, bustling towards them with his arms full of the collected lunchboxes. "He's still right out of his mind, isn't he?" With an air of deep concern he peered at Snape.

"Here, hold these a moment, will you please, 'Cissa?"

Lucius lost the rest of Lockhart's patronizing drone beneath a kind of oceanic roaring which filled his skull.

'Cissa?!

So now she's letting that — that randy Ravenclaw wretch call her 'Cissa —!

Oh, she would pay. Eventually. He reminded himself that her punishment and abject humiliation would require careful planning. More immediately and illustratively, Lothario Lockhart would reap the rewards



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of his misguided attempts at social climbing. *I shall invite him to Malfoy Manor for the summer.* The pretentious Prefect might survive a month, if proper care were taken of him. *Leeches first, then poison...* He could get Sev to help with —

Sev.

Oh damn.

Gilderoy Lockhart was holding Sev at wandspoint and muttering to himself as he decided what spell to cast on his helpless victim

Lucius hurried to join the others in a widening circle as they all backed away from imminent disaster. Not even Professor Keele could blame him for abandoning Snape to his fate under these circumstances.

Lockhart declared, "Right! Yes! Exactly!" and made minute adjustments to his aim.

The circle broadened hastily as the perilous Prefect's wand began to glow.

Goyle moaned "I can't look — !"

Snape was studying the invisible bee, high overhead.

"SNAPE! LOOK! WATCH THE LIGHT!" Lockhart exhorted.

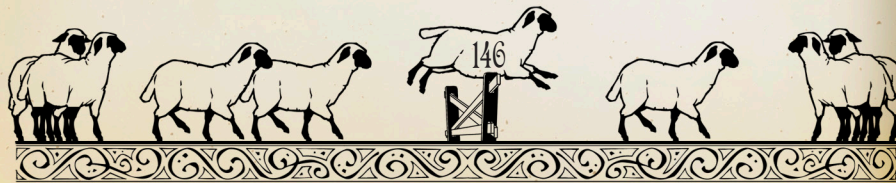
"COME TOWARDS THE LIGHT!"

Everyone else knew better.

Lockhart tried again, "LOOK! SHINY! PRETTY! SEE —"

"The number three copper ladle with the ding in!" Snape cried exultantly, snatched the wand from Lockhart's grasp and darted off towards the washtub.

Lockhart stared after him. "But — I say —" he stam-



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mered, and had to shout above a tide of general hilarity, "Look, now, wait, you'll do yourself a mischief—"

Snape had the wand clenched in both hands and was stirring aggressively widdershins, muttering to himself as he consulted notes no one else could see.

Lockhart hurried up to him. "Look here, Snape, that's enough - "

Narcissa grabbed Lucius's arm and shrilled into his ear:

“— interrupting Sev at his cauldron —”

There was a bright white light. Twenty feet might be a safe distance from Lockhart, but never from Snape in a snit. Lucius clutched Narcissa and ran for the barn, Crabbe and Goyle gallumphing right behind, dodging the comet's tail of lunchboxes that drifted higgledy piggledy in the witch's wake.

The Gryffindors passed them at a flat-out sprint and then succumbed to common decency which forced them to hold the barn doors open for their nemeses.

The stack of loose hay which had dominated the barn floor not ten minutes ago had been replaced by a phalanx of haybales piled precisely near the center. Lucius vaulted over the barrier, Narcissa in his arms, and crouched down, leaving the other six boys to their fates. They hurled their weight against the doors to slam and hold them shut. "Think it'll hold - ?" Black asked anxiously.

"Duck," Narcissa popped up long enough to cast a Stonewall Spell which petrified the doors an instant before they heard Snape's muffled scream.



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Lockhart's shriek was cut short by an ominous and surely fatal

BLVORRUPPP.

"That's it, they're dead," moaned Goyle.

There was a terrible silence.

And then a pattering of liquid to earth.

"That sounded like the giant squid sicking up," Hagrid stated in bemusement, emerging from a door which Lucius had somehow failed to notice next to the tack room. "But he don't usually come out here t'do that.. " He was carrying two large stone crocks. One said "Carrots" and the other had a lurid drawing of a horse in agony and was labelled "Horse Helper". He shut the door firmly behind him, and it faded away into the wall.

Pettigrew moaned, "Oh I hope those aren't for lunch," he said.

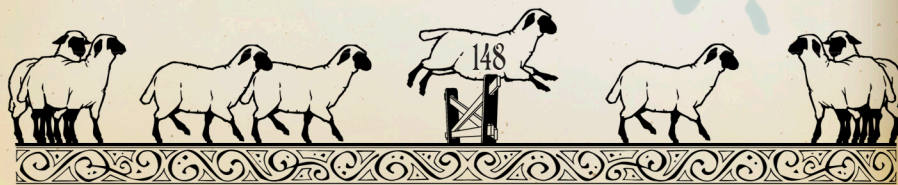
Hagrid strode towards the Stonewalled doors. Eight voices implored him, "DON'T GO OUT THERE!"

The Groundskeeper halted. "Whyever not?"

A babble of voices surrounded him. "Lockhart — wand — idiot — cauldron — Snape — both dead — more to follow — dangerous —"

Hagrid stared down at his charges, slowly piecing the story together. At last he said in a very low voice, "Oh, dear."

He harrumphed twice, uneasily, before saying, "I'd best go check." He set down the jars, squared his shoulders, and hauled open the stone doors and poked his head out into the sunlight.



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Potter groaned anxiously "Hagrid, please, don't -"

Lucius clipped, "He has to check on the welfare of a student in his charge " If the great oaf were horribly wounded, or killed, it would mean unhindered excursions to the Forbidden Forest for the next three and a half years.

Snape's shrill cry split the air. "*Wobblystalks and BATWINGS?*"
"He sounded outraged. Sounds of a scuffle ensued.

"Oh, dear." Hagrid hurried out of the barn.

Lockhart began screaming in high staccato bursts.

The refugees hastened to the doors and peeked around them.

Hagrid was striding through ankle-deep mud towards two struggling figures, the smaller of which had to be Snape; the sodden swot had the smoking wand clenched in his teeth and Lockhart pinned beneath him; he looked like a terrier finishing off a rat.

Hagrid grabbed his collar and swung him off the puling Prefect. "That'll do," the Groundskeeper rumbled, deftly extracting Lockhart's wand from Snape's jaws.

After a shocked moment Snape drew a huge breath to shriek, "You could have killed us!"

Lucius glanced at Crabbe. "A pertinent comment. Very promising," he murmured.

Crabbe nodded vaguely, and warned in a gruff voice, "Lockhart's on his feet again - "

"You saw him!" cried the bedraggled Ravenclaw, staggering as his heels caught in the muck. "Assaulting a Prefect!" he intoned with horror, sounding impressed



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by the peril he'd survived. "Oh, this is very bad, Snape" he warned darkly, reclaiming his wand from Hagrid.

"Look out, he's armed again," muttered Black.

Pettigrew queried eagerly, "Can a Prefect expell you?"

"No," Lucius informed him flatly. "And it was self-defense. Unmistakably."

Lockhart in his efforts to look well was already making Snape's excuses, babbling, "Really, I don't know what came over him! He just... just snapped! He shook his head, indicating a kind of fatalistic sympathy, intoning ominously, "And it's not the first time —"

Black laughed. "Hey, James, remember Thursday?"

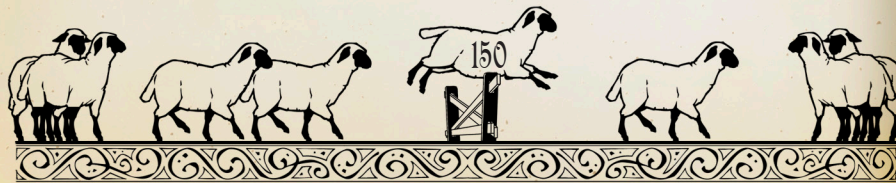
Potter grinned at him. "Oh, yeah!" Pettigrew giggled and Lupin shot him a dubious look with red, watery eyes and sneezed, edging carefully towards the hay-free air just outside the doors.

Lockhart went on expounding with buttercream empathy, "You know, Hagrid, I don't like to speak ill of anyone, but really I wonder if he's not... unstable!"

"And they all turned into swans, and flew away," Snape said dreamily, still hanging dripping in the Groundskeeper's grasp.

Lockhart clucked his tongue and shook his head, "There. You see? I can't, honestly, say I'm surprised... all those strange potions... they twist the mind..."

Potter nodded archly. "He's right, you know." He blinked, and looked quite disturbed. "Did I really just agree with Loosecannon Lockhart?"



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Black said supportively, "Well, even he couldn't miss it. Snape's completely crazy."

No. Not yet. Lucius was confident that he would know precisely when to take *Precautionary Measures*.

Lockhart likewise was explaining, "Doubtless they're the cause of his, er... erratic behavior..."

Narcissa said pertly, "There we are: 'total exemption from responsibility for his actions due to alchemically induced incapacity for rational thought.'"

Lucius nodded approval of this familiar excuse, which they had devised as First Years and which had served them well so far: Snape's scholastic records were dotted with that exonerating phrase so often that connecting all the instances would form a bunny.

Hagrid rumbled authoritatively, "Now, all o' this has jus' been a misunderstandin'." He nodded as if agreeing with his own judgment and went on firmly, "Now, you tidy yerself up and go on ter Hogsmeade," he directed Lockhart, "an' we'll all settle down ter have lunch."

Snape giggled. "Careful, it's spiked!" he warned cheerfully.

Lockhart looked warily up at the soggy Fourth Year, then inspected his own sodden robes and sighed, and flourished his wand.

"Doors get the doors!" screamed Black, heaving uselessly at the blocks of stone. There was a general scrum as everyone tried to find sufficient cover before the dazzling cascade of lavender light.

Someone coughed dustily, and then Snape said, "It's



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very dark. Byron, are you there?"

Lucius let out the breath he'd been holding. He would have missed all those rounds of Pin The Blame On Sev. He stayed by the door, blinking yellow afterimages away as he waited for someone else to stick his neck out and look first.

Hagrid harrumphed, and said encouragingly, "Not ter worry... er... I'll jus' give yer a hand —"

It sounded oddly like someone were juggling potsherds.

The refugees looked quizzically at one another until Potter began to laugh. "Drying charm," he supplied. "And they were covered in mud!"

Black peeked 'round the door and threw back his head and howled with glee, "Baked to a brown crust!"

They all crowded together to see this amusing tableau: Snape was still hanging in Hagrid's grip, but now he was coated with dust and crackled mud and resembled nothing so much as a lightly-breaded bat; Lockhart was frozen in place with his hair and robes so twisted up that he bore a striking resemblance to a chocolate bunny.

"Why," moaned Black, "have I never got a camera at these precious moments?"

Lupin told him, "Becauze we're id dedenjion."

Potter looked at Pettigrew and ordered, "Next time bring a camera." Pettigrew nodded eagerly; he'd probably risk injury in the attempt.

Hagrid made the unfortunate decision to free Lockhart. With one deft wrench he pulled the Prefect out of his hardened shell with the sound of a very large



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Christmas ornament shattering. "There! Tha's much better! Now... where's that washtub got to —?"

Lockhart coughed out a plug of mud and snipped, "Destroyed in his rampage." He pointed condemningly at Snape. "It quite flew to flinders!"

Snape began singing the Ella's Enchanted Everkleen song, brightly and horridly.

Hagrid hurried across the mazed barnyard and dropped him into the pig trough by the pump. Water sloshed everywhere and the Groundskeeper gave a happy cry, reaching down to pry a blue bottle free of the reconstituted mud. He dipped it under the flow of the pump and swirled it around before pouring its diluted contents over Snape. Thousands of tiny bubble-bound washerwomen lent their thin sopranos to a chorus that rose painfully to join Snape's cracked tenor, and the other detainees retreated into the dimness of the barn.

Black commented knowingly, "Still won't clean his hair."

The Marauders generally agreed.

Outside, they could hear Snape having a fit, apparently convinced he'd fallen into a bubbling cauldron. Hagrid was ignoring the boy's frantic protests and holding him under for longer and longer intervals, as if hoping that he could sober Snape up in the process of getting him clean.

Lockhart was edging stiffly towards the barn doors, hissing, "'Cissa —? 'Cissa, are you there —?"

Narcissa insinuated herself into Lucius's arms, and



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arranged herself with the grace of an Art Deco necklace to greet Lockhart with a cool smile. "I'm right here, Gilly."

Gilly? Lucius opted to smirk.

Lockhart looked down uncertainly at the pair of them. "Er... bad bit of business, that, with Snape," he lamented. "I did all I could, but you know how he is..." He shook his head in solemn regret.

"Anyway, I thought I'd just nip back to the castle and change — "

"Oh!" Narcissa sounded shocked and appalled by the very idea.

She darted forward, halted well before she actually came into contact with the detritus covering Lockhart, and implored him prettily, "You can't mean it! If you do, our ensembles will be disharmonious!"

The Marauders squawked with laughter, Pettigrew joining in a few beats late.

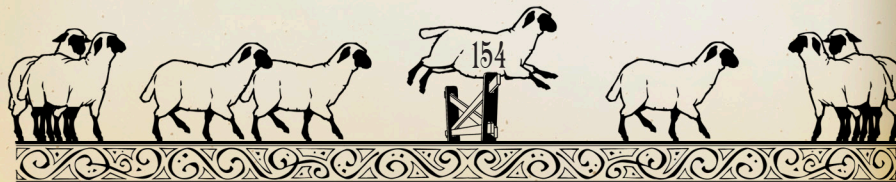
Lockhart dismissed this magnanimously: "Never mind them; they haven't the first clue about the social graces."

Potter asked gleefully, "D'you mean Grace Featheruffle and Grace Gravesend? 'Cause those two lumps couldn't get a date even if they baked a golem from scratch!"

Crabbe marched over, grabbed him, and told him, "Grace is all right." He held Potter's arms while Goyle punched the Marauder solidly in the nose.

There was a satisfying sound of glasses breaking.

Lucius stared, thinking *Merciful Heavens, they've discovered girls. What an unfortunate distraction.* He had admit-



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tedly indulged in hopes that the day might never come when his burly goons took note of the fairer sex. *Perhaps it's not come to that. Perhaps "Grace is all right" because she offered him some food. That would be enough,* he decided.

He returned his attention to his own winsome problem, and was unsurprised to find Narcissa repeating sternly, "No. No. No." It was a too familiar tune.

Lockhart in counterpoint was importuning her, "Please, 'Cissa, won't you please perform the spell? It will greatly improve matters," he promised coyly, and smiled white. "You know very well how susceptible I am to your charms..."

Narcissa giggled. "Oh, Gilly..."

Lucius saw red, and not from the sparkling of her spellwork.

He looked for help. His minions were busy thrashing the Marauders, and Snape was underwater.

Narcissa was clinging delicately to Gilderoy Lockhart, who seemed if anything more resplendent since her spell had hit him and was gushing, "Oh, *thank* you, 'Cissa! Excellently done! You really have a talent for this!"

Narcissa giggled again. Lucius gagged.

Lockhart tucked Narcissa under one arm, protectively, and estimated, "Let's see... you've put all their lunches in the barn, haven't you?"

She simpered, "Yes, Gilly." She cast a measuring glance at Lucius, who strove to *Rise Above The Occasion* by assuming *A Mien Of Ennui*.

"Ah!" Lockhart rifled through his several pockets and



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came out with a small brown bottle. "This is for... Remus Lupin," he read the label carefully. "To be taken internally as remedy for hayfever symptoms —"

The smallest Marauder somehow sprang free of the battle to seize the bottle, gasping, "Thangyou!" He got the stopper loose, paused just long enough to read the label, and gulped the bottle's contents down. His eyes cleared up, the harsh red line faded from his nose, every bit of hay on his person leapt away like it had been frightened, he took deep, joyful breath and fainted.

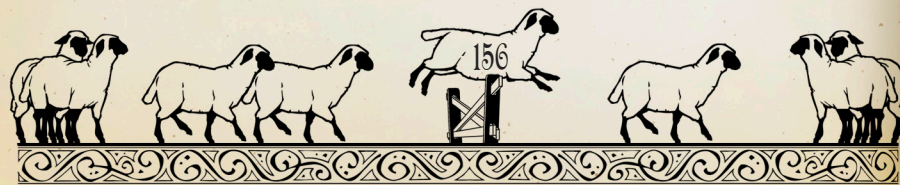
"Poor fellow," Lockhart commiserated. "I'm the same way with pomegranate juice."

Lucius filed this Interesting Fact away to be shared with Sev later. Snape had a wonderful talent for sneaking absolutely anything into pumpkin juice.

Lockhart seemed to have realized his error of *Oversharing*. "Er, come along, 'Cissa, let's hurry off to Hogsmeade," he encouraged, hastening her towards the pasture door. "Good day to you all!"

Lucius glared after the glittering git. Lupin snuffled appreciatively in his stupor and curled up contentedly in his widening circle of hay-free floor. *Perhaps he shouldn't have drunk it all at once.* His goons were still busy pummeling the other Marauders. Sev was still busy being drowned by the Groundskeeper.

Lucius decided to have lunch.



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rabbit, rather forlornly: "It's just too cold outside... and we've eaten all the chocolate chip cookies..."

Jinx, merrily: "Well, then, I guess we're gonna have to make some Screaming Loud Brownies." Here's how: Prepare one batch of your favorite brownie batter. (A mix will work nicely.) Then:

Chop up one cup of dried cherries (pitted) and half a cup of dark raisins (we love Thompson's Black Jewels, available at Whole Foods). Add up to half a cup of liquid made from 2 ounces of good brandy and water, and then plump in the microwave for thirty seconds on high. (Add time if the fruit hasn't plumped.) Add all of this to the brownie batter. (You will want to cut any other liquids in the batter to accommodate the brandy-water which isn't absorbed by the fruit.)

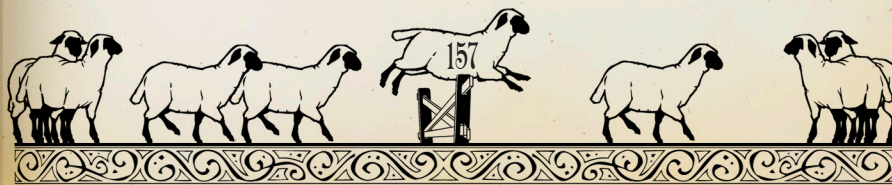
Stir thoroughly and bake, watching over it closely as it gets nearly done. When a knife slides out clean, it's done. Think of the steaming hot fruit and steel your resolve to let it cool for about ten minutes no matter how insistently it's calling you.

Devour.

MAKES ONE LARGE BROWNIE.

While you're waiting for that to finish baking, here's another treat for you...

MALFOY WALKED AWAY FROM THE fracas and located the wooden lunchboxes stacked neatly beside a haybale. He selected one from the middle as least likely to be *Poisoned*



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By Those Who Seek Our Downfall, and sought *Restorative Isolation* within one of the cleaner stalls. The door refused to lock (no door at Hogwarts would, for any student) but he plunked an upturned bucket down as a doorstop and settled down atop it to partake of his midday repast.

Expertly he tapped the box, which promptly opened like an origami flower to reveal its predictable contents: one red apple, two dry cheese sandwiches with an oddly chalky taste, a bottle of chilled pumpkin juice, and – like an apology – one delicious chocolate chip cookie.

Lucius ate that first.

It helped. Not nearly enough.

He solaced himself more satisfactorially with happy thoughts of Libidinous Lockhart's lingering demise, which must come very soon. *After all, how long can this go on?*

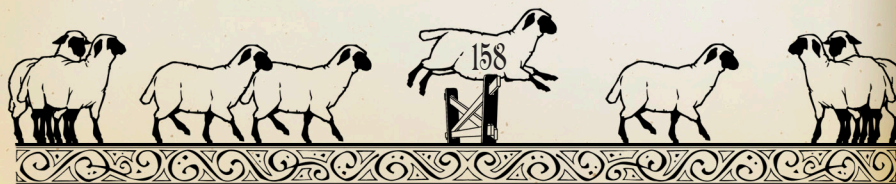
He bit his tongue as he realized: *Potentially, another year and a half.* Assuming Lockhart left school with a diploma instead of his very own monogrammed casket.

Dallying with a Sixth Year, what is she playing at? But what else ought he have expected, when she'd given him that gilt-edged, gryphonhide-bound edition of LES LIASONS DANGEREUSES for Christmas?

And now she's got her very own Chevalier Duncie —

Lucius actually laughed aloud as he suddenly realized just what Lackadaisical Lockhart had gotten himself into. *Oh, brilliant, the bumbling buffoon will provide us with months of entertainment —*

Cheered by Narcissa's thoughtful gesture of *Start-*



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ing *A Hobby We Can Enjoy As A Couple*, Lucius raised his bottle of pumpkin juice in salute of his Sweet Intended, and in much improved humor continued dining.

The silence outside his Sanctuary was broken by James Potter's inquisitive challenge: "Don't know what you're laughing about, Malfoy... looks like Lockhart's got your girl!"

Looks like. Lucius grinned wickedly.

Black volleyed, "Looks more like she's got him!"

Pettigrew laughed like a fool and added snidely, "It won't last! First time she leaves clawmarks, he'll run crying to Madame Pomfrey! Right, Remus?"

In the dusty silence which met this pronouncement, Pettigrew tried urgently, "*Don't you think so, Remus!*"

Lupin snuffled briefly between hearty snores.

Brisk footsteps preceded a hearty slap, and Pettigrew yelped in two syllables, "Wha-t?"

Potter snapped at him, "Shut up, Peter."

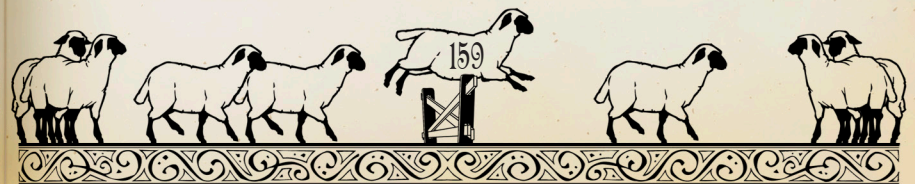
Goyle, impervious to the Marauder's antics, announced wearily, "I hate these damn cheese sandwiches. Anyone want to trade for an apple?"

Pettigrew agreed immediately, "Yeah, sure! Give me your sandwiches!"

"Well, if you want *both* you're going to have to — "

Lucius stopped listening as the traditional Noontide Negotiations commenced. He did, however, *Grace The Underserving Company With An Inspiring Presence* long enough to secure for himself three more chocolate chip cookies.

He also took a moment to survey his domain, hoping



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to locate Sev and take possession of his dessert as well. After some searching he found Snape tucked neatly into a corner, looking roughly outwung and clutching his unopened lunchbox. The soggy swot was once more watching the flight of the invisible bumblebee, humming idly along as he noted its progress.

Lucius startled thoroughly as he realized what was seriously wrong: Snape's hair was actually *Dry*. In utter surprise it was standing out from his head in all directions, lending him something of the look of an ebony anemone.

Malfoy found his voice and asked faintly, "All right, Sev?"

"The Avon lady's going to take me home," Snape answered amiably.

"Oh... good... yes," Lucius soothed, "directly after lunch." He tapped Snape's lunchbox to make it open.

Sev blinked at its blooming, seeming puzzled by the absence of the invisible bee as opportunity presented itself. "Hi, honey," he sighed, and picked up the chocolate chip cookie.

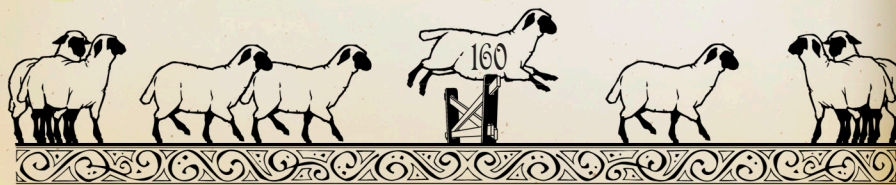
Lucius snatched it from him. "Sev! Give me that!" He took the lunchbox too, with a dire warning: "Deadly poisonous in combination with that last dose! What WERE you thinking?"

Snape stared at him, which Malfoy deemed progress.

After some moments the bewildered swot volunteered shakily, "Lemonade?"

"Not hardly," Lucius informed him, pocketing Sev's cookie.

"Here," he commanded, thrusting the bottle of pumpkin



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juice at Snape, "drink this quickly or you'll perish"

Sev boggled at him, seized the bottle and bolted the juice down, which at least got something beneficial inside him. Malfoy took possession of the cheese sandwiches, and handed Snape the apple. "Very good, you owe me your life. Here. Eat this."

"I'm not sleepy!" Snape protested.

"But you are representing the control group. Now eat that apple."

Sev began gnawing at it. Malfoy left him and negotiated his way back to his *Private Dining Room*, where he enjoyed a refreshing lunch of mostly sugar, happily contemplating the Spell-o-tape now holding Potter's glasses together.

After awhile there came a tapping as of someone gently rapping at the stall door, accompanied by Sev's queasy murmur, "Are you done in there? I don't feel so good."

Lucius surged to his feet, whipped the bucket off the floor, kicked open the door, jammed the bucket into Sev's arms, shoved the quaking swot into the next stall over and waited with resignation for the too familiar sounds of Snape being profoundly sick.

"LUNCHTIME'S OVER!" Hagrid announced cheerfully, as he sidled into the barn bearing several sheepsweight of sloshing buckets on a pole across his broad shoulders. "It's back ter work, boys!"

He set his burdens down with eight splashy thuds.

The prisoners waited with clenched teeth for the singing bubbles to froth into an exultant fog.



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They didn't, which proved that *Mercy Hath Not Vanished Entire From This World*.

Possibly.

Hagrid extracted a demijohn from one of his teeming pockets. It was plain brown glass, and as he uncorked it an acrid tang accentuated the general stench of the barn. He poured a generous dollop of clear liquid into each bucket. "Here ya go. Vinegar and water! Won't be as fast, but seein' as how you used all that Ella's Enchanted Everkleen, this'll hafter do. Add enough elbow grease, and before you know it you'll have these stalls all washed down properlike!"

Goyle frowned. "But we haven't got any."

"Sure y'have," encouraged the Groundskeeper.

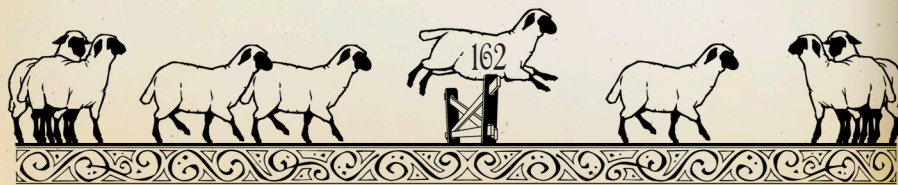
"No, we haven't," Crabbe chimed in. "No one gave us any."

Goyle gave up rubbing at his sleeve and said with sudden hope, "Unless Sev has some! Sev?"

Faint puking sounds came from the stall beside Malfoy's.

"Oh, no, not him as well..." Hagrid stepped carefully over Lupin and hurried to check on the suffering swot.

Lucius distanced himself from *These Unsavory Proceedings* and with interest considered Lupin's situation: still deeply asleep, the smallest Marauder was hazily visible through a golden dome of haychaff; within its boundaries the boy and floor and air were all quite clear of any fleck of hay, which was *A Potentially Useful Effect Of That Hayfever Potion*.



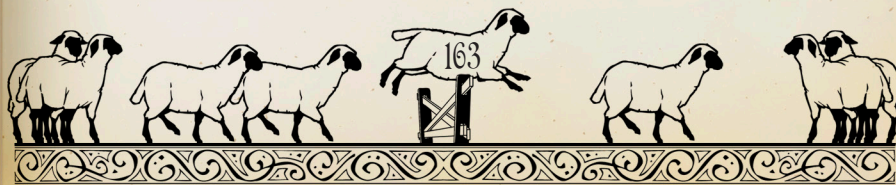
Ramifications

Unfortunately, the total absence of hay accentuated the omnipresence of gritty dirt and grime. They were going to have a lot of expunging to do.

In the stall behind Malfoy, Snape was explaining weakly and rather petulantly, "It's *rabbit's* fault. Someone *always* pukes in her stories." He belched protractedly and complained, "Mostly it's ME."

"Yeah, well, yeh've finished, now," Hagrid encouraged him hopefully. "Now, c'mon outta here." There was a kind of wheezing whine of protest, moments before Hagrid emerged from the stall with Sev slung over one shoulder, proving once and for all to Lucius that the great oaf had *Not The Commonest Sense*. Then again, that fright of a coat couldn't get any more befouled. Bits of its scurf were attaching themselves to Snape's hair, which had already recovered enough of its natural oils to attract a sprinkling of yellow, like pollen on a bee.

Hagrid paused to consider Lupin's dormant form, and muttered, "Well, I s'pose that evens things out." He scooped up the Marauder onto his other shoulder and betook his burdens to the largest stall at the very end of the row. "They'll do fine in here" he declared to his other captives. "Yen c'n keep an eye on 'em as yeh start out, and then yeh c'n use the spigot in here and check on 'em whenever yeh refill yer buckets. I've left yeh the jug o' vinegar, and there's a bit more in the crock by the tack room if you use that up, but that's the lot, so don't waste it!" he warned.



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"Refill the buckets?" echoed Lucius tartly.

Hagrid grinned at him. "I would. But that's up ter you." He clapped his hands, startling the lucid boys. "Now." He beamed.

They braced.

"Yeh're all gonna work T'GETHER ter clean all these stalls!" Hagrid announced brightly.

"You don't honestly believe that?" Black said just as brightly.

"Tell you what," Potter proposed sunnily, "we'll take that half, *you*" he indicated Malfoy and his bookends "take that half, and whoever gets their side cleaned up first will get a nice rest while the other team finishes."

"We-ell" said Hagrid.

"It'd get the barn clean, with a minimum of mayhem," coaxed Potter, looking imploringly through his bandaged glasses whilst casting a winsome grin up at Hagrid.

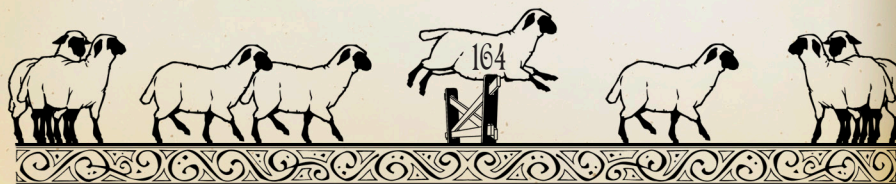
Malfoy *Calculated The Odds*, factoring in three and a half years' worth of experience *Tidying Away Sev's Latest In A Series Of Unfortunate Attempts*. He smiled like a fox and announced, "We accept the terms!"

"Done!" agreed Potter.

They shook hands and squared off, taking up their buckets and the large brushes bobbing therein.

"Er," said Hagrid uncertainly, "I dunno —"

The Gryffindors began scrubbing assiduously at the first of many stalls; the Slytherins commenced scrubbing efficiently at the walls of another.



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Hagrid harrumphed. "We-ell, I s —"

An agonized shriek echoed from the pasture.

The boys all froze, staring in horror towards the barn doors which were only wood now and wide open.

Hagrid sighed, "Oh, dear." Shaking his head, he fished in his pockets until he found a large jar bearing a depiction of a horse writhing miserably with all four legs desperately churning the air. "This should do it," Hagrid decided. "'Clean as a whistle,' it says. Yeah" he agreed with himself, and gruffly told his bewildered prisoners, "Don't break anythin' or *any one* while I'm gone!" He glared at them. "Back in a tick," he warned, and hurried out of the barn as another horrible scream rent the air.

The boys were thoroughly glad to see him shut the doors securely behind him.

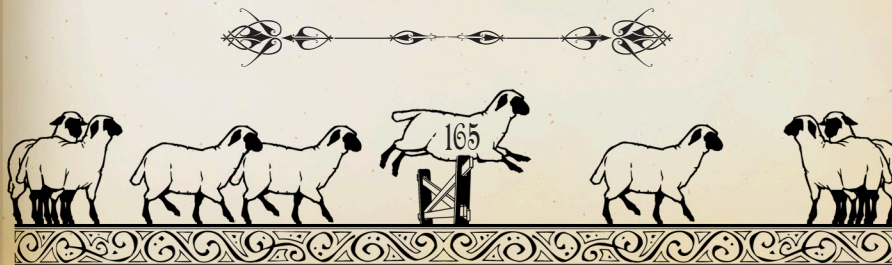
"So," asked Black curiously, "what's the *real* plan, James?"

Potter looked at him wearily and said, "We're going to clean the damn barn so we can have a proper dinner and sleep in our own beds tonight."

"Seconded," sighed Malfoy.

From the pasture a flurry of agitated shrieks rang out, followed by the sounds of an epic struggle for survival.

The detainees started vigorously cleaning the barn, which after all might have to serve as their home for the next several days or even weeks, until the Aurors could be notified of their need for rescue.



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After nearly half an hour, Crabbe clumped over to Malfoy and plunked down his bucket, wearing a look of disdain. This didn't *Bode Well* and Lucius looked down his finely shaped nose at him.

Crabbe complained, "This vinegar infusion doesn't work any better than spit."

Lucius informed him, "It's meant to be *Building Character*."

"Yeah, well, it's doing *nothing* so far as I can tell," Goyle grumped, thunking down his bucket beside Crabbe's. "This is useless. Maybe there's more of that Everkleen stuff?"

"NO!" cried everyone else.

"There you are!" said Potter with a fanatical cheerfulness that might have been more impressive if he hadn't been trying to keep back a yawn. "We actually did learn to agree and cooperate. Well done, us. Now we can tell them that honestly, when they ask if we've succeeded In *Learning Better Ways*."

Lucius scowled at him, disliking the Marauder's haughty tone. "Right. So that's done," he clipped. "Too bad the barn isn't."

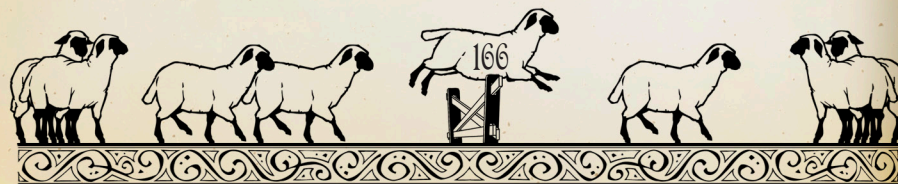
"The barn's *huge*," whined Pettigrew. Again.

"So's Hagrid!" snapped Black. "Keep scrubbing or someone will use *you* as a mop."

"HEY!" Potter yelped, breaking into a perilous grin. "We could use Remus!" He darted into the stall where the incapacitated boys were resting.

Crabbe asked perfunctorily, "Save him or seek cover?"

"There's a wall between us and them," Lucius reassured



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him, and waited for the outraged screaming to start.

The ensuing silence was disheartening. Sev was really *Out Of It*, this time.

Potter emerged unscathed, still grinning and frogmarching his dazed friend along; the two of them were scarcely visible through a glittering golden globe.

"Look!" cried Pettigrew. "It's a haylo – "

...

"This is why everyone hates you," said Malfoy.

"It's working!" Potter exulted. "Look! You can push the loose hay along in front of him!" He slipped, recovered quickly and added, "But not the used hay, apparently... eugh!" He scraped his boots against the edge of a stall door and carried on blithely.

"Like Hell it is!" cried Black. "STOP!"

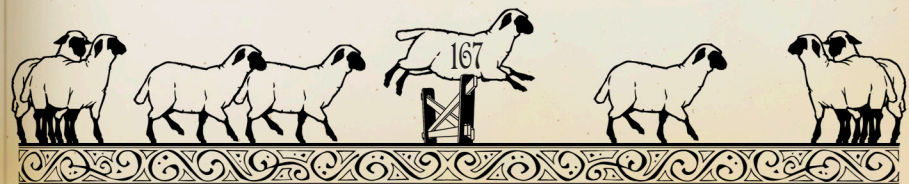
Lupin had spent the morning trying to escape the hay, but now the tables were overturned; the hay was actually flying away from him as he was moved, and the faster his progress, the worse the haystorm grew.

Lucius clung onto his goons for balance until Potter *Realized His Error* and braked Lupin to a halt. As the hay sifted gently to earth Malfoy gritted, "I'm so glad we spent our morning collecting all this into neat piles."

"Sorry," gruffed Potter. "All right, Remus? Remus?"

"Izzit lunchtime?" mumbled his sleepy companion.

"No," Potter told him. "We're cleaning the barn now. Nono! DON'T SIT DOWN!" he warned, holding Lupin on his feet. "It's all over horseshit!" When this made



Ramifications

no impression on the dazed Marauder, Potter called, "Sirius, toss us that broom, I'll prop him up, thank y — " He broke off staring as the broom's neatly tied haystacks splayed out like a windsprung umbrella. "Er — let's change it for a mop."

Lupin muttered, "I don' wanna change."

"Then don't lie down and you won't have to," Potter told him brightly. He took the mop Black threw him, and crammed it into Lupin's hands. "Here, hang on tight! Good! Just keep mopping, we're nearly done!" He pushed the mop into motion and Lupin took up the cadence like a clockwork novelty. "Great!" Potter approved, "just keep doing that!" He carefully released his friend, waited long enough to be sure Lupin would continue on his own, and hurried back to his own bucket and stared into it with dismay. "Oh, bother, it's full of hay."

"You think?" snipped Lucius ominously.

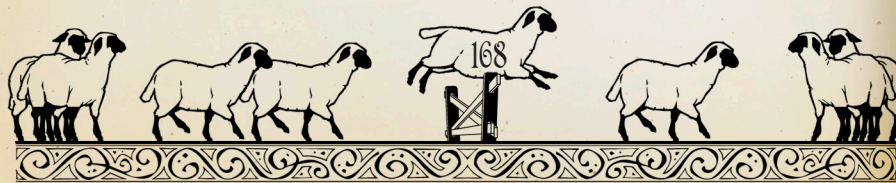
"Nevermind!" Potter rallied, "we'll just start fresh!" He dumped out his bucket onto the floor.

Pettigrew squealed, "I just cleaned that part!"

"Sorry, mate! No one could tell, anyway!" Potter loped back to the stall with the spigot. "Now, if Snape hasn't drunk all the vinegar..."

Lucius waited for the outraged shrieking to commence.

When again it did not, Malfoy began to grow *Concerned*. Sev was *Really Out Of It*, this time. Lucius edged towards the stall, listening intently and ready to *Prudently Retreat* at any moment.



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"Hey, Snape?" Potter queried very loudly and a bit uncertainly. "Still alive?"

In answer came an ominous belch, the kind which inevitably preceded a rousing bout of *Projectile Vomiting With Accompanying Headspinning*.

Potter came hurrying out of the stall, wearing his bucket as a helmet. "Run for it! I think this time he's gonna turn inside-out and explOde !"

The Marauders ran for the far end of the barn, hauling Lupin along with them and raising a blinding haystorm which scattered the Slytherins like autumn leaves.

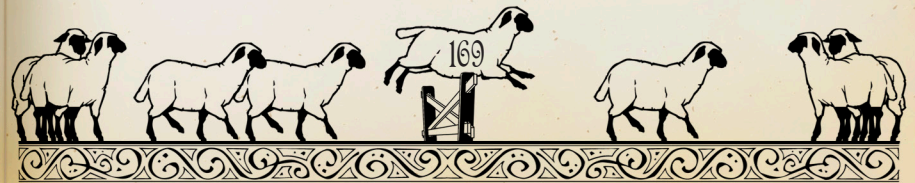
When the dust settled, Malfoy disentangled himself from his cape and sat up to discover himself *Utterly Abandoned*.

Everyone else had evacuated the danger zone. *Everyone.*
Everyone but SNAPE.

For whom he was PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE. LUCIUS disentangled himself from some barnyard implements he couldn't begin to name, shook off the layer of hay, squared his shoulders and told himself firmly, *He CAN'T be in THAT much trouble. They don't let Fourth Years NEAR potions ingredients THAT powerful —*

Of course Sev had that extensive private stash of *Unusual Ingredients With Interesting Possibilities* which Lucius had given him over the years. AND WHO KNOWS WHAT HE MIGHT HAVE DONE WITH THOSE —

The silence from the stall was unbearable. Lucius marched to the door and threw it open and stepped



Ramifications

briskly inside, demanding crisply, "All right, Sev?"

The wretched swot was sprawled out like a discarded ragdoll in a corner, his uniform stained dark from collar to belly and his hay-encrusted hair standing out from his head like the petals of a wilting sunflower.

He seemed if anything well past consciousness, and Lucius decided to drag him over to the spigot. A good dousing might *Improve Matters Somewhat*.

With efficiency born of frequent practice, Malfoy seized Snape and towed him across the floor, propped him against the wall beneath the spigot and set the water to gushing onto the enfeebled muckmeddler.

Snape spluttered, then coughed, and jerked away from the deluge, rolling instinctively aside to fetch up in a surprised crouch with the customary dismayed sigh, "oops."

"All right, Sev?" Malfoy inquired with uninterested solicitude.

"Too much heat," Snape apologized, starting to daub at the straw with his cape.

Lucius felt this a useful start. *At least he can scrub floors, and I know he can do that in his slee —*

Malfoy collapsed in a heap as something ensnared his ankle; he cracked his head on the gushing spigot and saw stars.

Next thing he knew he was pinned against the wall, with Sev's hand covering his mouth and Snape glaring like a cobra at him as the wretched swot whispered dangerously, "Hi, Luke. Lovely little detention we're having. Where's my wand?"



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It was rather difficult to answer with one's mouth covered. Lucius glared right back at his presumptuous lieutenant, and waited.

Snape cautiously removed his hand from Lucius's face.

Malfoy whispered contemptuously, "You're back, are you?"

"Briefly," Snape said and then repeated, "WHERE. IS. MY. WAND."

It was almost a pleasure to tell him: "Probably on the Headmaster's desk, with mine and all the rest."

"...what?"

"No wands," Lucius rather enjoyed telling him. "No magic allowed, during our detention."

Sev said something that actually sparked the air blue. And then launched into his usual tirade, all *sotto voce*, "Every time I get involved in these Machiavellian plots of yours, all I have to show for it is humiliation and bruises and ruined garments and wait — d'you mean the Marauders haven't any wands either?"

"Yes."

Snape laughed like a broken hinge.

Grinning he sighed, "Really."

He shook Lucius, who answered crossly, "Really."

If anything Snape's grin widened, and he breathed, "Oh lovely." He stared at something only he could see and it was great and strange and Lucius suddenly quite missed the invisible bee.

Snape released him, saying briskly, "So. We're all gathered here in the barn and we're cleaning it 'til it



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sparkles or we drop. Is that it?"

"Pretty much," Lucius admitted. His automatic correction of his deshaibille was interrupted by a sharp twinge and he grimaced at his sore hands, which were actually *Blistered*.

Snape glanced at them, rummaged in his cape and handed over a small tin. "Dry your hands and rub that into them, thoroughly," he directed.

Lucius did not.

"It's not poisoned," Snape sighed impatiently. "It's what I use, and it works fine." He showed Lucius his hands, which were refinedly pale but hideously callused from endless stirring and ladling and mincing and wringing.

Lucius sniffed the balm, which smelt of mint, and cautiously applied a little to his aching digits. It did help, almost at once, and he continued more optimistically.

While he did this, the dripping swot found the two spare buckets Hagrid had left in case he or Lupin recovered, and lugged them over to the gushing spigot. While the water ran he rummaged in his cape again and soon busied himself over the brimming buckets; the water in them turned a vibrant orange for a few moments before clarifying completely. Snape nodded and approved, "That should help considerably... and if you three can *manage* not to provoke the Marauders into an all-out fray, you'll have the barn clean within the hour so we can all go back to the castle."

He glared at Lucius. "It's a good deal better than you



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deserve," he growled, "but I don't mean to linger here one moment more than I must, and unfortunately I can't leave on my own." He scowled, plainly recalling the last and only time he'd tried feigning illness while in Hagrid's care; the Groundskeeper was used to looking after animals, and his solicitous scrutiny was absolutely thorough and not anything one ever wished to undergo a second time.

Snape shuddered, and snapped at Lucius, "Hop to it! I have studying to do!"

Lucius, who would never *Hop To* anything in this life, regarded the upstart with tolerant malice and said, "I think you've forgotten who's in charge here."

"I think I know where you sleep, and when," Snape bared his teeth, which had grown yellowish and uneven from too many samplings of half-finished potions. "And I think running for my life in a sheep paddock in the middle of the night and then having the whole school laughing about it is all the inglorification I care to endure for one week. Get going, or I'll poison your pumpkin juice."

This was the trouble with TOO-CLEVER MINIONS. "Is that a threat?"

"It's a promise," Snape grinned jaggedly. "Of another dose. But, if you regain my goodwill, I'll give you the antidote."

"And just what will you be doing, in the meanwhile?" Lucius inquired precisely.

Snape displayed a phial of chartreuse liquid, and gulped it down. "I'll be right out of my mind, of course.



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I told you," he said with a nasty smirk, "I don't plan to endure one minute more of this misery than I have to." His display of teeth widened, too much. "Try to be quick about it, won't you?" he directed expansively, "I'd hate to waste the entire DAYYYY-O - "

The deep musical notes which emerged from Snape nebulised his unaccustomed impudence. His face fell and a panicked light kindled in his eyes as he tried again. "DAY-AY-AY-O!" He swallowed several times convulsively and came out with, "DETENTION DONE AN' ME WANT GO HO-OME!" His voice had plunged two fathoms and for a brief moment he jerked about like a marionette in the grip of St. Vitus's Dance.

He crossed his arms savagely to control them and managed to say instead of sing, "This is unexpected," still in that same deep velvety voice. Lucius could see the whites of his eyes.

He'd never seen them before. He thought, *so this is it I'm going to die.*

"Sev," squeaked Lucius timorously, "what the hell did you drink?"

Snape grabbed the spigot and set it gushing. He took a long drink, waited several moment and swallowed several more times before answering in that same sepulchral register, "You tell me."

Oh, God. "What d'you mean?"

"I must have... ingested something... somewhere," Sev mused, and lilted hopefully, "THERE'S A PLACE FOR US... "



Ramifications

He clamped both hands over his mouth and looked alarmedly to Lucius.

Who looked alarmedly back, and considered staging a Strategic Retreat. And then remembered Professor Keele and how *with great power comes great responsibility...* Lucius tried a bit desperately "D'you feel all right otherwise? You're not going to puke or faint or anything?"

Sev shook his head. "Don't think so." He took another hefty draught of water, "Only I FEEL PRETTY... OH SO PRETTY..."

"No singing!" Lucius commanded.

Snape made a Herculean effort to bestill himself and fished in his cloak, which seemed to have quite a lot of secret pockets sewn into its lining. He extracted a phial of teal liquid and another of lumpy purple stuff, and drank both by turns. "Let's hope that helps. Whatever *did* I ingest?"

"The Detention breakfast," Lucius supplied, "all in one bowl. Recently, one apple and some pumpkin juice."

Sev shook his head in agitated dismissal. "No, none of those would have such effect." He clenched his teeth and shuddered.

Lucius thought harder and added "Definitely some water... and I should think some mud, and possibly some of that Everkleen stuff."

Snape spun on him and actually grabbed him by the front of the cloak to demand operatically, "ELLA'S ENCHANTED EVERKLEEN?"

Lucius with *Sinking Heart* offered, "That's the one."

Snape used a word that could have melted a caul-



Ramifications

dron and turned Lucius loose, diving frantically through his cape, halting sharp only when he found the corner bitten away by Incendium in the pasture; he stared at this damage for long moments before murmuring shakily, "Something's going to have a terrific bellyache..."

A bit desperately, Snape tried the other wing of his cloak and after some debate extracted a phial of ruby liquid and drank its contents in one gulp, and shivered, and made a face and gritted, "Let's hope that helps."

Lucius had to ask, "And if it doesn't?"

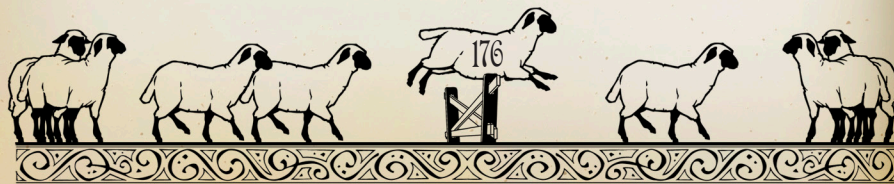
Snape sighed tightly. "I expect Hagrid'll tie me to a roofbeam, for the safety of all involved. Go on, Luke." He seemed to have lost most of his bluster with this new knowledge. Quietly he sighed, "And take this to one of the lumps, WILL YOU BE THERE FOR ME..." He bit his tongue, and leaned tensely against the wall as if he now were waiting to turn inside-out and explode.

With no better plan in sight, Lucius hefted one of the improved buckets, and then hesitated. Honor and self-preservation demanded that he ask Sev, "Tell me honestly" he glanced reflexively at the rafters, "are we talking better or worse than the, er... *Scottish Mishap*?"

Both boys quickly turned three times widdershins and spat.

Snape settled haplessly back into his corner and shot Lucius a stormclouded look. "We'll find out."

Lucius hurried out of the stall.



Ramifications



It took the Marauders, who had diverted their energies to the safer end of the row of stalls where they had found another spigot, twenty minutes to really notice what was going on.

By that time the Slytherins' half of the barn had begun actually sparkling wherever they'd used the mixture Sev had provided.

A further five minutes passed as the three cognizant Gryffindors huddled together, whispering furiously until Black ended the discussion with the ringing decree, "There's no way those anemic toffs know any secrets of scutwork! They're obviously using some kind of potion!"

After this they invited the Slytherins into the discussion. Several accusations and denials were made in quick succession, and then a rather more dynamic debate took place amongst the six boys, resulting in various bruises and scrapes and the upturning of Malfoy's bucket and a very obvious, very clean spot spreading scintillantly across the floorboards.

Potter said, "Right, there's your evidence." He collected his own bucket and strode towards the stall wherein Snape was supposedly still having a lie-down; Black followed at his heels. The two of them kicked the door open and stood shoulder to shoulder to block any escape attempt the prisoner might assay.

Potter said, bright as a bared knife, "Hullo, Snape, feeling better?"



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Within the stall Snape stood just beyond easy reach, his feet braced and his smirk crooked and a brimful bucket cradled ready in his arms. Its contents were roiling slowly, unloosing bluish steam. "I feel *fine*!" Snape said, in a voice like wet silk.

Potter blinked, clearly taken aback.

Snape beamed and declaimed in fulsome tones. "And Alexander looked upon the world and wept, because there was nothing left to conquer."

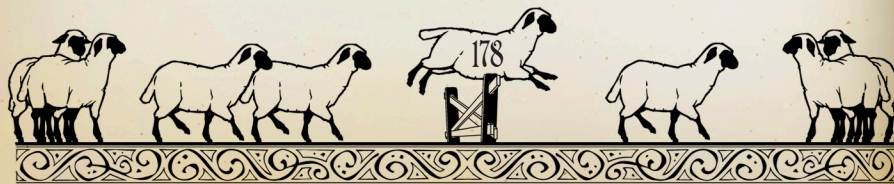
Lucius sniggered quietly at the sight of Potter discomfited, but the Marauder squared his shoulders, resettled his glasses and blustered on in an insufficiently deep voice, "What's in the bucket?"

Snape laughed like a frothing creek, and promised, "Try anything funny and you'll find out."

Malfoy decided that the snatches of song had been supplanted by *Episodes of Psychosis*. He grabbed his goons by their cloaks and pulled Crabbe and Goyle down behind a haybale, which was insufficient cover; he put the twin lumps in front of him as extra protection and growled exasperatedly, "Remind me *if* we live to educate him in social interactions other than baiting his intellectual inferiors until they *thrash* him..."

Potter was explaining with elaborate patience, "— remind you that we are in a barn, Snape... which is chock-full of flammable objects and you'll be in rather a bad position if the whole place catches light."

Black clarified helpfully, "Seeing as you're in this



Ramifications

stall with only the one way out."

Snape drawled, "In which case I certainly wouldn't use incendiary ingredients. Congratulations on realizing the obvious." He grinned like a lightningstrike, and chuckled to himself, "Which returns us to the question: Whatever *could* it be in this bucket, I wonder?"

Potter laughed. "So you don't know, either."

"Yes I do!" Snape glared at him and took half a step forward, then halted abruptly as the bucket slopped onto his boots.

Black, watching attentively, muttered, "Doesn't affect leather, doesn't affect hay, doesn't affect horseshit..."

Potter added, "Doesn't affect wood, look at the bucket— doesn't affect iron, the banding's intact."

Snape interrupted sharp as tacks, "Oh, but wait 'til you see what it does to *meddlesome idiots*!"

"Should you be holding that?" Black inquired solicitously.

Snape snapped, "I made it! I am in control here!"

"...sure..." soothed Potter.

"Very sure!" Snape asserted. He glared up at his nemeses, licked his lips, nodded faintly to himself and pronounced, "Now. You and your pack of fools will recommence cleansing the rest of the barn, beginning with the remainder of 'our' half, quickly and quietly... or this will go all over one of you, and I guarantee you'll not soon recover."

Potter inquired, "And just how will you explain to Hagrid why your lot aren't working?"



Ramifications

Snape laughed. "Naturally that's the result of our superior intellects and judicious allocation of resources."

Black said, "And you think Hagrid's going to understand that?"

Snape repeated, "We're dead clever and we work fast. Now get going!"

Potter conceded, "All right! All right, Snape, you've made everything crystal clear, thanks, only..."

"...only what" Snape demanded, looking vexed.

"Only if we used your Cleansing Concoction," Potter reasoned, "we'd be done in a twinkling, "as evidenced literally by the scrubbed portions of the room, "and we could all get back to the castle well before dinnertime."

Black added, "It only makes sense, Snape."

Potter nodded. "'Judicious allocation of resources,' isn't it? And your potion works really well, everyone can see that. Your results are excellent."

Black agreed, "First rate! I mean, look, the wood's *glowing* and the hinges are *gleaming*!"

Potter jumped in again, "All really splendid, Snape... so, come on, help us all out, will you? Please?" he added heavily, shifting his bucket wearily. "If we just get this detention over with, so we can go back to hating one another in peace. We won't even watch while you prepare your secret potion."

"Think about it, Snape," Black added. "Every bucket you dose for us is probably worth a half hour's time for you to mess about in the Potions lab. I'm sure Jenny



Ramifications

Goldberg's been there all day."

Potter volunteered bravely. "Here, you can start with mine." He held out his bucket.

Snape conceded, "All right, let me have it."

Lucius ducked.

Crabbe and Goyle piled on top of him.

There came a strangely heavy splattering, followed immediately by the long-awaited outraged shrieking and Black's gleeful cries of, "Come on come on!" as the Slytherins flattened themselves to the floor behind their haybale.

Pettigrew landed heavily beside them, and knelt up to peer over the bale. He laughed like a nuthatch, and announced giddily, "*Brilliant*, he's all over horseshit!"

A too familiar burbling heralded what could only be the geyserlike explosion of the bucket Snape had been holding. There followed a spluttering yowl, and a rich, earthy scent with a hint of bacon tinged the air.

Teeth clenched, Lucius heaved himself sideways so he could peek 'round the corner of the haybale and view the latest debacle.

Snape stood dripping and trembling like a prom queen doused in pigs' blood, which would have been better than his current coating of sludgy green ichor. His dark eyes glittered like a cobra's and his jaws worked convulsively as if he were searching for words or something to bite.

Atop another haybale, Potter and Black were congratulating one another and grinning as if they'd just been given a marvelous new toy.



Ramifications

Murder was welling up in Snape's eyes. He took one jerky step forward, then another, slipped, caught his balance and staggered like a wine-drenched wasp towards his tormentors.

Potter watched attentively, commenting to his companion, "The thing is, Sirius, *he* made up that potion, and so actually *he* used magic first... and then he threatened us with it..."

"Yes, he did," Black agreed loyally.

Potter nodded as Snape slurched closer. "*And a PERFECT agrees that he's unbalanced, all of which makes THIS self-defense!*" He whipped a wand out of his sleeve, aimed it right between Snape's wide, horrorglazed eyes, and cried, "*Lemniscintillite!*"

RAMIFICATIONS CHAPTER 9

🐏 Jinx 🐏, *staring out window*: Man, this winter just won't quit...

rabbit: I know... every time it seems like Spring's arrived, it goes and snows *again*...

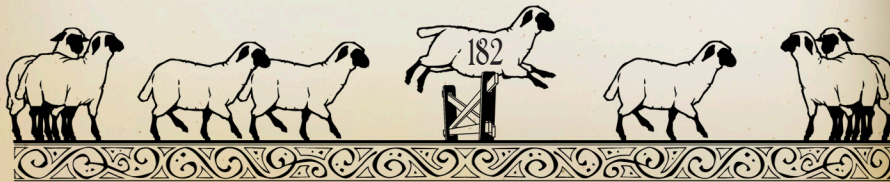
🐏 Jinx 🐏: Yeah... *it just won't stop*... (shakes head) It really lowers one's morale... it's like standing in the Staff Room, watching the Weasley Twins romping back to school for *another* year...

THINK SPRING!

rabbit & 🐏 Jinx 🐏

QUALIFYING FINALISTS FOR THE NORTH AMERICAN AUTOMOTIVE SNOW-BROOM QUIDDITCH LEAGUE

If you're lucky enough not to know what this is, it's a gadget



Ramifications

with a broom at one end and an ice scraper at the other. Currently we can wield 'em like quarterstaves.

SIRIUS BLACK PROTESTED ANXIOUSLY, "Oh, James, you shouldn't have!"

He stared in radiant dismay at Snape, who was thrashing about on the floor, covered in horse dung and entangled in a froth of glittering ribbons. The trussed-up swot resembled nothing so much as a bat which had crash-landed in a little girl's knitting basket.

Black shook his head grimly, and sighed, "Gift-wrapped Greaseball... and I didn't get you *anything*."

Potter grinned and handed him the wand, inviting graciously, "Surprise me."

Malfoy wished fervently that he had chosen a thicker haybale as shelter. In France.

Crabbe asked wearily, "Should we help him now?"

"No." Black was armed and Snape was conscious. No one with an ounce of sense would get BETWEEN them.

Crabbe and Goyle obediently hunkered down atop their peerless leader, presenting an arguably smaller target as they waited for the worst of the storm to pass.

Lucius unhappily was still *Responsible For Snape's General Welfare During This Nightmare Of A Detention* and so he diligently squirmed 'round enough to get a clear view of the unfolding disaster, in order that he might *Accurately Recount Events* to the Aurors when



they finally showed up.

Sev was writhing furiously, like a slug at the bottom of a slowly heating cauldron. Black was grinning and taking aim.

Out in the pasture something wailed like the Hogwarts Express derailing.

Everyone froze, staring at the barn doors which were looking thinner by the minute.

Black crashed to the floor in a heap; Snape had managed somehow to ensnare his foe's ankles in the sparkling ribbons. A fray ensued literally, during which the half-mummified muckmeddler succeeded in grabbing ahold of the illicit wand. Snape snarled something which was presumably a hex but it was never going to work through all the ribbons and spit.

Black, clinging two-fisted to the proper end of the wand, shouted, "*Torquere!*" There was a silverblue flash and Snape flew three feet straight up into the air and started spinning like an offkilter gyroscope, the ribbons binding him more tightly as he whirled.

Crabbe asked perfunctorily, "Should we help him now?"

"NO." There was no point adding to the body count. Malfoy and his minions huddled together, generally regretting the absence of a convenient trapdoor leading to sanctuary. Sev was really going to *Lose It But Good* whenever he got loose.

Black, apparently heedless of this danger, scrambled back onto his feet and hastily charmed the muck off himself. "EUGH! What have we told you, Snape, you shouldn't



touch people!" He shook himself for good measure, then resumed his perilous grin. "Now, where was I?"

Unfortunately not in Azkaban... but that could change once the Aurors showed up. The Gryffindors might be claiming *Self-Defense* but as anyone could see from Sev's uneven midair rotations Snape was *Obviously Temporarily Unbalanced*.

AND IN NEED OF EDUCATIONAL CHASTISEMENT FOR HIS EARLIER TRANSGRESSIONS...

Black announced brightly to the company general, "Now, I *knew* this looked familiar! Remember the the piñata Lorenzo had for his birthday?"

Potter laughed. "Oh, yeah!"

Black's grin widened and he asked with a gleam in his eyes, "Remember how we cornered it in the stairwell?"

Pettigrew yelped eagerly, "Let's hang him from the rafters and whack him with sticks!" He darted out from behind the haybale, eager to join the fun.

Malfoy kept firm hold of his minions' collars, muttering, "Not yet, he's just about chewed through "

Pettigrew shrilled, "SIRIUS, WATCH OUT!"

Black dodged backwards just in time as one of the ribbons turned black and unspiraled to reveal a hissing viper's head, which struck like lightning and sank its fangs deep into the wand. With one swift yank the snake delivered the weapon neatly into Snape's one free hand.

"Well, shit." Potter was staring almost curiously at this scene. "THAT's new "



Ramifications

Pettigrew clambered onto the haybale with him and rather hid behind Potter's cloak.

Black dodged hastily under Snape, and yanked on one of the sparkling ribbons, setting the swot spinning sideways.

Pettigrew warned him, "Sirius, be careful!"

"It's all right, Pete!" Black reassured him breezily. "He's already thrown up as much as possible!"

Snape spat out a mouthful of shredded ribbons and screamed,

"RETEXODUS!" All of the ribbons whipped loose, tumbling him to a rough stop against a nearby wall. "Whouph!"

Black laughed, and applauded. "Ten points for Artistic Interpretation... but none for Technical Merit. Too bad, Snape, you were so close!" He shook his head at the pity of it all, sauntering over to the dazed Slytherin. "If only your devastating intellect could be used for good," Black sighed, reaching down to pluck the wand from his dizzied foe.

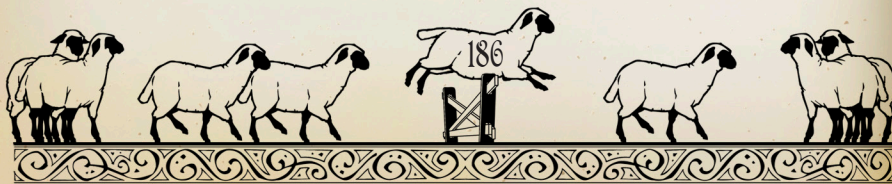
Snape and the snake both bit him.

As Black doubled over howling, Snape scrambled to his feet and braced himself against the wall and aimed the wand at Potter.

Lucius gave him small odds of success; Sev really needed to overcome his unfortunate habit of frothing at the mouth whilst attempting vengeful spellcraft

Something shiny blurred across the room and glanced off Snape's head; he yelped and toppled over, using words that could have scoured a cauldron.

The mysterious object rolled to a stop not far from



Ramifications

Malfoy, who by squinting could see it was a tiny bud of garlic, made of silver, with a variety of sacred symbols carved all over it.

It had to be Pettigrew's. Only he was fool enough to think any of that would work on Snape. Malfoy and his minions had found out during their very first week of school that all the traditional deterrents were ineffective against whatever was hanging upside-down in Sev's family tree.

Lucius at this point assumed *Eliminating That Troublesome Swot* would require a full-blown Frankensteinian dénouement in some fantastically desolate setting complete with *Deranged Revenant* steeped to the eyeballs in DARK MAGICK and personally hell-bent upon Snape's eradication from this Earth.

Another yowl of pain heralded the unmistakable clatter of a wand fallen to the floor. Malfoy said, "Get them and bring the wand to me." He let slip his *Dogs of War*.

The inevitable *melée* which ensued was really rather festive, with all those fluttering ribbons and intermittent showers of hay. Cursing, shouting, scratching and biting, in a very short time the combatants found themselves entangled in a great confusion of bodies, all gilded with chaff and trailing rainbows of glittering streamers.

It was strikingly like the last ten surly, giddy minutes of Mardi Gras.

Malfoy grinned as he got ahold of the wand. Potter grinned as he got ahold of Malfoy.

Submerged in the donnybrook, Lucius lost hold of the



Ramifications

wand and of course *The Situation Generally Degenerated* to the level of a Quidditch match, with all hands pursuing the prize. The elusive wand hummed and sparked as various holds and conflicting commands were laid upon it; unaimed hexes churned the air, lashing lightning tongues at random targets. Pettigrew started burping up slugs and gagging withdrew from the fray.

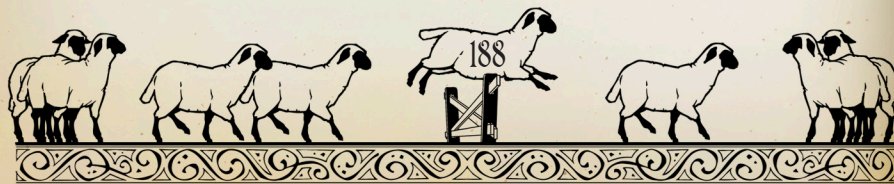
Black turned Purple but seemed otherwise well until Goyle slipped in the squashed slugs and collided with him; both boys thereafter enjoyed a sojourn in Dreamland. Crabbe meanwhile was wholly preoccupied with drooling like a burst pipe, which was making all the squashed slugs even more slippery.

Lucius was laughing heartily at this ridiculous situation, because he was utterly unable to do anything else; he was firmly caught in the grip of a Hilarious Hex as well as Remus Lupin, who had sprouted an extra pair of arms and though still asleep on his feet was doing a fine job of mopping the floor with Malfoy.

Potter, sprouting lush fuchsia fur, had Snape caught in a headlock, until the candystriped Slytherin returned the favor with a more Southerly interpretation. Potter's screech echoed through the barn.

One of the barn owls screeched back in a suggestive manner.

Snape squirmed loose and scrabbled amongst the ribbons and somehow came up with the wand, and took aim at Potter with DIVINE RETRIBUTION lighting



Ramifications

his eyes as he snarled, "*Restagnio alv* —"

"I'LL TAKE THAT." Hagrid, moving nimbly as a nother bear, snatched up the glowing wand. Snape's grip on it was so ferocious that the variegated swot ended up dangling in midair, where he was brought glare to glare with the enormous Groundskeeper. "AND JUS' WHAT D'YOU THINK YER DOIN'?" demanded Hagrid coldly.

Snape stared at him, wild-eyed. Then his lower lip began to tremble, and his expression crumpled into frightened despair as he quavered, "Please, Sir, I'm lost and I can't find my mum!" He began "sniffing wetly, which was not difficult with his nose pouring candys-triped blood all down his chin.

Hagrid stared at him narrowly for a moment, and then caught ahold of Snape's cloak and gave him a good long shake.

"Right," said the Groundskeeper, "let's try that again. WHAT. D'YOU. THINK, YER. DOIN'?"

Snape's eyes, which looked like two Starlight Mints, were rolling crazily and for some moments he looked as if he might be sick. He seemed to realize, though, that decorating Hagrid would gain him no favor, and he swallowed hard several times, and blinked rapidly, and looked around wonderingly and asked, "Where am I?"

"DETENTION."

"Really?"

"REALLY," Hagrid assured him. "YEH'RE IN THE BARN, WI' TH' REST O' YER MATES. YEH'RE TER CLEAN THIS PLACE THOR-



Ramifications

OUGHLY. YEH'VE GOT HOURS TER GO," he said stormily. "AN' THERE'S NO MAGIC TER BE USED FER THE DURATION!"

Snape boggled at him. "But then... how did Potter come to have a wand, and hex me with it?" he asked, patently mystified.

"Er " Hagrid studied the wand.

Snape said, "It's not mine. If it were, it'd be candys-triped too. That's how the *Merrie Menthall* spell works, of course."

The Groundskeeper nodded thoughtfully. Then he barked, "JAMES!"

The fuchsia-furred Gryffindor slunk out from behind a haybale, and asked sunnily, "Yes, Hagrid?"

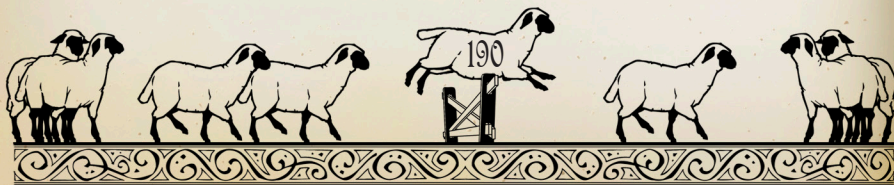
Fixing a warning glare on Potter, the Groundskeeper rumbled, "Is THIS TRUE?"

"Snape used magic first, Hagrid?" Potter protested, shedding with indignation. "He made up some potion they've been using to clean their half of the barn " His voice trailed off as he realized that the knee-deep mess of ribbons and slugsmeats and fur and dung completely buried his argument.

"It's true!" Black said loyally. "Make Snape turn out his pockets, Hagrid!" He snarled, "He's probably got half a chemistry set hidden on him right now!"

Snape contrived to glare at him. "Do you really think that likely, when you've just battered me from pillar to post?"

Black countered, "You've got all your stuff bespelled not to break!" He nodded knowingly and went on,



Ramifications

"Really you'd *have* to, just to survive your average schoolday. Make him turn out his pockets, Hagrid!"

The Groundskeeper nodded sagely and announced, "I THINK YEH ALL SHOULD TURN OUTCHER POCKETS." He set Snape down, pocketed the confiscated wand and hefted a large haybale into place before him. "GO ON. ALL O' YEH."

Potter clipped, "Gee, thanks, Sirius."

"Yeah, for *nothing*," sulked Pettigrew, who was retching and trying to hide something in another haybale.

"YOU THERE! PETER! C'MON, YOU FIRST!" commanded Hagrid.

The pudgy Gryffindor trudged forward, blushing furiously and belching up a fine fat slug along the way. Gracelessly he rummaged through his pockets and with some prompting produced several nibbled bits of cheese sandwich, took one look at these and burped up two more slugs.

Hargrid prompted ominously, "Go on."

After some feeble attempts at distraction, Pettigrew sighed and hauled forth a clot of candywrappers, a faded newspaper clipping showing Stevie Nicks dancing in a headwind, a shoebutton, a pair of engraved silver garlic cloves and a rowanwood slingshot.

Hagrid raised his eyebrows. "Expectin' trouble, Pete?"

Pettigrew hiccupped and shrugged uncomfortably, mumbling, "You never know when DARK MAGIC might be sniffing around, looking to start some mischief." He cast a dubious glare at Snape and Malfoy, who was still giggling in Lupin's four-armed grip.

Snape laughed, and opined frostily, "You won't stop



Ramifications

DARK MAGIC with a handful of trinkets and a slingshot."

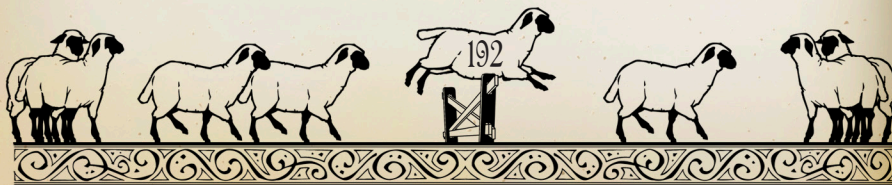
"Oh yes?" blustered Pettigrew. "Fine, let's see what you've got!" He stepped aside, belched forth another slug, and waved Snape towards the haybale.

The lanky muckmeddler strode forward, fished through his pockets and offered up three candy-striped phials. "Prior to their transformation into mint tea," he grumbled, "these were, respectively, willowbark powder, for headaches... laudanum, for tranquility... and coca powder, for lucidity. All perfectly ordinary study aids. Also, here are three Galleons and two Knuts... and a bit of ribbon." He rolled his peppermint eyes in exasperation, and spreadwinged his pockets to show them empty.

Crabbe had a collection of small coins and smoothed pebbles, and one platinum cufflink. Goyle had a map showing how to get to his classes, and a bitten Galleon.

Hagrid pried Malfoy loose turned out Lupin's pockets himself. He came up with a wilted handkerchief, a worn permission slip granting access to the library's Restricted Section, and a much-thumbed pocket version of the WISE WITCHES' ALMANACK CHRONICLING THE EVENTS OF THE LUNAR YEAR.

Lucius, still chuckling tediously and *Much Interested in Obtaining that Useful Permission Slip*, stepped forward to produce "Six galleons and four sickles. Just pocket change." He shrugged, and pulled out his pockets, and tried not to chortle.



Ramifications

Sirius Black all but slunk to the haybale and blushing began producing handfuls of parchment scraps, all of which seemed to be covered in flowery script detailing *Abiding Affection* and every free moment in their authors' schedules.

"That's Narcissa's handwriting !" Lucius was appalled. He'd been sure she'd stopped speaking to her *Goody-Two-Shoes* cousin when she'd stopped answering to her surname outside of classes.

No doubt the *All But Disowned* cur had purloined her letter. "I'll take that to its proper owner!" Lucius snapped, and gallantly snatched up the perfumed note, expertly palming the *Advantageous Permission Slip* as well. An outburst of gleeful laughter doubled him over and provided opportunity to hide both away inside his shirt.

When he came up he met Snape's avaricious gaze and knew he had *Bargaining Leverage for the Rest of the School Year*. Lucius was pleased that at least some good had come of this Detention.

Potter, unable to delay any longer, produced some kite string leashed to a bent-winged Snitch, a few coins embedded in lint, a handkerchief embroidered with fleurs-de-lis and the letter "L," a speckled red feather, and a TO DO TODAY note reminding himself to POUR SOMETHING NASTY ALL OVER SNAPE AT LEAST ONCE, with a scrawled addendum in Black's hand: SOMETHING NASTIER THAN HIM? (IS THIS POSSIBLE!)

Snape glared at the pair of them.



Ramifications

Potter only grinned and told him, "It's important to set goals in life."

Hagrid said over Snape's answering snarl, "QUIET, NOW. I'M THINKIN'."

Lucius sniggered (*Helplessly*) and waited for the barn to ignite.

"ALL RIGH' NOW," the Groundskeeper declared gruffly. "YEAH... THAT'LL WORK." He glared sternly down at his captives and announced, "WE'RE GONNA CHANGE THINGS 'ROUND A BIT. POTTER AN' SNAPE AN' LUPIN AN' GOYLE, YOU FOUR ARE GONNA WORK TOGETHER T' CLEAN THAT HALF OF ALL THIS MESS!" He warned the remaining appalled quartet, "AN' YOU FOUR ARE GONNA CLEAN THAT HALF! AN' RIGHT QUICK!"

There was a frozen silence.

"THAT'S NOT FAIR!" Goyle protested. "I keep getting put on the team with the useless lump! Lupin's no more help now than Snape's been all morning!"

Potter, perhaps realizing that he was thus outnumbered two to one, chimed in, "He's absolutely right!"

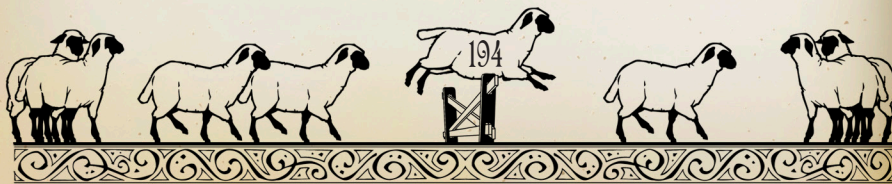
"THEN SOMEONE'LL HAVE T' WORK TWICE AS HARD T' MAKE UP FER THAT," Hagrid decreed, tapping significantly at the pocket containing the confiscated wand and fixing Potter with a stem gaze.

Potter wilted.

"Dear, dear," murmured Snape. "Lost your every ally, have you? How unfortunate."

Malfoy tittered.

Hagrid barked, "Go ON!"



Ramifications

Something in the barnyard shrieked horribly.

Given the choice between banshees and buckets, the prisoners hastily chose the latter.

All except for Goyle, who apparently felt the urgent need to explain, "*Potter had that wand hidden up his sleeve!*"

"Stop helping, Gav," Snape recommended, and cuffed him.

"FINE," Hagrid growled, "I'LL JUST FRISK YEH ALL, THEN. POTTER, C'MERE. THE REST O'YEH, LINE UP."

There was a general scrambling for last place.

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle formed their customary screen to hide their ever-resourceful swot as he ditched whatever *Ministry-Controlled Substances* he had brought along today. Lucius averted his gaze and enjoined his minions to affect *Keen Interest* in the objects produced by Hagrid's shakedown of the Marauders, while Sev had a brief intimate encounter with a haybale.

Unfortunately, the Groundskeeper's collection was *Nothing Much to Write Home About*. The most interesting item so far was a Tarot deck with rather exciting illustrations of the Empress and other Ladies, which had been extracted from Potter. Regrettably, fuschia fur had obscured the artwork's finer points.

Pettigrew's deck was nevertheless lacking by comparison, and much smudged. He looked very relieved as Hagrid set him back onto his feet, exclaiming, "I say, that was " Posterity would never know what; slugs erupted from his open mouth and splattered all over his roommates.

Malfoy collapsed in a burbling heap of hapless merriment.



"Eeeuuuuggghhhh!" Potter swatted at the slugs for several moments, then grimaced and resorted to using his fingertips to pry them loose from his sweater. "Oh, really, that's *enough!*" he decided almost immediately, and upturned a pleading gaze to Hagrid, exclaiming, "Look, I've learned my lesson! I shouldn't have brought the wand! It's only made things worse say!" He brightened.

Those Slytherins able to do so braced.

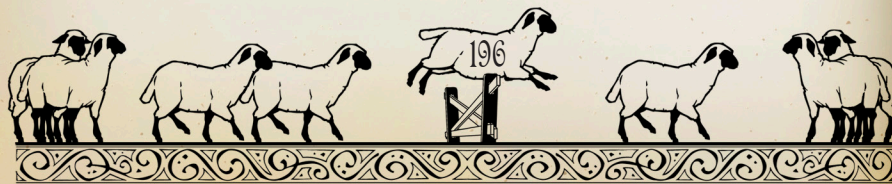
Potter offered generously, "Let me make amends by undoing all the havoc that wand's caused!"

"Yes, let him!" Black agreed quickly. "So we can all get back to normal and get the barn clean! C'mon, Hagrid!" he exhorted, trying to shake slugs off his cloak.

Snape said flatly, "You're not giving Potter back that wand." The haystrewn and rumpled swot was breathing hard and flushed as he staggered into line beside Goyle; his tie was wrongside-out and his cloak hanging askew, lending emphasis to his assertion, "We've suffered enough."

"Making my argument for me," Potter continued glibly, "that really we'd all be better off unhexed and free of all this muck and mess!" He glanced dubiously at Snape and added, "Unless you're happy being covered in horse shit "

"SHUT UP." Snape glared at him, and then turned to Hagrid and said silkily in his *New and Improved and Well-nigh Calligraphic* voice, "Naturally I am not pleased with the current state of things... nor would be the Headmaster, should he to drop by to judge our progress... "



Hagrid said nervously, "Er."

Snape went on smoothly as ice cream melting in July, "Of course it is well-documented that I have more experience than any other Hogwarts student in countering hexes."

"True," chipped in Goyle loyally. "School record, he's got!"

The Gryffindors sniggered in self-congratulation; their tireless efforts had largely contributed to Snape's spending the majority of his scholastic career ridding himself and his belongings of hexual residues.

Snape added practically, "And I am all over horse shit, and the sanitary facilities in this barn might, charitably, be deemed 'lacking.' Unfortunately, we're not allowed to leave until our Detention is over, so that leaves us trapped in here with that wand as our only recourse to restore equilibrium, so that we might proceed properly with our punishment, as intended by the Headmaster."

Black stared at him, and found his own broken tenor long enough to scoff, "Top marks in crawling, Snape."

"Slithering," Potter opined, curling his lip.

"Expediting matters," clipped Snape, "so that I needn't linger here in Purgatory one minute more than necessary. I have studying to do, and something on the back burner." Snape looked expectantly up at the Groundskeeper, exhorting, "Come on, Hagrid, we've had enough of all this folderol." He held out his hand expectantly.

Hagrid looked deeply uncertain, and seemed to be talking to himself rapidly. His gaze kept darting from his captives to the barn doors, and once or twice he cast an



apprehensive gaze in the direction of the distant castle.

In the barnyard something shrieked like a glacier calving.

"RIGHT, THAT'S TORN IT," growled the Groundskeeper, tugging the wand from his pocket. With a forbidding scowl, he LOOMED over Snape and crammed the wand into the Slytherin's grip with the curt direction, "JUST UNDO THE MESS TO WHERE IT WAS BEFORE LUNCH."

Snape beamed up at him, as if the great oaf were Father Christmas.

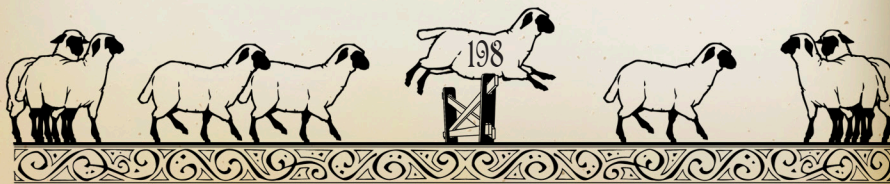
Potter protested, "Hagrid, that's a Gryffindor's wand" He seemed to strangle some revelation and went on hastily, "The owner doesn't know I have it! But it's, uhm, quite Fiery in nature we don't want Snape *igniting* the barn!"

"No problem," Crabbe said placidly. "Sev's got an unmistakably dampening influence on any situation."

There was general agreement with this.

Snape was staring at the wand, eyes wide, looking as if he'd swallowed too large a frog. He ran a finger gently over the delicate leaves carved into the witchwood, then grinned wickedly at Potter, purring, "Oh, you *are* going to catch Hell for this when she finds out you nicked her wand." His smile grew even more crooked as he mused, "Wonder who she's wandering Hogsmeade with, that she hasn't noticed yet it's gone?"

Next instant he shook his head, looking cross with himself, and flourished the wand experimentally. "Good job it's willow," he muttered, and aimed at Pettigrew.



Who shrilled, "*Why me first?*"

"Because I'm fresh out of white mice," Snape snapped, and hit him with a *Stomach Soothing Spell*. It was one of his best and most often practiced, and with a final salvo of slugs the pudgy Gryffindor slumped gasping with relief to the ground.

Snape nodded approval, and briskly tended to Goyle, and Crabbe, and Malfoy. When he turned to Lupin, he had some difficulty, "as if the spell thinks there's still more to him," he growled through clenched teeth, hanging whiteknuckled onto the wand. "And it would help if I could just see him through all that hay..." He brightened and cast a *Scourgifying* spell which instantly left Lupin standing in the middle of a sparkling rectangle of cleanliness. "Better," Snape purred, and used a *Disarming Charm*. Lupin blinked benignly and waved a bewildered thanks with one of his remaining hands.

"Where's my cookie?" he asked.

No one answered, as the other Gryffindors were busy assuring Hagrid that at least that much of the barn had been clean before the fight, and the Slytherins were busy bemoaning the fact that Snape had apparently only mastered the spell enough to clean a space the size of the Students' Potions lab.

Snape, momentarily neglected, turned on Black and Potter, and took rather a long time choosing a target; at last deciding on the lesser of two evils, he hit Black with a sizzling spell that knocked the Gryffindor right



Ramifications

out of his boots but did restore his normal coloring.

"Oh, really – " Potter's protest died as the next spell caused all of his fuchsia fur to fall out and raised a sweetish stench of burnt hair.

When he found his glasses and got to his feet again, everyone stared at him. Potter was entirely bald.

"Whoops," said Snape evenly, with a satisfied little smirk. "Gryffindor's wand, you know. Very Fiery. Accidents *will* happen."

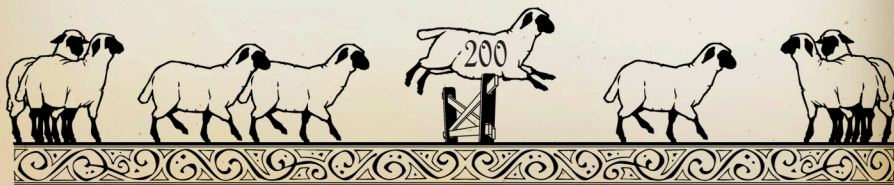
When Potter was apprised of his plight he charged at Snape, fists swinging, but checked himself roughly as he realized the swot was still covered in disgusting muck.

And of course Hagrid was still present and very large indeed.

With a self-laudatory grin, Snape casually charmed himself back to his usual appearance. He shivered, and sighed rather dreamily, despite the blue-green flames which briefly haloed his hair.

"ALL RIGHT NOW," growled Hagrid, once the flames had faded away, "I'LL TAKE THAT!" He plucked the wand from Snape's grasp. Sev scarcely seemed to notice this, or the ensuing thorough frisking to which the Groundskeeper brusquely subjected him.

The other Slytherins should have liked to have been so lucky. Lucius delayed *The Inevitable* as long as he could but ultimately had to endure the same inspection, which he bore by distracting himself with the composition of *Part the Second* of his letter to Father, *In*



Ramifications

Which Our Situation Actually Worsened Despite All Reasonable Protests and Common Sense.

At last Hagrid plunked Malfoy down and clapped his huge hands with the authority of a judge's gavel. All of the wakeful boys jumped. "Now! No more SHENANIGANS!" decreed the Groundskeeper. "BACK TER WORK WI' YEH POTTER, SNAPE, LUPIN, GOYLE, YOU TAKE THE NEAR WALL, MALFOY, BLACK, CRABBE, AN' PETTIGREW TAKE THE FARTHER! GO ON!"

They had so hoped he'd forgotten that divisive scheme.

"AN' ANYONE WHO'S GOT ANY MORE PROTESTS, OR BRIGHT IDEAS, OR TROUBLE HE JUS' CAN'T HELP CAUSIN'," invited Hagrid, "c'n JOIN ME FER DETENTION AGAIN T'MORROW, WHEN YOU CAN HELP ME WITH A VEXATIOUS AND AWFULLY BLOODY TASK O' BONIN' AND JOINTIN' A CHIMERA FER USE IN PROFESSOR STIRWELL'S ADVANCED CLASSES - "

"REALLY!" Snape yipped hopefully

Hagrid looked into his shining eyes, and stammered, "ER... COURSE NOT! YER ONLY FOURTH YEARS! I'LL HAVE YEH MUCKIN' THE BARNYARD!"

"It can't GET any muckier," muttered Goyle.

"GET BACK T^H WORK!" Hagrid roared. "NOW!" He folded his tree-trunk arms and glowered at his charges as they scattered to comply. When everyone lucid had recommenced scrubbing vigorously, the Groundskeeper warned, "I'LL BE RIGHT BACK." He spun on his heel, and marched out to the barnyard, where the HIDEOUS THING was ululating like a Lovecraftian afterthought.

Lucius tried not to be discouraged at being consid-



Ramifications

ered *The Lesser of Two Evils*, consoling himself that this was *Only to Be Expected at the Tender Age of Fourteen*.

"Oh, come on," Black was dogging Snape's heels, insisting, "You're ALWAYS cleaning up your little accidents, and all those grease stains... You *must* have SOMETHING hidden up your sleeve!"

Snape whirled like a Hammerthrow finalist and clobbered Black with his sloshing bucket. The Gryffindor went down with a yelp and the bucket leapt up with a reverberant CLANG! which left Sev neatly bottled in a halsize version of Houdini's Milk Can with just a droop of greasy hair sticking out from beneath its lid.

Crabbe paused in his scrubbing and asked Malfoy exasperatedly, "Should we help him now?"

RAMIFICATIONS CHAPTER 10

Lucius, anxiously: Does it worry anyone else that they've now gone and seen Kung Fu Hustle?

Sev, resignedly: No, it's always like that inside their twisted, little, sugar-glazed minds...

rabbit & jinx with what surely must border on criminal negligence: WHEEEEEEEEEEE! (marfmarf) Pass the cookies... (marf) nku... (marf)



Ramifications

OH, BRILLIANT!" SNARLED GOYLE, CHUCKING down his brush in disgust. It turned into a mousetrap and snapped shut on his foot. He scarcely noticed as he growled angrily, "Now we're two down!" He spun round and grabbed Pettigrew by the collar, loomed over him and commanded in tones fit only for a grimy alley after midnight, "KEEP SCRUBBING."

Pettigrew cringed, and frantically complied.

Potter studied the milk can now encasing Snape and murmured, "Convenient... but is there a market for tinned grease?"

Black trotted to his side, grinning like Christmas had come early. He invited merrily, "Want to play Kick the Can?"

Crabbe looked to Malfoy and asked leadenly, "Should we help him now?"

"No, that will require Hagrid's involvement," sulked Lucius. "Now we know what the buckets do when we 'abuse' them." He drew a long, calming breath which only gave him strength to burst out, "Really it's not right, telling us there's NO MAGIC ALLOWED DURING THIS DETENTION and then bewitching everything in this barn to turn against us! Are they trying to educate us or eradicate us!"

Crabbe blinked at him, and after a few moments began inching quietly away from Malfoy.

Potter was striding briskly towards the barn doors, which he proceeded to crack open just enough so he could call loudly and with rather too much satisfac-



tion, "Hagrid, we need your help in here! Snape was misusing the tools and he's stuck in a bucket!"

There was a long silence from the barnyard.

And from the milk can.

Black said just a bit uncertainly, "You don't think he'd go and drown in there, do you?"

"Only if we upend it," Pettigrew proposed.

Goyle snapped the mousetrap shut on the pudgy Gryffindor's nose reducing Pettigrew to a wailing lump.

The barn doors swung open.

Hagrid looked ANNOYED. He was covered in grass and mud and noticeably frayed around the edges. In fact he looked a great deal like the Quidditch pitch immediately following a bitterly-contested finals match.

And seemed every bit as large, as he glared at his prisoners. "RIGHT," he snarled, in tones that meant it certainly wasn't. "GUESS I'LL HAFTER STAY IN HERE AN' LOOK AFTER ALL O' YEH!" Shaking his head disgustedly he stamped into the barn. "NOT FIVE MINUTES, CAN YEH BE TRUSTED ALTOGETHER! REALLY IT'S TOO BAD! C'MON, YOU!" He lunged forward, and stumbled as if he were tethered to some great weight. "C'MON NOW!"

The boys realized to their horror that Hagrid was hauling on a thick rope which he had slung over one shoulder. Before they could gather enough wits to protest, he gave one great no-more-nonsense heave and into the barn stumbled a lanky roan.

Staggering dazedly, the horse was glowing with sweat



and somehow it seemed oddly melted, like an hour-gone candle. Its head was hanging nearly to the floorboards and its dagger teeth were coated with a bluish froth.

Lucius's heart leapt into his mouth. INCENDIUM. *INSIDE.*

He couldn't help himself and broke and ran for the hayloft ladder, hoping desperately that the damned horse would eat one of the stragglers. As he grabbed the rungs, something touched his shoulder and Lucius screamed.

Crabbe screamed right into his ear.

Behind them, the horse let out a shriek like the *Endurance* being folded, spindled and mutilated by the icepack.

The two Slytherins veritably levitated up the ladder and buried themselves in the hay, perhaps in vague hopes that they would look more like a salad and hence unappetizing to *That Fiend Incarnate*. Shuddering, they clung onto one another and waited for the start of the BLOOD FEAST.

The Aurors were welcome to show up *Any Time Now*.

Crabbe sniffled, "I'm really gonna miss Gav!"

Goyle was still down there, with the Marauders. And that vicious beast, who was shuddering and glaring at his imminent victims, red eyes glistening like a wet blade glimpsed by moonlight.

"EASY, NOW, INCENDIUM," Hagrid warned, winding the rope more securely around his forearm.

The horse stumbled backwards, flattened its ears and growled like a rockslide.

Pettigrew whimpered.

Incendium fixed his attention upon the knot of Marauders.



Ramifications

"Don't move," uttered Potter, "his vision's based on movement, he can't see us if we don't move—"

"And you know this how exactly — ?" whined Black.

"Shutupshutupshutupshutup," chanted Pettigrew, as Goyle ducked behind him and then with one fierce shove hurled the squealing Gryffindor forward as an appeasing sacrifice.

The horse lunged; Hagrid dug in his heels.

The rope broke.

Black and Goyle dove for cover; Potter dove for Pettigrew, tackling him awkwardly and sending them both sprawling into a corner as the furious horse thundered straight for the milk can, which had made the mistake of gleaming.

"Oh, DAMN it!" Lucius was REALLY going to miss Sev, whom he would remember almost fondly as a *Useful Distraction and Occasionally Interesting Conversationalist*.

The screaming stallion launched itself into the air and came down foursquare LIKE DOOM upon the milk can.

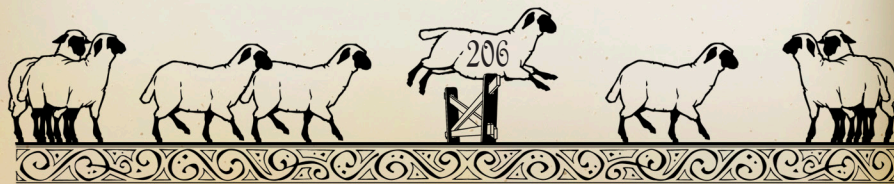
The rafters rang with the sounds of Quasimodo performing a new work by John Cage.

Crabbe began sobbing. "S'pose he'll haunt the barn, then?" he hiccupped hopefully, fishing out his handkerchief and saturating it. "Like Moaning Myrtle? 'Cos otherwise I'm never going to pass Potions!"

Malfoy swiped crossly at his own tears and choked, "Probably he'll haunt Potter."

"You mean Evans," snivelled Crabbe.

Lucius bleared at him incredulously.



Ramifications

"'Cos y'know, they come back 'cos of something they've not done, right?" gulped Vic miserably. "And he'll never ever manage to ask her out, not in a million years..."

Goyle flung himself down beside them, spooking them both.

"Don't DO that!" snapped Lucius damply.

"What save my life? Think I can, mate!" Goyle was flushed and panting and fool enough to crawl forward so he could watch what was happening on the floor below.

The Marauders scrambled up the ladder, Potter and Black hauling Pettigrew over the edge so quickly they all landed in a heap in the hay. The more agile boys quickly scrambled to the loft's edge to overlook Snape's *Sticky End*.

Lucius remembered keenly that he was *Still Responsible for Snape's General Welfare During this Nightmare of a Detention, Although Extenuating Circumstances (To Wit: That Equine Monstrosity Representing the Groundskeeper's Fatal Error in Judgment) Have Nullified All Reasonable Expectations of My Success in Preserving Snape's Health and Existence*. Still he would have to recount events accurately to the Aurors and Wizengamot... Malfoy crawled forward and peered down at the remains of the fray.

The lower floor looked as though a tornado had just waltzed across it twice, and hadn't bothered picking up after itself a bit.

Crowning the debris was the battered milk can, now strongly resembling a fortune cookie.

Goyle burst into angry tears. "We're gonna be cleaning the damn barn 'til June!"



Ramifications

Hagrid collected the doublebent and deeply dented milk can and solicitously set it upright against a haybale. Why he was bothering, Lucius didn't know. From the look of things, Sev must have been churned into butter.

A scream echoed from one of the stalls, which shook as Incendium protested his incarceration with a series of petulant kicks.

The Groundskeeper ignored this outburst and fished something shiny from his pocket; he touched this to the milk can, which turned back into a bucket and promptly fell to flinders.

Sev, drenched and crumpled, looked like a bat which had spent a very long afternoon lost inside a car wash. He coughed up a pint of soapy water, shuddered, and toppled over.

Hagrid dragged him onto tiptoes and shook him, recommending strongly, "QUIT MESSIN' ABOUT!"

KRAK! The door between Incendium and the MOVE-ABLE FEAST crazed beneath another swift kick.

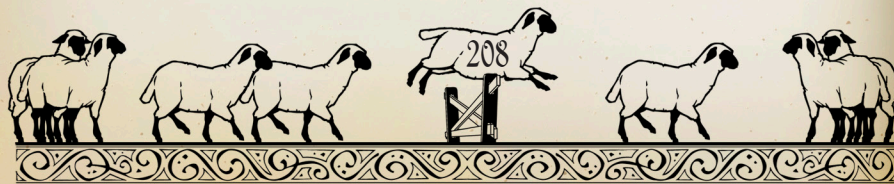
Silence fell very thickly.

"Hagrid," asked a small haystack, in Lupin's anxious voice, "can that horse break out of there?"

"Nah," Hagrid reassured him.

More kicks produced more cracks. These were plainly visible even from the hayloft.

"Don't think so," said Hagrid rather less certainly, staring at the spreading maze of fractures. He glanced around the barn as if seeking inspiration, and said,



Ramifications

"Oh, of course!" He snatched up a pitchfork and speared the nearest pile of hay.

Lupin screamed.

"Oh, sorry about that!" Hagrid glanced at the tines and seemed reassured to find no blood on them. "All righ', Remus?" he inquired.

"So far!" The haystack shuffled hastily away.

Hagrid picked up one of the haybales and heaved it over the stall door, interrupting another fit of temper and instructing firmly, "Yeh've just got ter shift it, Incendium, that's all there is for it! Now you eat that grass, that'll help!"

Lupin the Haystack edged closer to the ladder leading to sanctuary.

"I am," said Snape dawningly, "the Lizard King."

OH NO NOT AGAIN, THOUGHT LUCIUS.

Crabbe was tugging persistently at Malfoy's cloak, hissing into his ear, "Luke! Luke, I think we're in trouble—"

"Oh, just drop something heavy onto him," sighed Lucius disgustedly. "Another concussion might shut him up, anyway..."

"Look, Luke! — I mean, Luke, Look!" Crabbe seized Malfoy's tie and forced his attention onto the stall wherein *That Misbegotten Monstrosity* was avidly chewing on something sparkly.

A glass phial.

One of Sev's potions — Malfoy heaved himself to his feet and dashed for the door that led to the upstairs stalls which



Ramifications

flanked *The Door Out Of This Deathtrap*, betting his life that a thirty-foot drop would be better than whatever that potion was going to do to that already maddened horse.

He collided with something and fell sprawling flat on his back.

Something he couldn't see... investigated him. Closely.

Its breath stank of blood.

Malfoy shrieked.

SOMETHING LICKED HIS CHIN. SPECULATIVELY.

Malfoy discovered that if one tried very hard indeed one could levitate for short but vitally important distances, for instance back into the hayloft. He slammed the door shut and held it with all his inadequate weight and wheezed, "THERE'S SOMETHING IN THERE!"

The other boys didn't even look at him; they were all standing at the far edge of the loft, in postures of apprehensive disbelief, silhouetted by the cozy glow cast from the lower floor.

Hagrid's voice boomed from below, "MIND YER HEADS!"

Seconds later Snape came hurtling into the hayloft, as if sent there by a tournament-winning badminton smash. A chrysanthemum blossoming of loose hay marked his safe arrival amid one of the golden heaps. "C'MERE, REMUS, YOU NEXT!"

Potter yelped, "No! DON'T THROW HIM, THE HAY —"

Went EVERYWHERE as Lupin came slewing into the loft. All the loose straw spun furiously into a golden haze that stung like bees and sent the boys scrabbling for handholds.



Ramifications

It was like being in a haystack full of needles.

"STAY UP THERE AN' YEH'LL BE ALL RIGHT," Hagrid seemed to truly believe. "BACK IN A TICK! JUS' NEED TER GO AN' GET MY OVEN MITTS!"

Everything was *Yellow*. And chokingly dusty. Lucius had a moment's *Exquisite Sympathy* for Lupin.

And made straightaway for him. Lupin was the center of the storm, hence near him there would be AIR. Malfoy was grateful no one could see through the maelstrom as he was forced to crawl on all fours for several yards.

Someone grabbed him by the necktie and hauled him to *Safety*.

MAYBE.

Snape was glaring at him. He was frothing at the mouth again, which was *Never A Good Sign*.

Around his other hand Sev had wound James Potter's necktie, which was beginning to strangle its owner. He snarled at both his prisoners, lightly misting them both.

Potter gasped, "izzera**problem**?"

"YOU!" Snape cried like the failing brakes of the Hogwarts Express, "AND YOUR LITTLE FRIENDS—" He hissed in a long, strangled breath and spewed out: "YOU JUST HAD TO GO SNEAKING 'ROUND THE SHEEP PADDOCK IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, FOR A LITTLE SOCIAL GATHERING WITH CHANG AND LOVEGOOD AND WEASLEY AND ALL THE REST... AND THEN YOU THREE," he rattled Lucius and bared his teeth at their roommates as they stumbled into view; Crabbe and Goyle took one look at him and hid inadequately



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behind Lupin, who was standing frozen with bewilderment and horror as he stared at Snape.

Snape's eyes were brimful of homicidal confusion with a twist of fanatical outrage, as he hissed accusingly, "YOU LOT JUST HAD TO GO SNEAKING AFTER THEM... AND THEN YOU JUST HAD TO TRY TO TAKE CUSTODY OF THEM, INSTEAD OF SIMPLY REPORTING THE MATTER TO THE HIGH INQUISITOR, AND OF COURSE THE STUPID SHEEP STAMPEDED." He shuddered at the memory, shook his captives for good measure and surged on even more furiously, "AND OF COURSE ALL YOU INBRED LITTLE MORONS PANICKED AT THE MERE SIGHT OF AN ILLUSORY DRAGON - !" Snape strangled on his own outrage for long moments and then growled at Potter. "AND THEN YOU BLASTED GRYFFINDORS JUST HAD TO TRY TO SAVE EVERYBODY, BECAUSE YOU WOULD NEVER DREAM OF SIMPLY RUNNING FOR IT - !" He gnawed the air furiously before strangling out: "WHICH FORCED MY INTERVENTION JUST BEFORE ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE AND YOU SHOULD NEVER THROW AN UNAIDED HEX IN THE DARKNESS IN A CROWD ESPECIALLY WHEN SHEEP ARE DITHERING ABOUT!"

"kay," wheezed Potter. His eyes rolled back so only the whites showed.

Snape shrieked in horror and cast his prisoners away. He staggered backwards and tripped over Pettigrew and landed hard on his knees, looking for all the world like *Richard the Third in Want of A Nail*.

SO THIS IS HOW IT ENDS, THOUGHT LUCIUS DAZEDLY.

Snape was strangely hunched over, with his hands



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upraised beseeching Heaven's Mercy.

Or perhaps he was still just lucid enough to refrain from touching his own hair, as he drew a great shuddering breath and keened like a hinge about to wrench loose for once and all: "SO HERE WE ARE AND ISN'T THIS TERRIFIC, I'M LAID OUT COLD IN A CURSE-INDUCED COMA WHILE THAT UNBEARABLE UMBRIDGE WOMAN DOES WHATEVER SHE LIKES WHILE THE HEADMASTER IS GOD-KNOWS-WHERE WHILE GOD-KNOWS-WHAT IS HAPPENING WITH YOU-KNOW-WHO - !"

He shrieked again, like an entire string section emphasizing a stabbing, and then collapsed like an unfortunate motel guest.

In the silence the susurrations of the swirling hay seemed quite loud and just a bit ominous.

Black inquired gruffly, "Does he have these turns often?"

"Only when he's been hexed senseless," replied Lily Evans. "All of this is just a kind of fever dream." She smiled wistfully, and sighed, "Still, some of it did happen... and you, and you, and you, and you were there!" she informed the staring boys.

"Told you, Pete," Potter choked, "you're just a bit of bad potato."

Lily moved through them as if they or she were not really there, and crouched down beside Snape; when he raised his head and stared blearily up at her, she intoned solemnly, "Help me, Severus, you're my only hope."

She repeated this several times, as if to make her message sink in, and then flickered out of existence.



Ramifications

Lucius fought his way free of his necktie and breathed as deeply as he could, hoping to avoid further *Hallucinations Induced By Oxygen Deprivation*.

Snape swayed up onto his knees, trembling like the last leaf of Autumn; he rucked back one sleeve to reveal a thin forearm bearing an incredibly tacky tattoo of a fanged skull upchucking a snake.

"Didn't know you had it in you, Sev," coughed Lucius wonderingly.

Snape made a noise like a laugh turned wrongside-out, and hauled up his other sleeve to reveal a smaller tattoo comprised of the neat Copperplate inscription: *Everyone deserves a second chance. Love always, OR ELSE. Albus Dumbledore.*

Crabbe lumbered forward and kicked Sev out of the way, grabbed Lucius by the *Only Just LOOSENE*d necktie and helpfully informed him, "YOUR MAN-EATING HORSE IS STARTING TO SMOULDER."

"scuse me?" said Black.

"Incendium," gagged Lucius.

"Oh, right! No happenchance names in the Wizarding world, are there?" moaned Potter, who had quite a talent for Ceramics.

There came an ominous FLUMPH! from downstairs.

"FIRE!" Snape flung himself flat to the floor. Then sprang back to his feet crying "STUDENTS!" Somehow he managed to gather all of the others into an untidy gaggle which he shoved firmly behind him as a wave



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of flame crested the edge of the hayloft.

Snape braced his feet, and stared into the blazing abyss, and whispered, "This is going to hurt."

The flames surged.

Everyone huddled beneath Sev's thoroughly fire-proofed cloak, which grew several yards longer and broader in accordance with the wishes of eight wandless but deeply motivated wizards.

The world turned BLUE.

All around them the flames writhed hungrily over the dome of clear air surrounding Lupin.

Lucius elbowed the others aside and seized ahold of Lupin.

Black inquired mildly, "So why aren't we dead exactly, this time?"

Crabbe grunted from the bottom of the heap of boys, "Lupin drank the whole lot at once, didn't he? A whole bottle of Hayfewer Brew, that's bound to cause some significant side effects."

"Yeah," Goyle agreed sullenly, "and you know just banging it down ALWAYS ends in tears and ruined decor..."

Lupin ventured, "I don't understand..."

"GOOD LAD!" enthused Potter, clapping him heartily 'round the shoulders. "YOU'RE EXPERIENCING INTERESTING SIDE EFFECTS AND SO WE'RE NOT DEAD YET! IDEAS, GENTLEMEN!" he invited somewhat maniacally. "OUR SANCTUARY IS SHRINKING!"

"Dunno why," muttered Crabbe. "The hay's still avoiding him, will be for hours yet according to the dosage instr-"

Pettigrew seized his necktie and shrilled up at him,



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"FIRE BURNS UP AIR AS WELL AS HAY YOU MORON!"

Black announced brightly, "TIME TO GO!"

"AND HOW EXACTLY MIGHT WE DO THAT?" demanded Malfoy, crowding closer as their haven dwindled.

"OUT THE BACK WAY!" Potter decreed. "WE CAN USE SNAPE'S CLOAK AS A PARACHUTE!"

"YEAH!" Black enthused. "IT MIGHT ACTUALLY WORK THIS TIME!"

"WAIT!" cried Lucius, and not just because he'd seen what'd happened the last time. "THERE'S SOMETHING BACK THERE! IT TASTED ME!"

"EW," said generally everyone, frozen with distaste.

"IT DID! AND IT'S INVISIBLE!" Lucius insisted frantically. "AND ITS BREATH STANK OF BLOOD!"

Snape bundled them altogether into his cloak and stormed towards the door, snarling, "THEY'RE THES-TRALS, WHICH YOU WOULD KNOW IF YOU EVER BOTHERED OPENING YOUR SCHOOLBOOKS!"

They staggered along boggling at him. Except for Lucius, who was still desperately trying to dig in his heels.

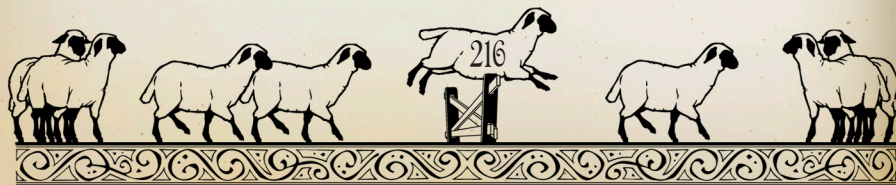
"THEY'RE INVISIBLE HORSES THAT CAN FLY!" Snape explained crossly. "IF THEY HAVEN'T FLED ALREADY, WE CAN RIDE THEM OUT OF THIS CONFLAGRATION!"

Pettigrew dithered, "I always thought they were lucky horses — ?"

Black snorted. "Yeah, and if you can see 'em, good luck to you!"

"What d'you mean!"

"COME ON!" Snape in a rarely useful fit of temper



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managed to haul them all across fifteen feet of charring floor; he was reaching for the door handle when the hayloft collapsed.

The landing hurt Incendium more than it did them. Probably.

It certainly made him PLENTY mad.

The furious and now flaming stallion shrieked and tried to buck free of the tangle of boys, with no success; the bitten corner of Snape's voluminous cloak fell over the beast's eyes and the stupid creature reared and bolted.

Fortunately the wall was only *Keeping Up Appearances* and collapsed in a hail of embers and charcoal dust as Incendium charged right through it, taking his unwieldy howling cargo of boys along for a very bumpy ride.

In the barnyard he stopped, dropped, and rolled.

This snuffed out several of the boys.

Lucius, clutching gratefully at someone's ankles, opened his eyes and looked thankfully up at PROFESSOR MCGONAGALL, who was standing over him, clutching a tray full of china cups.

"The Detention Tea, boys!" cried Potter dazedly. "We've done it! We've survived!"

"Yay us!" saluted Black, and fainted.

Lucius twisted round to look at the sparkling embers which were all that remained of the barn, and looked up at McGonagall and said at exactly the same time and in exactly the same charming tone as James Potter, "The barn's finished."



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"I can see that," she informed them through clenched teeth. Just beyond her Hagrid was studying the conflagration with an air of bewildered dismay.

Goyle sat up, dusted himself off without much success, looked at the smoking, empty space where the barn used to be, and grouched, "I'm NOT sweeping up that lot!"

Pettigrew reeled over to his Head of House and asked hopefully, "Are there any biscuits?"

"Maybe later," Lupin groaned. "Help me up, fellows... the ride's over, and I'd like to throw up now."

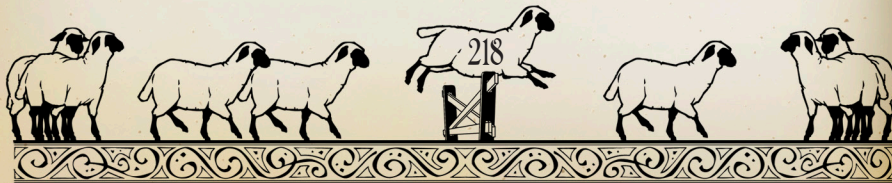
A muscle was working overtime in McGonagall's jaw. She began to count slowly: "One... two... three... four... five... six... seven... WHERE'S THE OTHER ONE?"

In the not-nearly-enough distance, *Something* screamed again. Lucius rolled over and confronted a scene from Bosch. THE HORSE was racing aggressively widdershins around the barnyard, trailing a magnificent cloud of thick black smoke...

...which, as Lucius desperately rolled out of its path, proved to be a dozen or more yards of ensorcelled black woolen schoolcloak. It undulated past like a prolonged oil slick and at the end of this serpentine writhe of fabric kited Sev, shrieking, his hair graced by an aureole of eerie, turquoise flame.

"Amazing," sighed Goyle. "His head's on fire and even the flames won't touch that grease."

Incendium hurtled over the nearest fence and ran for a solitary tree, with the arrowflight urgency of a dog which



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has been *Let Out* for the first time in fourteen hours.

"Oh, no," said Lupin very softly.

"This is going to hurt," sighed Lucius, "to watch."

But no one could look away as Incendium zagged past *The Whomping Willow*, which over the past four years had been responsible for more injuries to the student body than Quidditch, Herbology, and Filch combined.

Sev almost made it, flapping desperately in an updraft.

The tree lunged up and seized him with the unforgiving grace of a koi gulping a low-flying dragonfly.

Incendium staggered free of the cape and ran for his life. His whickering sounded nastily triumphant as he vanished into the Forbidden Forest.

The willow was juggling its prey, having realized that its dinner had arrived flambé. Many of the flames leapt for safety from Sev's hair onto its branches.

It writhed and beat at him with withies, but its attempts to extinguish his hair were worse than futile; in under a minute the willow had acquired its own corona of azure blaze. With one great shrieking twist it suddenly grew another ten feet and a great sturdy branch, which it used as a trebuchet to launch Sev after the horse.

He went like a Roman Candle, with an unearthly scream that faded woefully into the distance as he dwindled to a tiny blot of black and burning blue.

Crabbe tapped Lucius ritualistically on the shoulder and asked in an apprehensive monotone, "Should we help him now?"



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"I'll fetch him." Hagrid pulled up his oven mitts, and strode into the forest as it began to kindle.

EPILOGUE

FAQ

What are you on and how do I get some?

We've told you repeatedly: chocolate in (m)any forms. Available OTC most everywhere. We also like to listen to COMBUSTIBLE EDISON and, as the boys are getting older, *Nouvelle Vague*. (Both groups are TOO VERY.)

How DO you fabricate such... such mayhem?

We cannot reveal our DARK SECRETS to the *Uninitiated*.

WHY do you do such horrible things to Severus?

WHY do y'all keep coming back for another chapter? ;)

(shrug) You always hurt the ones you love...

(Saturday Evening)

HALF AN HOUR LATER, SEVEN BOYS WERE gathered on the carpet in front of the Headmaster's desk. All of them looked considerably more tatty and worn out than the rug on which they stood clutching cups of the Detention Tea, which had turned out to be a soothing chamomile.

The stupid ones were longingly eyeing their wands, which were still stacked neatly near one corner of the



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Headmaster's cluttered desk. The clever ones were anxiously eyeing the Headmaster, who was perched upon another corner of the desk, contentedly finishing his own very large cup of tea.

At last, Dumbledore set down his drained cup, folded his hands neatly into his lap, and looked interestedly at the boys collected before him. His half-moon spectacles twinkled in the flickering glow of Fawkes, who was suspiciously scrutinizing the students.

Dumbledore cleared his throat softly, and said, "I have a few questions regarding your story."

There was a flurry of anxious shuffling, during which Potter and Malfoy wound up at the front of the huddle of boys. Traditionally they had enjoyed greater success *Explaining Away Incidental Mayhem Which After All Didn't Actually Destroy the School or Even So Much As a Significant Part Thereof, and Therefore Was Not So Bad, Really.*

Dumbledore considered this pair, with the mien of a squirrel preparing to crack open a walnut.

"Mister Potter," he said at last, and Malfoy edged away from *The Subject of Scrutiny*. "How did you happen to have a wand in your keeping today?"

"I thought it was a spare pair of socks. Sir," Potter explained glibly and immediately. "Everything in our room was all woolly, and I guess I got a bit confused. I picked them up because I didn't know what sort of work we'd be doing today, so I thought it wise to take along extra socks." He grinned winsomely up at the



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Headmaster, declaring, "As you've said yourself. Sir, one can never have too many pairs of warm socks."

"True," agreed Dumbledore sincerely.

Pettigrew yelped, "I snitched it from Evans! And then James had me Spell-o-tape it between his shoulderblades so no one would find it even if we were searched!"

Potter boggled at him. "What's got into you — ?"

"Veritaserum," answered the Headmaster complacently. "It's a traditional ingredient in the Detention Tea. Salazar Slytherin invented this particular brew as a preventative to the Detention Supper... WHICH NONE OF YOU WANTS TO SAMPLE... Dumbledore assured them, his blue eyes no longer twinkling but rather glinting like a displayed shiv. "Mister Pettigrew," he beckoned coolly, "step forward, please."

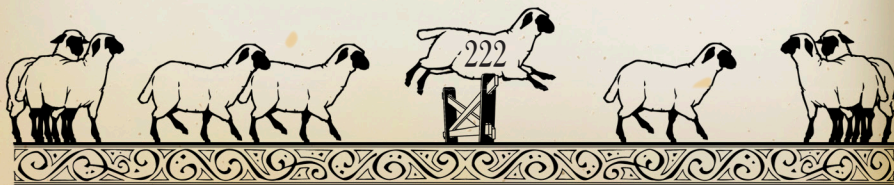
The quailing Gryffindor was pushed and shoved to the fore. He looked guiltily up at the Headmaster, gulped, and nervously drank the rest of his tea before his roommates could stop him.

Dumbledore smiled encouragingly.

The other six boys did their best to inch away from Pettigrew, and find someplace convenient to dispose of their untouched tea.

The Headmaster asked invitingly, "Mister Pf'O Pettigrew, why would any of you smuggle a wand along, on what I specified as a magicldess detention?"

"Psh! Just smart, innit?" answered *The Informant*. Pettigrew glared suspiciously at the trio of Slytherins clus-



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tered behind him. "The Nightmare Brigade along for the day, and us with no wands — ? Not really likely to go well, is it?" Before the Headmaster could respond, the pudgy Gryffindor barreled on eagerly, "That creepy little headcase Snape had *potions* hidden in his pockets! And he was USING them!" Pettigrew's eyes were beginning to gleam with the excitement of ratting someone else out. "And whatever he drank scrambled what few wits he has so badly that he ATTACKED us! *That's why* James used that wand," he insisted. "JAMES was only DEFENDING himself — and all of us!" in a fit of inspiration he shrilled eagerly: "I think he should get an AWARD such heroism!" He grinned much too encouragingly at Potter.

Malfoy decided that Potter should take care to acquire *Less Inventive Minions*, or he'd meet with disaster whenever they unexpectedly *Took Initiative* as Gryffindors were wont to do.

"That's right!" Potter was nodding agreement with his tagalong toady, proclaiming his innocence: "Snape started it!"

Black chimed in, "Yes, it was Snape!"

"Right here. Headmaster, safe an' sound!" Hagrid came bustling into the room, winded slightly from extinguishing the Forbidden Forest and fetching back Snape, who was slung like a deflated stormcloud over the Gamekeeper's massive shoulder.

Hagrid grinned encouragingly at no one in particular, and plunked down Snape, who teetered precariously until



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the Groundskeeper deftly wrapped the swot's legs snugly into all those yards and yards of black cloak as if using a beloved blanket to revivify a scraggly Christmas tree.

Sev looked better for it, although his hair was still haloed by writhing turquoise flames. These didn't seem to be hurting him, despite the spirals of bluish smoke languidly curling ceilingwards.

"Thank you, Hagrid," said Dumbledore politely.

"An' I'll just be about catchin' the horse, now," Hagrid briskly reassured the Headmaster, and snugged up his scorched oven mitts and hurriedly departed.

Dumbledore studied the well-swaddled new arrival, and smiled encouragingly and inquired, "All right. Mister Snape?"

Sev just stood there, slightly canted, and burned. He looked like a lone tiki torch forgotten at the end of a long night's rum-soaked revelry.

"Mister Snape," said the Headmaster again, more sharply. Sev didn't so much as blink.

Fawkes alighted upon the dazed boy's shoulder, and cooed at him inquiringly.

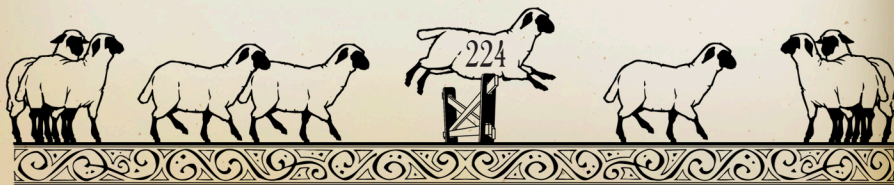
Then the phoenix flared his wings in a spectacular display, at the culmination of which he did something *Intimate* to Snape's blazing hair.

"Fascinating," murmured Dumbledore. "A rare sight –"

"Snape with a date? You bet!" agreed Potter glazedly.

Sev jolted awake and held out an expectant upturned palm, demanding, "Pay up!"

This elicited a flurry of excuses and scribbled IOUs;



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not even Malfoy carried enough pocket money to answer such longshot odds. Still, when they'd made the wager all those months ago, they HAD allowed for *Inhuman Creatures*, up to and including *Terrific Incarnations of Dread Powers from a World Other Than Our Own*.

Fawkes let out an earsplitting shriek, fluttered agitatedly upon Sev's shoulder, and began to weep with the singular frustration of *Unrequited Love*. His pearly tears began to douse the flames wreathing Snape's hair, and realizing this the bird wept all the harder.

When the last of the fire had gone, Snape blinked, and shivered, and sighed, "Thank you, Fawkes." From somewhere he produced a pair of clove cigarettes; he lit these against the phoenix's tailfeathers, and popped one into the bird's mouth. Fawkes gobbled it down in a twinkling.

Snake took a very long drag on the other cigarette before saying quietly, "Good evening. Headmaster. Please pardon my state of unconsciousness." His misadventure amid the forest fire had reduced his voice to a smoldering whisper. The slightly-charred swot sighed and took another prolonged drag, looking like Constantine's *Little Indiscretion* just back from a weeklong bender in the UNKNOWN REACHES. "I was doing all right," he mused bitterly, "until the blasted sheep got involved."

"I expect so," soothed Dumbledore. "They do seem to upset you so —"

"I hate 'em," Snape growled. He glared at the other boys and snarled, "ALMOST AS MUCH AS I HATE KIDS."



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"Yet somehow you find yourself plagued by both," Dumbledore noted, "doubtless due to your past... misjudgments."

Snape took a deep, extinguishing drag on his cigarette, and fed the smoldering stub to Fawkes.

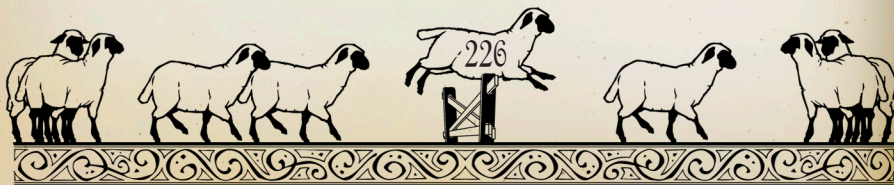
Dumbledore shook his head ruefully. "You really will have quite a job, disentangling yourself from so many alchemical dependencies, when the war has ended."

Snape glared at him almost defiantly and sulked, "I hope so."

"But it's not over yet," sighed Dumbledore, and there was steel in his voice. "So let us move along briskly, before the prop shifts and your *Window of Lucidity* slams shut again." He leaned forward, steepling his long fingers, and studied Snape quite closely, inquiring, "What happened, Severus?"

Snape answered all in an overflow rush: "Potter and his little friends went out into the sheep paddock. Malfoy and his bookends went after them. Of course the illusory dragon guarding the sheep paddock appeared and they all *panicked*, and when I had to intercede, I wound up hexed senseless and so here I am in a coma." Snape folded his arms as if resisting strangling somebody, and went on through gritted teeth, "I seem to recall thinking as I swooned how MARVELOUS it would be if ONLY Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had a brain between them..." He trailed off, looking very angry with himself.

Dumbledore did not quite bother to hide a smile. "I see. This explains a great deal."



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Black griped, "Well, I wish you'd explain it to me!"

Snape spun on him and snapped, "The war's still on and things have gotten so mind-bogglingly bad that I'm actually better off hiding amongst my schoolday memories."

"Wow," breathed Potter, looking stunned. "Things must be really execrable."

"Thank the sheep for that," Black muttered.

Snape glowered at them both, intoning frostily, "I'd guess we're about hip-deep in it now." He looked to Dumbledore and invited keenly, "Do hurry back. Headmaster."

"All in good time, Severus," soothed Dumbledore, "all in good time. At present I am unwelcome in the castle, and so I shall bide my time until this changes." He smiled fondly and murmured, "It's given me a marvelous opportunity to catch up with all those movies I've been meaning to see." He grinned suddenly, declaring rapturously, "The original Japanese production of *Shall We Dance?* is absolutely charming!"

The gathered boys stared at him.

Somewhere a cricket chirruped.

Dumbledore's grin widened and took on rather a crafty aspect. "Muggles are amazingly inventive. I do believe that by studying their cinema, we may discover useful new tactics to employ against our foes."

Snape said slowly, "This explains the multitude of Muggle cultural references..."

"Yes," agreed the Headmaster. "I have a great deal to think about, and since you are unconscious and have nothing



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else to occupy your thoughts, I'm bouncing a few new ideas off of you." He smiled encouragingly at the suspicious swot and reassured him, "In return for your assistance, I am lending you a little help with your Occlumency."

Snape shivered and said quickly, "Thank you. Headmaster."

Potter wondered, "What's... Occlu-thingy?"

"The only thing keeping me this side of the daisies," growled Snape.

"Yes, indeed," agreed Dumbledore soberly. Then his eyes twinkled again, like distant stars by which one might find one's way. "Enjoy your rest, Severus. You certainly need it." He smiled at the assembled boys and exhorted them cheerfully, "Well, carry on, everybody! You've all done very well!"

"Thank you. Headmaster," they answered reflexively.

A moment later, the four Slytherins found themselves standing in their restored dormitory room. The windows were filled with twilight ripening to plum.

Malfoy spun about and seized Snape by his necktie. "Right! While you're still lucid," he spat, "let's get this sorted out! This is all your demented hallucination, right?"

"Right," choked Snape.

"And yet somehow I'm narrating fully half of your fever dream?" challenged Malfoy.

"I find," gagged Snape, "it's enlightening to let you talk."

Lucius frowned, and warningly shook his supposedly tame swot. "And the sheep?"

"Let's not talk about 'em," coughed Snape.



Ramifications

Malfoy dropped him to the floor.

Crabbe and Goyle glanced at each other, shrugged, and decided to call it a night. They wandered away to their beds.

Lucius did his best to Loom over Sev and pressed on: "Why would you be having a fever dream involving Gilderoy Lockhart?"

Snape clawed his necktie loose to answer gruffly, "Some experiences scar the mind. I put up with that grandstanding git for nearly a year."

"...and what," Lucius rallied, "makes you think you've any right to address the lovely Narcissa Beauregard Black, who happens to be *My Sweet Intended*, so informally?"

"Oh, that." Sev coughed in a vague attempt to clear his throat, without much success. "I rather fancy her, actually."

"You mean you *Worship Her FROM AFAR*," warned Lucius. "In which case, what's with all this lovestruck rubbish about Lily Evans?"

"Sorry, but that's your fourth question," Snape replied glibly, "and everyone knows you only ever get three answers." He collected himself, gathering his expansive cloak like nightfall all around him, and smiled oddly, intoning, "After all you've got to maintain some mystery, to get along in this world." He had the nerve to *wink* at Lucius, and laid one finger alongside his long, crooked nose as his smile glimmered in the deepening twilight. "So now it's back to classes, as usual. Good night, Luke."

Snape turned away, all twelve yards of his cape flow-



Ramifications

ing mesmerizingly in his wake as he betook himself to bed. He turned down the covers to collect his pyjamas, and the rudely awakened ram lunged.

There was a *Short Violent Interlude* marked by cries of despair and the hasty deployment of indiscriminate hexes, by the end of which Crabbe was trapped in the chandelier with the ram, Goyle was spinning idly under a besheeped bumbershoot singing about Mary's Little Lamb, and Sev was lying senseless in the doorway, at the feet of Professor Keele, who was NOT IN THE LEAST AMUSED.

It thus fell to Lucius, as the only coherent occupant of the ramsacked room, to push his way out from under a pile of mismatched credenzas, square his shoulders and say in his most *Irreproachable Manner*, "I can explain everything."

And he would have, too, if only he had not fainted *Cold Away*.



Ramifications

rabbit: Aw... Look at them all out there...

jinx: sitting in the darkness...

rabbit: all gleaming eyes...

jinx: waiting...

rabbit: hoping...

rabbit: that maybe, just maybe...

jinx: at the end of the credits there'll be an...

EASTER EGG!

chocolate naturally

(Sunday Evening)

THE LIBRARY'S CLOCK CHIMED DISCREETLY, giving Lucius exactly one hour to gather his belongings, and extract Sev from his favorite haunt, and still get back to the dormitory before curfew.

It hadn't been a good day. It had commenced in the infirmary, which Was Never An Encouraging Prospect, and invariably meant a breakfast of dry toast and weak tea (which in light of Pettigrew's performance of the previous evening they had left untouched). It had continued immediately with a *VISITATION* by Professor Keele, who had escorted them to the library with all the friendliness of a Dementor before distributing essay assignments.

Crabbe and Goyle had gotten:



Ramifications

EXPLAIN JUST WHY, IF LUCIUS MALFOY TOLD YOU TO LEAP OFF A CLIFF, YOU WOULD DO IT.

After the requisite pause for deciphering the question, Crabbe had brightened, written, "'Cos Luke said," and signed his name. Goyle had signed the parchment too and the pair of them had departed in the direction of the Great Hall and rashers of bacon and eggs. They'd made a brief appearance near lunchtime to tackle their other homework assignments with the confidence of wizards whose allowances were not *Dependent Upon Performance* and by now they were probably up in the dorm room, lazing about.

Lucius collected his notes and those books he was still using, and glared at the extracurricular report which had been imposed upon *him* following yesterday's sequential debacles:

EXPLAIN WHY, EXACTLY, A PERSON WHO FEELS HIMSELF BORN TO LEAD SHOULD TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE LIMITED MENTAL FACULTIES (INNATE OR ALCHEMICALLY INDUCED) OF HIS FOLLOWERS.

As if he didn't know. The bruises weren't going to fade for weeks.

And so he had explained (*BITTERLY*) at length, filling two rolls of parchment which he would deliver promptly *First Thing in the Morning, As Specified* to Professor Keele, and at long last he was *FINISHED*.

He snapped the locks shut on his dragonhide satchel, neatly stacked the books he would not be taking from



Ramifications

the library this evening, and turned his baleful glare upon the cold-iron gates barring him from the *RESTRICTED SECTION*.

Within that *Forbidden Realm* was Sev, who had relapsed into unfathomable swotdom the moment he had awakened. He had colonized a long table now thoroughly overstrewn with books and scrolls and worn-out quills and scraps of parchment; he'd spent hours with his oversized nose buried in a quaint and curious volume of long forgotten lore and he was quite plainly *IN HEAVEN*.

Lucius, excluded from this happiness, caught himself pacing and made himself hold quite still.

And stop grinding his teeth.

He reminded himself firmly how *Setbacks Encourage Greater Thought, Which Engenders Greater Success*.

That helped only slightly. He was still smarting with the knowledge that, although he had acquired Lupin's frayed Permission Slip granting limited access to the *RESTRICTED SECTION*, all of his resultant *Bargaining Power* had melted away when every effort had failed to alter Professor McGonagall's handwriting to make the document specific to another student. He'd sacrificed most of the morning in the attempt.

And then *That Overweening Swot* had dared to take the initiative, *A New and Bad Habit* Sev had acquired along with the disquieting change in his voice. The accidental combination of potions, smoke, and cleans-



Ramifications

ing products he'd ingested during their detention had infused his voice with a didgeridoo's resonance, which affect Madame Pomfrey had deemed permanent. She'd even offered Snape her congratulations.

Subsequently and for the very first time in his life, Sev had found his endless explanations and pontifications greeted with rapt attention.

People would actually stop and stare, like cobras entranced by a sinuous air.

Snape had never before managed to attract a crowd without enduring abject humiliation. He had adapted with lightning speed to his *New and Improved Circumstances*; by lunchtime he had developed an unbecoming confidence, a persistent smirk, and a strange ability to add several syllables to even the smallest word.

All of which had somehow possessed Sev of sufficient temerity to petition Professor Keele for his own sanctioned access to the *RESTRICTED SECTION*, with the argument that actually he would be less dangerous to himself and others if only he had clearer guidance and cautionary examples such as Lovecraft, Phibes and Morrison.

Really it was incredible the effect *THAT VOICE* had on witches. Professor Keele had granted her permission straightaway.

Sev, of course, had promptly taken his paranormaphernalia into the New Realms of Wonder and continued to work on his assigned essay:

EXPLAIN WHY UP-ALL-NIGHT POTION (EVEN WHEN INCOR-



Ramifications

RECTLY BREWED) IS NOT MEANT TO BE DRUNK THREE TUMBLERS-FULL AT A TIME.

While this had saved Lucius from pontifications, it had made getting the answers off of Sev's work more difficult.

And now *There* was Sev, chattering avidly with that spooky little Ravenclaw Prefect, Siouxsie Sinistra. She was actually *Hovering over* him, animatedly explaining something, pointing to various books in turn as she pursued some idea. Silver rings flashed from all her fingers as she performed some illustrative pantomime; her eyes, sunk in tarpits of kohl, were shining with the thrill of the hunt.

Sev laughed appreciatively, a creamy sound capable of causing arterial obstruction. Lucius stared as the foolish girl's knees actually *Unhinged*. She caught ahold of Snape's shoulder *To Keep Her Balance*, and actually *CLUNG* to him.

Lucius forced himself stop grinding his teeth *again*.

After all she was *A PERFECT FRIGHT*, *hair like a bats' nest and she's forever glooming about...* She couldn't touch Narcissa for looks and anyway a clever girl was *NOTHING BUT TROUBLE*, which Sev would soon learn to his *EVERLASTING REGRET*.

Sinistra giggled.

And handed Snape two slim volumes, one of which had a scrap of parchment very obviously tucked between its pages. She giggled again, with an effervescence like spilt champagne, and fluttered away into the shadows



Ramifications

of the bookstacks.

Lucius called sharply, "All ready, Sev? Time to go!"

Snape jumped, and looked through the bars at him. The smirk resurfaced, and *That Uppity Swot* commenced arranging the voluminous tomes he'd pulled from the shelves. Lucius tapped his foot impatiently as his upstart minion spent an extra moment or two with his selections, arranging them with scrupulous precision before placing a little "reserved" sign on top of the stack.

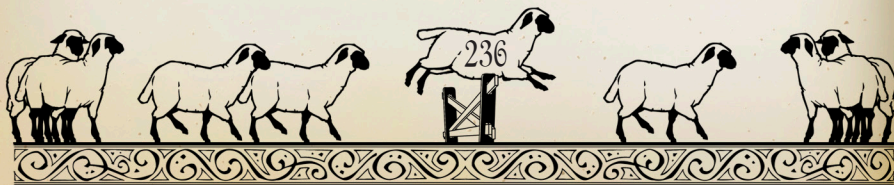
Really, it was a great pity that Snape couldn't take books out of the Restricted Section.

Still, Sev could access the shelves and that was *Something to Write Home About*.

Sev finished packing up his belongings with dispatch, probably because he didn't care to get caught breaking curfew and lose his newfound Privilege.

He pulled a second bookbag out of the first, and began to pack it with a complex realm of parchment which had to be THE ESSAY. The attendant charts, graphs, and illustrations bulged at the corners in spite of his efforts. Snape was only faintly disturbed by this and gently transferred some of them to the first bag, accompanied by the various Tables of Elements, robe protectors, astrolabes, astronomical slide rules, quills and parchments which were the essential trappings of an *Aspiring Alchemist*.

Saddlebagged by two overcrammed satchels and looking insufferably pleased with himself, Sev slipped through the gates, and swirled all three yards of his



Ramifications

persistently capacious cloak clear of their swing's radius, as the iron bars clanged shut behind him. Snape joined Lucius, and, there was no mistaking it now, had the bad grace to rather Loom.

"Come on," Malfoy clipped. "We've only got thirty minutes to get back before curfew, thanks to your malingering."

"I am engaged in the steady pursuit of knowledge," Snape had the absolute gall to correct him. "What the rest of you are doing here during your seven-year sojourn remains mysterious to me."

Lucius blinked at him. "You'll feel better when you've shat out that dictionary you've swallowed," he snapped. "Be a bit less snarky, I expect."

Snape arched one eyebrow, in the Gothic style.

"Come on, Sev," snarked Lucius.

"Severus," Snape corrected him, somehow contriving to turn his given name into a phonetic feast.

Lucius seized Sev's necktie and hauled him out of the library. This endeavor was made unusually challenging by the obstropulous swot's appalling refusal to Heel.

That, and Sev seemed somehow to have gotten taller. Lucius was disturbed to realize that Snape had abandoned his habitual cringe. This didn't *Bode Well*.

Narcissa was waiting in the hallway. She dazzled at them.

Severus said with the artful precision of Goya's finishing touches, "Good evening, Narcissa."

She giggled breathily, "Hi Sev!"



Ramifications

Snape didn't correct her. His smirk spread like a winestain.

Lucius greeted his fiancée a bit sharply, "Good evening, Narcissa, my *Sweet Intended*."

She smiled at him in rather a feral way. "Hi, Luke." From beneath stardusted eyelids she studied them both as if considering her next chess move.

Lucius keenly recalled his father's warning: *Witches play Wizard's Chess with living pawns*.

Narcissa reached out and took ahold of Sev's tie, removing it from Lucius's grip; gently and deftly she tucked it back into place, then graciously resettled the hang of Snape's fulsome cloak.

Sev stood extremely still and actually shook in his boots. He looked as if he were confronting a werewolf.

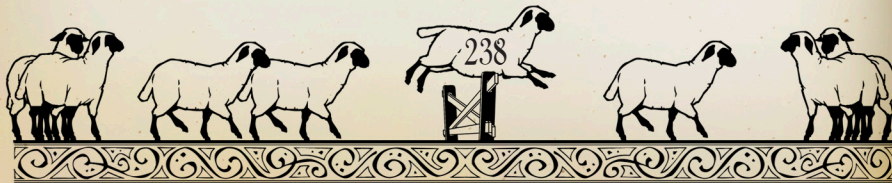
Lucius felt this reaction perfectly appropriate: Father had also warned sternly that one shouldn't trust anything that underwent strange changes beneath a full moon.

Narcissa insinuated herself closer, and breathed, "How do you like the Restricted Section, Sev?"

"... er..." Snape made a mighty and pitifully obvious effort not to stare at her Restricted Sections. He turned chalky, and then brick red, and mumbled something, and half-dove into one of his bookbags and began rummaging assiduously amid its contents.

He looked like a small forest creature desperately trying to burrow its way to safety beneath fallen leaves.

Lucius was entertained.



Ramifications

Narcissa flashed him a wicked grin and sighed, "Good night, Sev."

Snape dropped his bookbag onto his foot, yelped at the impact, hopped about on his unbruised foot and slipped on his own fallen quill and went sprawling amid a flurry of scrolls, phials and books.

Narcissa winked at Lucius, and glided from the room.

Lucius looked forward eagerly to the series of unfortunate events sure to be engendered by his *Sweet Intended's* deftly stringing along both Lackwit Lockhart and Seriously-Out-of-His-Depth Snape. Inevitably there would be tears, tiffs, tests of loyalty... and with a little creative effort, perhaps even a duel in the Great Hall.

Sev would hex *That Pest of a Prefect* halfway into next Autumn. Just at present, however, the flustered *Object of Narcissa's Affliction* was busy pursuing his scattered possessions and currently was scrambling on all fours after a scroll which was tumbling down the stairs.

"Whoops!" Lily Evans scooped up the wayward document as it rolled across the landing. "Here you go, Severus!" She pressed the scroll into Snape's hands and hurried on her way towards the Gryffindor dormitories, rusty tresses and brimming bookbag bouncing.

Sev, frozen like a startled gecko, clung onto scroll and stairs and let out a faint, strangled wheeze which might have meant either "thank you" or "*sheknowsmynAME!*"

Lucius inquired of his petrified minion, "All right, Sev?"

Snape yelped and lost his grip and tumbled down



Ramifications

all the way onto the next landing. He fetched up in an inverted heap against the wall, like a castoff ragdoll, upholding the scroll as if it were a reliquary.

Lucius strolled down the stairs, avoiding quills and books and phials, prompting languidly, "If you're through with your acrobatic display, you might just hurry along a bit... unless you wish to waste several more hours in Detention..."

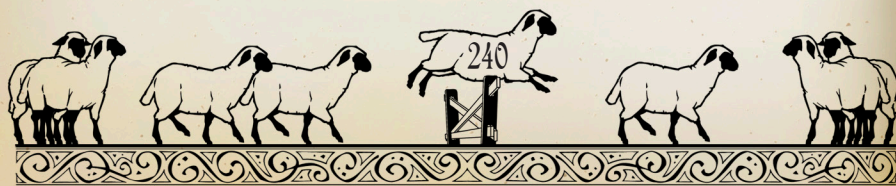
Snape uttered some sound that certainly wasn't a word, and scrambled upright, and stashed the scroll inside his sweater and scurried up the stairs, hastily collecting the rest of his belongings.

Lucius was pleased. *So there is something which can shut you up.* Although it was rather pitiable *That it should be that filthy little Mudstain...* still-glimpsed from the Snapes' murky depths of the genetic pool, anything which managed to crawl ashore must seem like an angel.

Sev caught up to him three floors down, unfortunately not quite out of breath and clutching his frothing bookbags, his sallow complexion shaded to an unhealthy damask. He managed to ask in a kind of cougar's growl, "Where are the lumps?"

"Sound asleep, no doubt."

Snape shook his head in astounded condemnation of this lack of industry, and snarled, "Really, I wonder how they ever expect to pass any subjects at all." He scowled disapprovingly and somehow this expression seemed surlier today, as if he were some half-mad



Ramifications

prince confronting societal demons. He huffed dismissively, "There's plenty of time to sleep all summer."

Lucius nodded aside this familiar, weak explanation of the Snape family's tendency to aestivation. "If you—"

Scrambling on the stairs nearby heralded a high, sharp cry of, "Severus!" Moments later, Jenny Goldberg appeared, out of breath and holding out a stoppered bottle of dark blue glass. "Here!" She fumbled it into Snape's hands and said in a whirlwind rush, "I know you've got curfew have a look at that when you get a chance will you IT'S FINALLY GONE TO GREEN!"

Sev grinned like a deranged monk and all but purred, "Excellent. Thanks very much, Jenny. Goodnight!"

Jenny said "hfffh!" And turned bright red and tripped down four stairs, caromed off the nearest wall, and scurried away back to the depths of the castle.

Lucius stared at the gleaming-eyed swot, who was studying the bottle with frank, corvid glee. Suddenly he was seized by a violent hope that Sev would suffer *Profound Laryngitis* for the remainder of their school years.

No SUCH LUCK. "The thing is," Snape commenced animatedly, "this verdancy is almost certainly indicative that we've achieved a sufficiency of wormwood in the admixture, and now may proceed confidently in the direction of dreams... certainly this mandates abandonment of sugar," he declared, "raising the corresponding question of what might be used as a clarifying agent... moonshine, maybe... preferably caught



Ramifications

in the dew from a virgin's brow..."

Lucius lunged forward just in time to catch Bellatrix Black as she nearly stumbled off the stairs.

She didn't thank him, as she never spoke to any student whose pedigree did not predate the Norman Conquest. She was, however, studying Snape as if she were deciding whether to accompany him with a white or red wine.

Lucius shivered and dragged the oblivious swot down the stairs and through the corridors, doing his best to ignore Sev's beehive drone of observations, negations, and ramifications. It was much more difficult to ignore the way every witch's head seemed to turn with weather-vane accuracy towards that uncanny resonance.

Hastening through the crowded hallway was very much like traversing a den of lions, who'd had their fill of catnip and now desired a new plaything.

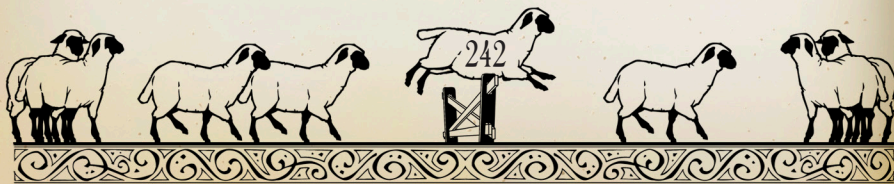
Vanessa Vector actually collided with a statue.

Pretty little Medusa Bulstrode completely IGNORED Lucius, which she hadn't done since she was three years old, and he resolved that *SOMETHING MUST BE DONE*.

Of course Sev never knew when to shut up, and so could simply be left to a merciless tenderizing at the hands of the boyfriends of all these mesmerized witches.

Unfortunately that wouldn't silence him for long, and when he regained consciousness, his bewildered protests of ignorance would be pathetic and extensive.

Messing about with Sev's potions might actually *Worsen* matters, by adversely affecting Snape or some ingredi-



Ramifications

ent. Lucius shivered and tried not to think how *The Haggis* might have found its way out of the Great Hall by now.

Surely not. It was a big hall. And the castle was laced with wards which had held their place for centuries.

Lucius had a Good Idea.

He refined this into a *Cunning Plan*, and at *Le Moment Just* he lunged with a jaguar's grace, striking Snape midsentence and shoving the blindsided swot sprawling into Moaning Myrtle's washroom. With a technique perfected by the Marauders, Malfoy quickly jammed the door shut so that it couldn't be opened from inside, even by furious spellwork.

There came a scrambling of boots on tile, and a scrabbling at the jammed doorknob, and Sev's predictable dismayed cry: "*Luke! Let me out!*"

Lucius waited.

Snape foolishly threatened in a voice like August thunder, "RIGHT NOW I MEAN IT!"

A burbling, eerie wail culminated in a delighted welcoming whine, "*Severus! You came to visit me again!*" A damply ethereal giggle precipitated Moaning Myrtle's coy warning, "*We really shouldn't keep meeting like this. People will TALK!*"

But not Sev, Lucius thought with satisfaction, as he hastened back to their dormitory. *Not after screaming for help all night long.*

THE END
(for now...)



If Ewe are
Prepared



If Ewe are Prepared

The more things change, the more they stay the same...

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize, however abused, is J.K. Rowling's fabulous doing. What happens from there is all our fault, from which we intend no profit or fame or anything like that.

Why *do* they make chocolate chip cookie bags resealable, anyway? It's not as if you need to open them *twice*.



AT A QUARTER TO FOUR IN THE MORNING, Professor Severus Snape stood glaring down at a hole smashed through a door in the Slytherin boys' dormitory. In one hand he held his wand ready. In the other hand he clutched one curling horn of a terrier-sized ram, which was struggling noisily and sporadically emitting cotton puffs from its nether end.

Snape had not yet gotten to bed, which was the only thing likely to save those culpable from Mediaeval torture.

That, and Albus had expressly forbidden such.

Pity. He was *just* in the mood.



If Ewe are Prepared

Snape had spent much of this miserable Friday night enduring Minerva McGonagall's supposedly hilarious and regrettably accurate recountings of how *five* of his Slytherins had been caught out in the sheep paddock, desperately trying to abduct an animal in hopes of passing their Transfigurations exam.

It had been a very long night.

The lamb chop dinner hadn't helped.

It brought back... unfortunate memories.

Eventually Snape had stalked off to his dungeons, there to soothe his nerves over a steaming cauldron and a well-used cutting board.

It had taken awhile. Poppy would be thrilled to discover the infirmary stores fully restocked for the next three months.

IDIOT BOYS!

And they'd gotten *caught*.

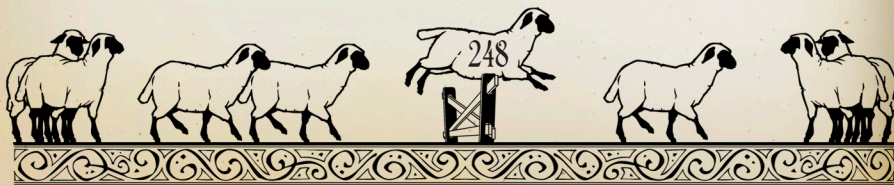
Dragon and all of it.

And then *Minerva* had possessed the utter gall to suggest that if *he* hadn't managed to kill every last rumor concerning his *own* scholastic sheep-rustling, the current offenders would never have had the guts to *try* such a harebrained scheme...

They should NOT have attempted it in the first place –

From within the dormitory room came a lengthy crash, followed by shrill bleating and angry discussion, and then another magnificent crash.

Muscles working in his jaw, Snape adjusted his grip on his wand and rapped smartly on the door. "All right



If Ewe are Prepared

in there, Gentlemen?"

He distinctly heard someone use an expletive.

"Just fine, Sir!" came Tarantino's cheerful voice.

Snape highly doubted that, particularly coming from the leader of this hapless band of miscreants. "I see. Would you then – "

A quick series of thuds drowned him out, followed by the sound of impressively splintering wood; from within the room Rodriguez hollered, "*Help!*"

Snape tapped the door with his wand, banging it open, and strode into the room, into... a cloud of bees? He had a countercurse ready on his lips before he realized he was being swarmed by very tiny, chubby... sheeplets... with iridescent butterfly wings.

"What in – ?" he exclaimed, as one of them hovered near his nose.

"They're butterfleece, sir," said Tarantino, and then shrugged in nervous apology. "They sang a little song, when they first got loose," he muttered.

The tiny creatures settled onto Snape like snow, some of them sliding off his hair to join their fellows on his shoulders, where they commenced gnawing his cloak.

Absolutely not! Savagely the Potions Master cast a grounding spell, sending the winged things tumbling to the flagstones.

Flagstones. No carpet. Snape looked around and spotted the inevitable bedslipper sheep. Burton was attempting to bundle them up in a fleece blanket, and currently had one thoughtfully munching his pyjama



If Ewe are Prepared

sleeve, which had been partially torn loose.

"All right there, Burton?" Snape asked, his tone indicating that there wasn't a hope.

The boy looked up from under tangled black hair. "Bit of bother, Sir," he said lamely.

"So I see." Snape inspected the ruins of the room.



[Insert destruction here.]



A ruptured piñata of a golden sheep with wings hung askew in the middle of the room, still spilling forth an occasional butterfleece. *Now how would you make that singular? Or is that the singular, the plural then being "butterflock?" I need some sleep!* They had to be the work of Rodriguez's cousin, a hopeless sentimentalist given to drawing unicorns on her spellbooks.

A huffing, nearly-round sheep the size of a spaniel backed into Snape's leg, earning his baleful attention. He charmed it to sleep, and trailed his stormy gaze along the tattered scarf hanging from the animal's gaping mouth; attached to the other end of the garment were two white-knuckled hands, protruding from beneath a half-collapsed bed. "Thank you, Sir," gasped Hardy, crawling stiffly out from the wreckage. Very carefully the boy pulled his scarf out of the snoring sheep's mouth.

"That will need repairing, Mr. Hardy," Snape told him coldly.



If Ewe are Prepared

"Yes, Sir," Hardy sighed, wiggling his fingers through some of the larger holes.

"And where is Mr. Wise?" Snape asked, surveying the gamboling herds.

"Up here, sir," came the reply, and Snape raised his wand defensively before turning and looking up to discover Wise entangled by a number of sheep balloons and bound fast to the rafters.

I wondered where the pillows had got to.

With a frown that hid a sigh, Snape aimed two quick spells, freeing the bound boy and bringing him down to a soft landing upon the now grounded and bumbling sheep balloons, which began sampling bites of Wise's hair and pyjamas.

"Thank you, Sir! I – "

"I don't want to hear it," snapped the Potions Master, bringing the piñata down as well and summarily grounding every other bit of wool he saw floating or fluttering past.

This done, he drew himself up and glared down at his hapless students. "In fact, there is entirely too much noise coming from this room," he continued, darkly.

"We can't get them to shut up!" protested Burton, who was promptly kicked by Hardy. "Ow! We tried!"

"Not hard enough," Snape informed him.

"Sorry, Sir," ventured Tarantino, hastily replacing rather gnawed-looking glasses onto his nose. "We – "

"You have lost track of your... possessions," Snape declared, and held forth the ram he had brought with



If Ewe are Prepared

him. It bleated unhappily at the sudden motion, and ejected several more cotton puffs from its rump.

Several groans and aborted curses met this display, as the boys went very still and waited for the worst. The absolute worst. With salt ground into the wounds, to follow.

Snape glowered at them, and rummaging in his pockets, traded his wand for an egg, elaborately carved from bone. Dusting a small space clear of sheep, he set this item on the floor, where it quickly increased to the size of a pumpkin and split open round the middle. Another, smaller egg hopped forth, repeating the process, and in a few moments a dozen eggs sat in a neat row, their carvings deepening and becoming more detailed.

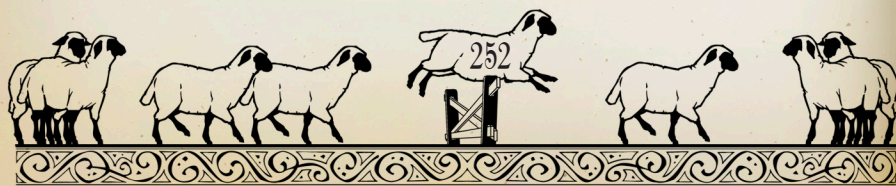
"*Cave Canem*," said Snape, and the eggs squirmed and stretched to become alert Border Collies, the largest no bigger than a breadbox, the smallest only the size of a thimble. They looked expectantly at Snape, wagging their tails. The Potions Master chirruped at them, and set them racing round the room to briskly collect the various sheep into neat flocks.

"We could have used *those* three hours ago," marvelled Wise, straightening his well-chewed schoolrobes.

"We could have used divine intervention, three hours ago," grumbled Hardy.

Snape glared down his nose at the boy, then turned the same cold look upon his comrades. "Are you in need of transport to St. Mungo's?" he icily asked the company.

Various abashed refusals greeted this query.



If Ewe are Prepared

"I see. Do you wish to go see Madame Pomfrey?" The Potions Master raked his gaze over the boys, taking note of gnawed clothing, missing tufts of hair, and an overall coating of lint.

The students hastily shook their heads and declined, flushing red at the prospect. Snape allowed them half a smile, which somehow managed to be the shadowy half. "I see. Then I think divine intervention might have proven excessive," he said drily.

He looked down at his dogs, busy keeping their flocks in order, and chirruped again for their attention. "Bring them onto the landing," he commanded. The dogs barked eagerly and chivvied their charges out of the room, neatly cornering them against the stairs. "Stay," Snape directed this assembly, pulling the door closed to muffle the nervous baaing.

"I trust," Snape drawled into the sudden gaping hush, "that you have noticed the rather sizable hole now apparent in your room's door."

The boys looked at the damage, Hardy and Wise nodding slowly, Rodriguez offering a bewildered shrug, Burton avoiding eye contact and Tarantino — *Shades of Lucius Malfoy* — daring to look innocent.

"Idiots!" Snape lashed out at them. "You should at least have thought to corner the battering ram *first*!" He waved the offending creature at them, eliciting more cotton puffs. With a growl, he turned and pushed it through the gap in the door, leaving it to the dogs' supervision.



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"Instead," he gritted, "it has had the run of the tower, and I have had the distinct displeasure of being disturbed by its insipid bleating as it butted its horns against *my* door... which, fortunately for you, is reinforced."

He glared at his students, who looked duly alarmed but were trying not to laugh. With a scowl, he retrieved his wand from its pocket and illuminated the tip, casting most unflattering light upon the wrecked room.

"Clean up this mess!" he barked.

"Pardon me, Sir," said Wise quietly, "but we've got detention at seven -"

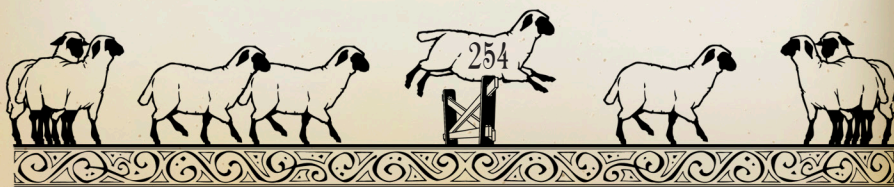
"Then you'd best be quick about it!"

"But — the beds — " Wise gestured at the nearest one, which was folded into a neat "v."

Snape folded his arms and cocked his head consideringly. "I was under the impression that you were wizards, gentlemen. I understood that to be the prerequisite for admission into Hogwarts." When no one addressed this, he went on through gritted teeth, "Unfortunately, it appears that having brains in your head, and the ability to use them, are *not*." He glared at his students, challenging, "Unless, of course, I am mistaken — ?"

"We'll get this cleaned up, Sir," Tarantino assured him, giving his confederates a look that implored acquiescence. General nodding answered his pleading gaze.

"Without further incident," Snape warned. "If you are truly incapable of breaking a spell, leave it for me to deal with in the morning."



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Snape spun on his heel and suddenly lunged sideways, fast as a lizard, reaching up to tap his wand against a bit of quartz resting atop a high shelf. "*Lumos solem!*" he said sharply, casting the spell into the crude scrying prism he had spied earlier.

Caterwauls of pain were clearly audible from two floors above. Snape recognized them as the expected culprits, Slytherin's supposed criminal masterminds: Lee, Price, Rickman, McKellen, Spacey, all the usual suspects....

Snape collected the scrying prism and held it up for the Fourth Years' inspection. They looked insulted, but also relieved as they realized others were also going to suffer their Head of House's displeasure. "Another thing you should have attended to immediately," Snape informed them, pocketing the stone.

They looked as if they actually might respond, but Snape was not interested in should-haves or could-haves, particularly not at four in the morning. "Get to work!" he snapped, and flung the door open.

Stepping carefully through the milling sheep, he collected the battering ram and chirruped to the dogs, "Up!"

To the sheep, using his full command voice, he said, "Go on, find your masters!"

There was a general rush up the stairs, like a frothing waterfall in reverse, accented by leaping collies.

Snape strode through the muddle, leading the way up to the Sixth Years' rooms and following the sounds of discomfort and dismay. Throwing open Price's door,



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he entered the kingdom of the blind, where he certainly reigned supreme. "Good morning, Gentlemen," he said harshly, "and Ladies," he added, catching sight of Hayek, Huston and Weaver rubbing their eyes. "I don't believe these dormitory rooms are co-educational?"

"Studying, Sir," offered Price, blinking back tears of pain.

"I'm well aware of that, Mr. Price, as well as the subject of your study," Snape grated. "Both are inappropriate." He glanced round at the miscreants now scrubbing at sore eyes. *When a simple tincture of bright-eye and moonflower petals would soothe them in an instant.* "Dear, dear, you all look so dreadfully weary," he said with terrible false sympathy. "Pity. You've a great deal of work ahead of you before you sleep tonight."

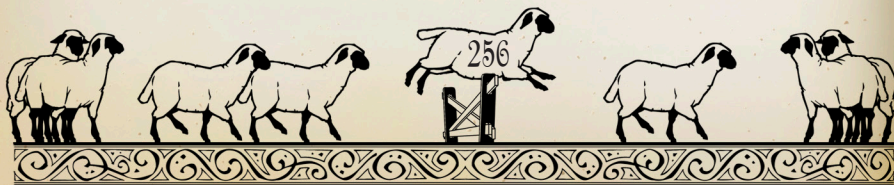
Those able to look at him did so with misgiving and dismay.

Snape waited in ominous silence until the first wave of sheep arrived, and the creatures began trotting obediently to their masters and mistresses. "You will start," he directed the blinking students, raising his voice over the happy bleating, "by transforming, transfiguring, de-hexing and otherwise completely restoring those items you have affected this evening."

They accepted this, with fairly good grace. It shouldn't take long.

Snape held up the ram. More cotton fell.

"You should be aware, since you were surveying your handiwork, that at least one of your creations escaped, spreading the damage throughout our tower."



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His eyes glinted like a hawk's. "You are all in deep... deep... cotton."

Rickman laughed. Alone.

The rest cared a bit more for their personal safety, and looked appropriately apprehensive.

"Therefore, when you have completed your spellwork and duly prepared all the items for return to their rightful owners, you will begin scrubbing the tower's common areas." Quick commands brought brimming buckets and brushes floating up the stairs, to settle expectantly near the wrongdoers. "I don't expect any of you will pass the pleasant day you had envisioned in Hogsmeade, as this endeavor will occupy most of the weekend." He glared at the group, daring them to groan or comment.

"Proceed," he ordered sharply, and signalled the dogs into the corridor, tossing the ram onto the nearest bed as he strode from the room, closing the door firmly behind him. An instant later the battering ram slammed into it.

Snape smiled and waved his wand over the dogs, returning them to their quiescent state. Pocketing the egg, he listened as squeals and shouts of dismay came from the dorm room.

"Grab it! No, grab the — you've got it all wrong — watch the teeth!"

"They're EVERYWHERE!"

"It is actually EATING my sweater. Do you know how unacceptable that is?"

"This whole SITUATION is unacceptable!"



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"Excuse me, WHOSE idea was all of this, Spacey? Oh, THAT'S right, it was YOURS."

Snape filed that information away for later use.

"Oh, no. Have you looked at these buckets?"

"There're sheep in them, right?"

"Well, yes, but... they're not potions at all, they're... I think they're just water and vinegar!"

"You're JOKING. We're to clean the whole tower with that?"

Oh, indeed. Snape grinned, and tapped his wand against the stairwell's wall, murmuring a complicated hex, before making his weary way down the stairs towards his dungeon rooms. As he descended, a kind of dense shadow spread along the walls in his wake, covering the stones with grease and ash which nothing but arduous scrubbing would remove.

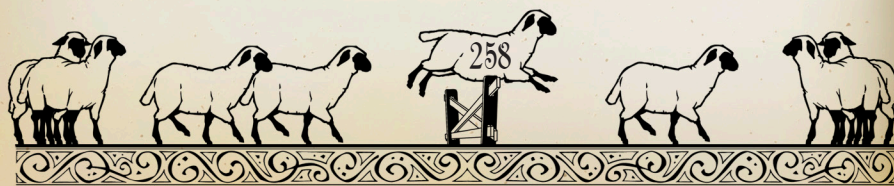
Pausing in the common room, he charged the Bloody Baron to supervise all clean-up efforts, and retired to his rooms, looking forward to two hours' rest before the Detention Breakfast, and then to a relaxing, peaceful Saturday all around.

THUD!

...Just as soon as they caught the battering ram...



Finis



Colophon

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