

# House Help

*by snapesbeatrice*

Battered by Tobias, Eileen Snape receives unwanted help at home--and her son comes to visit.

## One: Assignment Accepted

*Chapter 1 of 2*

Battered by Tobias, Eileen Snape receives unwanted help at home--and her son comes to visit.

*A/N: Many thanks to MW87, whose thorough betaing greatly improved this story.*

*Disclaimer: What you recognize isn't mine. The rest comes from the mildly rich mind of an insignificant, poor person.*

### **Chapter One: Assignment Accepted**

"You asked to see me, Father?"

Just turning to leave a brief post-Mass conversation with two elderly ladies in flowered, scrub-worn dresses, the kind-faced priest halted.

"Ah, yes. Why don't we chat over here?" He gestured toward the pews beside the St. Joseph altar, where numerous candles flickered in small red cups below an elaborately-framed, cheap print. The young woman sat, carefully smoothing her dark skirt to her knees.

The priest sat the space of a person away on the same bench and ran his fingers through neatly shorn, sandy brown hair. He didn't know the young woman well, only that that she'd immediately pitched in at the church with the little time-consuming jobs others disliked...dusting, mopping, replacing spent candles, stacking missals.

"The parish secretary tells me ya've volunteered t'help parishioners who may need some assistance," he ventured.

"Yes, Father," she answered respectfully.

He looked at her astutely. "Ya've only been here, what? Two months." He waved about the bleak interior. "It's a rough-and-tumble parish, ya know. Folk who work hard, make little, and cling t' what little pride they have left. It's been a bit of a surprise that ya chose t' move here."

The brunette pursed her lightly tinted lips, then smiled. "I come from a long line of poor people, Father. The only reason I can afford university is that I worked the Scottish fisheries for three years and saved everything I could." She pushed back a strand of nearly waist-length hair draped on her arm. "Everyone needs help at some point. It's a matter of whether anyone actually offers it."

The priest nodded. "And few ask for it." He looked at the altar a moment, then sighed. "There's a woman in hospital who'll be needin' help when she returns home. Her husband works the mine, is a hard drinker, and as proud as they come." He paused, considering how to explain. "There was a ... disagreement between husband and wife. She was beaten. He was arrested. Not for hurtin' her, mind ya, but for startin' a pub brawl and landin' two men in hospital."

A glance at the girl showed her expression was neutral. The lack of surprise made it obvious that she was aware of domestic abuse, though how he could only guess.

He chose her because she seemed wise for her twenty-one years and had arrived with a hand-written recommendation from her previous priest, who'd noted her selfless dedication, especially for the old and infirm. She'd moved to attend nursing school in nearby Birmingham, having chosen this small town because its living expenses were far less than in the city even with paying commuting fare.

Shaking his head, the young priest continued.

"The poor woman 'as broken bones, cuts and internal injuries. Good Hope will discharge her tomorrow. She's too proud t' ask for help, and the only other relative anyone knows of is a son, but no one knows how to locate him and she doesn't speak of him. If you agree to help her, you'll need to go directly to her at home and just take charge."

He turned to face the girl and pulled a knee up along the pew's edge. "The husband will be in jail several days, perhaps a few weeks. The wife's not pressin' charges. The station will let me know when he's t' be released. It'd be best if you aren't there alone when he comes home, which can almost be guaranteed to be after eight in the evenin'. He always stops at the pub after work and rarely leaves before then."

The student looked at her hands, which were smooth but strong. "What would you have me do?"

"T'be carin' and careful. She'll be released about ten tomorrow and will need help for probably a week. I'll speak with her doctor. Meet him at Good Hope. He'll introduce you t' her and firmly explain that you're going t' help. She'll need meals, changin' her dressings, help with movin' about, bathin'. When the husband's due for release, I'll let ya know. Leave before eight, makin' sure t' first have a hot supper ready for him and a cold breakfast and packed lunch for the next day. And stop at the rectory so that I know all's well."

He tilted his head. "It's a lot t' ask, but the other women are busy with their own jobs and families." The priest wearily rubbed the back of his neck. "D'you think you could handle it? D'ya have the time?"

Thoughtfully tucking a strand of hair behind her left ear, Audrey considered the request. It was understandable that the parish women didn't want to step into a private and potentially volatile matter for which there was little, if any, legal recourse. The eldest of six children, she'd grown up responsible and independent, but also appreciating the necessary interdependence within family and community.

"I'll do it," she said decidedly, turning confident blue eyes on him. "My classes are all in the morning, and being first year, they're not difficult. Studying doesn't take long...not yet, anyhow. It would help if you'd write a note to my school."

"Of course."

"Do I know them, Father?"

The priest shook his head, sighing again. "I understand that their attendance has been intermittent, at best." Fishing beneath his vestments for a pocket, he pulled out a slip of paper. "Here are the names and address. They've no phone, and only a few houses on that street are occupied nowadays." Both of his eyebrows lifted. "You'll be careful?"

The young woman smiled confidently. "Yes, Father. I know where the nearest police station is."

They looked at each other a few moments and both reaching the conclusion that the interview was concluded, rose simultaneously.

"I thank ya, Audrey Cox." The priest extended his hand and shook hers, and then they both turned, he to climb the short, narrow steps to the sacristy and she to leave through the front door. At second thought, the priest returned to kneel before the altar to offer a quick prayer for the student and her patient-to-be.

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Stiff, weary and anxious, Eileen Snape wasn't enthused with Dr. Wilson's announcement that the young woman standing behind him would be helping her at home. The doctor accepted her curt statement that her son didn't need to be contacted, but he stood his ground when it came to the church-provided student nurse.

Toby would be furious at her weakness, Eileen knew. But he was in the clink, and she wasn't yet able to care for herself, let alone muster any magic.

The black-haired, black-eyed woman's features were severely drawn as she resignedly nodded her acceptance. There would be a stranger in the house. She'd have to keep the girl from learning the family's secrets.

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Eileen was carefully eased into the taxi's back seat by her doctor-foisted helper. If not for the pain, she would have settled back to relax in luxury, this being her first taxi ride since Tobias had proudly taken his wife and newborn son home from hospital. Instead, she watched as the surroundings went from comfortably middle class to grim, signaling their arrival at Spinner's End.

With Audrey holding her steady, Eileen shuffled up the cracked, uneven walkway, bravely tolerating the pain. At the door, which needed a fresh coat of paint, she reached into her decades-old, standard-black handbag and fingered the house key. Shakily, she extended a thin hand to the door and turned the key in the dull brass lock. Audrey twisted the knob and found that the door practically opened itself, the hinges smooth from wear and regular oiling.

"I-I think I should sit." Eileen couldn't bear the idea of climbing the stairs just yet. The girl helped her into the nearest chair, whose springs creaked even from Eileen's slight frame.

"I'll get you some water and then get the bed ready," Audrey said, dashing into the kitchen before Eileen could respond.

She hated the idea of someone else in her kitchen. *And the girl plans to next go into Tobias's and my bedroom!* Eileen took a deep breath, recovering from the excursion. She was too tired to think, but had to consider what must be done.

The books...well, that couldn't be helped. Most of the Dark Arts books were in Severus's room and their titles carefully concealed with Disguising Charms. Those downstairs were carefully stashed among second-hand Muggle books, including the Reader's Digest volumes she'd learnt about after marrying Tobias. Her tired mind floated into memories of reading Kon Tiki, The Hawaiians and other stories that Severus later read during his last years in Muggle school. The books were among the few Muggle things she'd found to provide some enjoyment.

Some of the magical items she'd inherited were in her family's Gringotts vault, which she hadn't visited in years. The rest she'd given to Severus, who had left a few in the wobbly desk she'd managed to buy when he was nine and already the tallest boy his age. Those things could be mistaken for old children's toys.

No, the real concern was her wand. She kept it because it was the only thing that had ever been truly hers alone...and she had, on occasion, used it to defend herself against her drunken husband. It was in the kitchen, third drawer from the top, shoved in the back under a pile of threadbare towels. It was never exposed because Tobias never helped with washing up. The only drawer he ever got into contained the tableware and the little bit of pin money she didn't hide from him. Her other money was tucked into the bottom of the canister holding a hefty bag of flour.

After opening two cupboard doors, Audrey found the glasses. She pulled out one, filling it at the aged sink. Returning to the sitting room, she handed the glass to Mrs. Snape and observed. The woman lifted the glass to her lips, her hand trembling slightly.

"We should get you to bed soon," Audrey said kindly. "I'll get things ready, and once you're there, I'll fix you some soup."

Eileen's long fingers grasped the girl's wrist. "Thank you," she said, smiling as much as she ever did. "The room is atop the stairs, on the left."

Audrey nodded, making to leave. But Eileen held on.

"There's one thing," the matron continued. "The kitchen drawer third from the top...I'd appreciate if you stayed out of it. There are ... personal things, family things."

Audrey smiled. Her mother always kept her pin money and bills in a kitchen drawer, and wouldn't want anyone mucking about in there. "I understand. Don't worry," she said reassuringly.

Released, the young woman climbed the creaking stairs covered with a threadbare runner. The door at right was closed, and the open door facing it led to Mrs. Snape's room. Inside was a double bed fashioned from a dark wood, with a matching dresser and two bedside tables. One dresser drawer was broken down the middle, and had been repaired with glue that had left clear bumps over the crack. A straight-backed pine chair sat next to a stand containing a wind-up alarm clock. Its only adornment was a tatted cotton doily. The wood floor was bare and dull, lacking even a rug. Without a closet, clothes hung on a free-standing metal rack, possibly the newest item in the run-down house.

The bed was covered with an old but pretty, blue-floral spread. A matching, ruffled valance decorated the sole window, highlighting dingy, cream curtains. They seemed to be an attempt to make an otherwise drab environment cheerful.

Audrey's fingers brushed against the rough cotton as she pulled back the spread. The sheets seemed freshly cleaned...probably just before Mr. Snape had brutalized his wife, sending each of them to different temporary accommodations. She stacked the two pillows so that her charge could rest comfortably, then returned downstairs.

Drowsy, Eileen had fallen asleep, her chin resting on her chest. Audrey tenderly placed a hand on her forearm, gently waking the woman, who momentarily caught her breath at the sight of her forgotten aide. She allowed the young woman to help her up and leaned on her as they slowly climbed the stairs together.

Upon reaching the bed, Eileen immediately collapsed. She shook her head at Audrey's inquiry whether she wished to use the water closet and allowed the nurse-to-be to help her change into a nightdress. Once the patient was settled, Audrey returned downstairs to begin cleaning and preparing soup.

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For the first few nights, Audrey slept in what apparently was the son's room so that she could provide help during the night. There was pain medicine to administer, and Mrs. Snape still needed assistance to the WC. In the morning, Audrey changed her dressings, handed Mrs. Snape her pills, and then prepared and delivered a breakfast of hot porridge, tea and canned fruit. After washing up the dishes, she placed a tray containing a water carafe and cold sandwich on one of the bedside tables, next to a couple of books should Mrs. Snape wish to read. Then she pulled on her coat, grabbed her books, and hurried to the bus stop to begin the journey into Birmingham to attend classes.

By mid-afternoon, she was back to check on Mrs. Snape, deliver her mail, chat with her for a few minutes and ask if she wanted anything else. The main task then was to set the house in order, a project that lasted several afternoons and evenings. Evidence of depression was rampant. Other than the bedroom, which was relatively orderly, the entire house needed attention.

The bathroom was first, receiving a thorough scrubbing from ceiling to floor. The kitchen next received the same attention. Stacks of dirty clothes went into the tiny, ground-floor washroom that contained an aged washer with a hand-cranked wringer. The damp clothes had to be draped on racks for drying. Scattered tabloid newspapers, circulars and magazines were picked up and sorted, the oldest placed in the rubbish bin along with stale and spoiled food from the refrigerator and cupboards. Every dish and utensil in the kitchen was washed and replaced in an orderly fashion.

At six, she fixed simple meals: soup the first several days, then stew. She joined Mrs. Snape upstairs for dinner, quietly sharing with her the latest news and listening to what little the older woman had to say. Later, Audrey ironed and put away laundry before doing her homework.

She stayed the first three nights in the squeaky single bed, the door open and alarm set to check on the patient. By the fourth, Eileen was truthfully confident that she could go to the WC on her own. Thenceforth, Audrey returned to her small flat.

A reserved and cautious woman, Eileen couldn't bring herself to be very open with the girl. Since her marriage, Eileen had become a near recluse because Tobias would become angry whenever he discovered she'd "been talking" with anyone but him. It was safest not to become friends with anyone. *The girl will be gone soon, anyway*, she thought.

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After putting away the last glass into the packed cabinet, Audrey draped the towel over her shoulder and pulled forward an old recipe box from the counter's rear. Made of rosewood with traditional Indian carvings, even its scratches were worn smooth. She removed the top and thumbed through cards both white and yellowed, slowing in the section marked "Biscuits." The refrigerator biscuits recipe she had found would work well. The dough could be chilled quickly in the freezer, and a full batch baked, cooled and stored by seven-thirty, allowing time to wash up and leave.

She pulled out two of the heavy mixing bowls before collecting the wet and dry ingredients, a fork for blending and a heavy spoon for mixing. From the box of waxed paper in the bottom drawer, she tore off two pieces for rolling and wrapping the dough.

The only thing she couldn't find was a biscuit cutter. Surely there would be one or more. After all, the Snapes had raised a child. Frustrated, she took the towel from her right shoulder so that she could dig deeper without the cloth brushing against her cheek.

A pale hand pressed against the kitchen doorway, long fingers wrapping against the surprisingly clean wood. Peering from beneath a fringe of long, lank, black hair, the young man watched.

## Two: Assignment Completed

*Chapter 2 of 2*

Battered by Tobias, Eileen Snape receives unwanted help at home--and her son comes to visit.

*A/N: Many thanks to MW87 and lyn\_f, whose help greatly improved this story.*

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## Chapter Two: Assignment Completed

A pale hand pressed against the kitchen doorway, long fingers wrapping against the surprisingly clean wood. Peering from beneath a fringe of long, lank, black hair, the young man watched the strange woman bending over the row of drawers. When her arms pulled out from deep within the third drawer, his wand slid into his hand.

With a silent *Accio* his mother's wand sailed from her hand to his, and a biscuit cutter fell from the stunned girl's other hand. The unknown woman jerked upright and turned toward him with wide eyes, her mouth forming a surprised circle.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" A vertical line creased deeply between lethally narrowed, dark eyes.

"Wh-who are you?" she stuttered. Her eyes darted to the stick she'd found in the drawer and now was in his left hand and then to the black stick in his right *le's across the room. How did he get that chopstick?*

Severus sneered. "Surely you see the family resemblance."

The black hair and eyes, the slim, tall build and severe looks matched those of Mrs. Snape. She'd discovered the first day that, oddly, the house lacked any pictures. "Yes," she said hesitantly. "I, erm, haven't met your father. He's due home tonight."

His lower face shifted into a scowl. "You haven't answered my question."

"I-I'm Audrey Cox." She wondered whether she should extend her hand and decided against it. "You are?"

"The son. Severus." He pocketed his mother's wand in his jacket but kept his aimed at her, belying his languid speech. "What are you doing here, Audrey Cox?"

"I'm helping your mother. She had ... an accident." Seeing a brief flicker of surprise in his face, she added, "You didn't know?"

"No one told me." Severus lowered the ebony wand but kept it at the ready. His hard eyes never left her.

"No one seems to know how to find you." Audrey looked at the clock. "I need to take her supper, finish and leave by eight, before your father arrives. He doesn't know...and she doesn't want him to."

There was something between an order and a plea in her eyes, and he nodded. "We'll 'talk' when you're finished." His look said that this was not an option.

Audrey turned to pick up the cutter, then removed three plates, bowls, cups and saucers from the cupboard, placing two sets on the table, the second for the newly arrived son. Two steaming scoops of stew went into the third bowl, a piece of fresh-baked bread on the plate and hot tea in the cup. Audrey shifted everything onto a tray and started for the doorway.

"Don't tell my mother I'm here. I'll do that later," he ordered and waited for her surprised nod before letting her pass.

His eyes searched the kitchen, which was cleaner than he could remember. Even the windows' exteriors were clean. The drawer that had contained his mother's wand was still open, and he looked inside. Towels that usually covered it were pushed aside, revealing a space where the biscuit cutter had been next to the wand, plus a box of matches and several spare candles for the times they couldn't pay the electricity bill.

He heard a chair scraping across the floor and from the direction it traveled could tell she'd it drawn near his parents' bed. For the next several minutes, the vague clink of a spoon against stoneware drifted downstairs. A little more than a quarter-hour later, he heard the girl speaking in the upstairs hall and a door close. Then she came down the stairs, smiling and carrying the tray. The smile faded into doubt when she saw him. Severus waited to speak until she'd placed the dishes in the sink.

"What were you doing in the drawer?" he demanded. "Didn't my mother tell you to stay away from it?"

"I I was looking for a biscuit cutter. I'd looked everywhere else."

He looked deeply into her blue eyes. She was telling the truth.

The wand he was tapping against his leg drew her eyes, and she stiffened at the memory of what had happened. She licked her lips nervously and then looked up at him.

"What is that?" she asked hesitantly.

He scowled, then pointed the wand at one of the kitchen chairs whose paint was practically gone. It swiftly moved from the table and, despite her frightened jump, managed to push behind her knees, forcing her to sit. Panting in fear, she stared at the cold young man and dared not to move.

"That surely answers your question," Snape said.

"You haven't even asked about your mother." There was more concern in her voice than accusation.

Snape winced but quickly shifted his features into a scowl.

"She's sleeping less and reading more," Audrey said. "There's a reading light in the small bedroom I used for a few nights...yours, I suppose. Would it be all right to move it onto your mother's bedside stand?"

One eyebrow rose at the mention of her using his bedroom, but he nodded. He opened his mouth to demand further answers, but his ears pricked. From down the block, they both could hear a couple of men singing off-key, and they were drawing nearer.

"That's my father." Severus glanced around, then with two flicks of the wand removed one place setting from the table, shoving the dishes back into the cupboard and the utensils into their drawer. "I'm not expected."

"Neither am I," she whispered while gaping at where the plate, bowl and spoon had been.

As steps approached the house, the young man roughly grabbed her hand. "Let me do all of the talking, and go along with it." The set in his jaw and look in his eyes brooked no argument.

"Eileen! You sleepin'?" Tobias shouted. "Damned woman," he muttered as he shrugged off his jacket.

Severus's hand clamped down on Audrey's as he approached the kitchen doorway. "Father."

The hook-nosed older man spun ungracefully, nearly falling, and gaped briefly at his son, not immediately noticing the girl slightly behind Severus.

"Vistin' from yer fancy appren'ship, eh?" Tobias slurred and wiped his red nose with a sleeve. It was then that he saw Severus holding another's hand, and he looked over the young man's shoulder. "Who's this?"

Severus squeezed Audrey's hand just hard enough to remind her to let him take charge. "This is Audrey."

Hesitantly...Tobias took it for shyness...Audrey extended her free hand. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Snape."

The shabbily dressed older man looked at her neatly applied makeup and carefully pressed clothes. Her blouse and slacks weren't high-end, but they were a damned sight nicer than anything he could afford. He nodded his head belligerently as he eyed her and then looked back at his son. "Got yerself a fancy girlfriend from yer fancy witchin' school, eh?"

Expressionless, Severus stood his ground. Caught in the middle of a confusing situation, Audrey stood silently, rapidly reviewing the scenes of the past half-hour *Witching school?*

"Well, boy? Don't ya have better manners than not answerin' yer father?" Tobias glared at Severus. "Yer little witch here will think I'd not brought me son up proper. She from yer Hogwarts School, or did ye meet her on yer appren'ship?"

"Hogwarts, sir." Severus answered coolly.

She was beginning to put things together and was increasingly nervous. *A witching school. Witch. Wand-waving. That's how he took the chopstick from me! And it isn't a chopstick!*

Tobias looked at the girl again. "Well, ya seem nice 'nough, even if yer one of them wand-wavers. Don't think down on us 'cause we ain't got much."

Mr. Snape's chastising tone caught her attention. "I've not done so, sir. My family's had its share of struggle." Audrey was relieved that the young man didn't hurt her hand, though his grip did tighten.

"Then ya un'erstand." Tobias's expression softened before he turned back to Severus. "Yer mother meet 'er?"

"Yes, sir. We just stopped by to see her. She's gone to rest."

Tobias grunted, then pushed past them into the kitchen. "Been a long day." He sat down heavily and sloppily dipped up some stew, dribbling some on the tabletop.

Severus took the hint. "I was just going to take Audrey home."

"Oh, erm, no! I'll be all right," she said quickly.

Simultaneously, Tobias grunted a doubtful "Hrmp!" while Severus shot her a warning glance.

"Not in this neighborhood. I'm walking you." Severus turned her wrist just enough to pass the message that she should make her goodbye.

"It was nice meeting you and Mrs. Snape," she said with a politeness strongly tinged with nervousness.

Tobias grunted and nodded, his mouth full of food. Severus pulled Audrey gently but firmly away from the kitchen doorway. "All right then. I'll be back later, Father."

Severus picked up her coat from the couch and helped her into it, handed her purse to her, then ushered her out. On the stoop, he sheathed his wand and firmly took her hand again before leading her up the potholed, dead-end street. "Which way?"

"Really, I'll be all right by myself." She spoke too quickly and tried to calm herself. "I walk around here all of the time."

Severus lowered his voice. "You fail to understand. We're going to have that little conversation I referred to before my father arrived."

Audrey dropped her head so that he couldn't clearly see her face. "Mordian Way," she murmured.

It was a two-mile walk. Severus slowed his pace so she needn't hurry. They walked silently for several minutes, Severus studying the shop windows as they trekked along a primary street.

"What are you, a social worker?" His tone was contemptuous.

"No, a student. I'm studying to be a nurse."

"So you're practicing on an invalid," he snapped.

Audrey bristled. "That's not it at all! She couldn't possibly get by without help."

"What's wrong?" he asked, his eyes sweeping the street and buildings.

"She was ... injured." Severus cast her a sharp look, and she sucked in air. "She was beaten so severely that she had to be hospitalized. There are broken bones, internal injuries."

Exhaling angrily, Severus winced. It had only been a matter of time before his father's temper carried him away this far. Too bad he hadn't been there. Now, he needed information.

"So who sent you and why? Neither of them would ask for assistance."

"There was a time my mother needed help like this, and I've always remembered how important it was for all of us. So I asked at St. Pat's if there was a way I could help."

He snorted. "St. Pat's. I should have known."

"It hasn't caused any harm."

Snape stopped, turned and looked down at her. "Yes, it has. You know too much."

Before she could back away from his menacing posture, he tugged her sharply into the shadowy opening between two closely placed buildings.

"Don't. I'll scream." She was frightened and appeared fully capable of carrying through with her threat.

His lips twisted into a sneer. "That little demonstration in the kitchen was nothing. I can make you do anything I want...including having you tell the police that we're a happy little couple, and the scream heard was from someone else. I can even make you forget everything."

Her eyes flicked back and forth between his.

"You saw too much, and my father said far too much." He patted the pocket containing his wand. "Now you know what this is."

She licked her lips again and pressed them together.

He knew his mother certainly wouldn't have told the girl anything. But few Muggles other than family had ever been to Spinner's End, and for good reason. "What else do

you know?"

"Nothing."

Suddenly, her back was against a rough brick wall and Severus was pressed against her, one hand at her throat, the other in his pocket. A chill ran down her spine and she gulped air. "It feels ... odd inside your house. Especially around your mother. Even more so around that one kitchen drawer."

"So you just had to snoop." His breath was hot against her cheek.

"No! I was going to make biscuits for your dad's lunches! Your mother did tell me not to get into that drawer. I thought it probably held her pin money. But I'd looked everywhere for a biscuit cutter, through all of the other drawers twice before I finally looked in that one drawer. That's when you..." she swallowed..."when you came in."

"And you seized what you shouldn't have seen, let alone touched." He could feel her fear building to a crescendo. It was a craving he'd been able to satisfy on Death Eater raids. His body was responding to her warmth and soft, round breasts. Now he sensed she was fearful of something else.

"I-I was just helping. I didn't know." Her voice trailed plaintively.

"And now you do. You know what my mother and I are. You've undoubtedly looked at the books. You know about our world, and that's forbidden."

"I won't tell anyone!" she pleaded. "I only want to help your mother until she can get around. Just a few days more. Think about your mother!"

Repeated use of that word killed his libido, and Severus drew back sourly. Looking over his shoulder, he paused, then drew her back onto the sidewalk, lacing his fingers tightly between hers. He needed time to think, and she unknowingly accommodated him by remaining silent.

"You mentioned that my father was 'due home tonight.' Where's he been?"

Audrey sighed and looked down at the cracked concrete. "The police arrested him for drunkenness and disturbing the peace since your mother wouldn't press charges. Father Stephen told me yesterday that Mr. Snape was being released today...that he'd go to work and then be home after stopping at the pub. He wanted me to be gone before your father got home."

A noise came from Severus' throat that was a cross between a snort and a growl. *Yes. Always the pub*, he thought.

They turned onto Mordian Way. Like most other streets in the working class community, it contained a few older, battered autos and look-alike run-down row houses, some adorned with small, carefully tended victory gardens. She glanced at Severus peripherally, and he caught her eye, raising a brow. Lips pressed together, she jerked her head toward a door with peeling blue paint. Severus strode quicker, pulling her up the steep steps and waited behind her as she reached into her purse for the key. She half turned before inserting the metal into the lock; his level look said he fully intended to see her in. Defeated, Audrey opened the door and Severus followed her in.

Inside was a tiny entrance, a scratched, unpainted door to the left and a staircase going up to the first floor. Audrey shook the keychain to bring the next key to hand, opened the door and snapped on a floor lamp. The flat was narrow and long. The living room-cum-dining room looked into the kitchen, which was dimly lit by a light spilling from the open bedroom door. He assumed the bathroom was in the L-shaped jog under the stairs. The sparse furnishings appeared second-hand, and there was no sign of a telephone.

Putting down her purse on the blanket-covered loveseat, Audrey slowly turned. Severus' eyes were fixed on her.

"I need to ... speak ... with my father." His tone sent a chill up her spine. "But first..."

The action of extracting his wand sent her running backward several steps, and Severus chuckled...a dark, unkind sound. Turning, he waved the wand at her door and around the living room, then swept past her, through the kitchen and into a narrow hall that led to the bathroom...just where he suspected it was located...and the back door. Another wave and that door, too, was locked and warded. For good measure, he locked the windows and silenced the entire apartment. He met her in the kitchen, where she'd craned her neck around the corner to watch.

"Fix yourself some tea. I'll be back." He allowed a slow appraisal of her from head to toe and smirked at her discomfort. Turning, he left, carefully closing the door behind him.

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After he left...*what is his name? Severus?...*there was a loud crack! outside. She rushed to the front windows and looked but saw nothing unusual in the vicinity, and he'd already vanished from sight. She didn't plan to be there when he returned. In her bedroom she grabbed a small suitcase from the closet and stuffed into it some clothes and an extra pair of shoes. Dashing back into the living room, she caught up the purse as she sped to the door...which wouldn't open. She twisted and tugged at the old brass knob, but it was fixed as if epoxied.

Pausing only a moment, Audrey ran to the back door. It, too, wouldn't budge an iota. Dropping the suitcase and purse, she returned to the kitchen, picking up the broom and hitting its tip against the ceiling. "Help! Can you hear me? Help!" The upper flat's telly was on and the floor creaked, but there was no response to her pokes. Thumping harder and calling louder went similarly unheeded.

*The windows.* Audrey removed the protective board stuck in the window to keep it from being pried open from without. The frame wouldn't open. Banging against the glass brought no rescuer, no acknowledgement whatsoever.

Someone should have heard her in this street, where everyone made everyone else's business their own. Then she remembered the young man waving his black stick. As inconceivable as it seemed, he must have done this. There was no logical explanation.

Still in her coat, she slumped onto the loveseat, helplessly waiting for the dark man to return, and hoping that he would not.

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Severus strode down the block, finding a dark alley from which he Apparated to Spinner's End. He entered the kitchen from the side yard, finding his father's dirty dishes still on the table. The man himself was settled sloppily into an old, overstuffed chair in need of new upholstery, loosely holding a bottle of ale in his grimy hand.

"Ya weren't gone long enough for a shag." Spittle flew from Tobias' mouth as he slurred his words, his eyes focused blurrily on his lean, pale son.

Severus' eyed the drunken man. Though his nostrils flared, he retained a cool demeanor. "It's always a joy having an intellectual conversation with you, Father," he said with mock respect.

"Don' get cheeky wi' me, boy!" Tobias tried to hike himself out of the chair, but fell back with a grunt and shifted uncomfortably. Somehow, he managed not to spill his drink, a skill he'd honed from years of inebriated practice. "Ya've always had a smart mouth, an' I see that havin' an office job ain't made ya any more proper t'ward yer elders. Lazy, useless, swotty snob ya are! Never have done nuthin' for yer family but cost us money for that pissant school."

Used to such tirades, Severus looked down his nose at the reddened drunk. "My, Father, how your vocabulary has increased! One must hope so many polysyllabic words won't strain your delicate constitution."

"Why, ya...!" Half-raised, Tobias swung at the air, lost his balance, and fell sideways against the chair arm before sliding back into the seat. The effort knocked the wind out

of him and he sat, panting and glaring at Severus. The cherished beer bottle lay on the floor, its last few drops trickling onto the wool rug that was so threadbare the pattern was indiscernible.

Severus crossed the sitting room to climb the stairs to the first floor. The harsh glow of an electric light shone beneath the door, and he knocked softly.

"Come in?" a female voice called.

Long fingers turned and pushed the old brass doorknob, and Severus poked his head through the opening.

"Oh, Severus!" His mother's chest heaved with emotion. "It's so good to see you!"

Pulling the chair to her bedside, Severus sat, tucking knees against the mattress and taking his mother's hand.

"How are you, Mother?" he asked. Not stopping for an answer, he pulled out his wand and ran diagnostic spells the length of her body.

"Better. Better, Severus," she replied, biting back the pain from broken ribs.

His eyes darted to hers upon hearing the catch in her voice, and then he returned to the spells. Finished, he sheathed his wand.

"What did he do to you, Mother?" Try as he might, he was unable to keep his voice neutral. Slytherin venom seemed to fill his mouth.

Eileen tore her tired stare from the wall behind him. "Don't get involved, Severus. You don't live here, so you don't have to live with the consequences."

He gritted his teeth to keep from shouting. "You could leave him!"

Sighing, his mother looked at him sadly. "Until you're in love or married, you can never understand, Severus. I love him."

"Love isn't supposed to go in only one direction, Mother," Severus said with disgust.

"He's not like this all of the time. You know that. Times have been difficult."

"Yes. Ever since I can remember," he replied stubbornly.

"He'll make it up to me," she pleaded. "He always does."

"And he always abuses you again."

Eileen reached for his hand, which he petulantly pulled away. Instead she hesitantly rested her hand on his knee. "Please, Son. Stay out of it."

He looked around the room. It was brighter and neater than it had been in years, everything in its place.

"She's taking good care of you?"

Eileen started. "You've met Audrey?" He nodded curtly. "I didn't ask for her, but she's been a boon," she continued. "I couldn't get around and simply fixing something to eat would have been too much. No strength yet to get downstairs, nor for magic."

Severus turned his steady, dark gaze on his mother and considered whether to tell her. He decided not. "Do you still keep your wand in the kitchen drawer?"

"Yes, and I told her that drawer is off limits," Eileen replied firmly. "I let her know I'd be most displeased."

"Indeed." After a moment, he placed his free hand atop his mother's, giving it a pat. She was relieved to have that bit of affection. "You need to rest. Father's been drinking and likely will fall asleep on the sofa. I'll see myself out."

"Come more often, Severus." Eileen smiled wearily and accepted a kiss on her cheek. "I miss you."

Severus managed an apparently sincere smile, pulled her sheet and blanket up higher and exited, dousing the Muggle lamp on his way.

Before returning downstairs he stepped into his old room. Like the other rooms, it obviously had been cleaned. The bed was neatly made up and the desk and bookcase were dusted. His eyes settled on two books that lay on the table next to the bed. In the Snape household, all books not being read at the moment were stored in their proper places.

He picked up to return volumes seven and eight of a collection disguised as children's books but actually were old magic texts that augmented his and his mother's Hogwarts educations. Anyone opening the books could read what they contained. Someone had been reading them, and he knew who she was. Clenching his jaw, he whirled and headed for the staircase.

Predictably, the elder Mister Snape had fallen asleep in his chair. Severus shook his head at the detestably familiar sight. As far back as Severus could remember, his old man had been a drunk, and he apparently would continue to find questionable enjoyment from alcohol.

The son could not tolerate another moment in his father's presence. Severus Accio'd his cloak, draped it over his shoulders and stepped out the front door, facing the night.

Rather than Apparate, Severus decided a walk would grant him time to think. He headed up the rough side street to the primary way, carefully aware of his surroundings. His years at Hogwarts had taught him the value of always being on guard, whether against Muggle or Wizard, and his more recent ... activities reinforced the habit. One never knew when an Auror might show up or a foolish Muggle might get in the way. Audrey Cox was one such Muggle.

The Snapes had always kept magic within the family, just as Eileen and Severus kept mostly to themselves. A Hufflepuff, it wasn't Eileen Prince's habit to be retiring until after marrying the strapping young Tobias Snape, who'd proven himself ready and willing to use his fists to enforce his expectations. Those included strict and instant adherence to all of his instructions. Severus' scholarship to Hogwarts was his salvation, removing him for a few months each year from the hell that was home.

Having considered how to control Audrey, Severus ducked into a loading yard and Apparated from behind a lorry.

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Like a dark shadow, Severus seemed to float down the sidewalk to the building containing Cox's flat. A stealthy gaze about satisfied him that no one was watching, and a flick of his wand popped open the main door. Inside the common hallway, another flick unlocked the ground-floor flat's entrance.

The idgit woman was pressed against the interior wall, right next to the door in hopes of running past him. He pushed her into the chair, then whirled, stepping over her askew legs to lean against the fireplace mantel.

"What have you been doing ... for my mother?" he asked coolly.

His quieter manner helped her to relax somewhat. "Keeping the house clean and tidy, shopping and errands, baking bread, making soup. Helping your mother walk a bit and get to the water closet, treating the wounds and talking with her whilst she eats. Now I'm to get your dad's meals ready before he returns home so he'll think she did everything herself." Audrey paused. "I think she feels rather isolated."

Severus grimaced at the truth. Eileen was, indeed, isolated, and being confined undoubtedly made it worse.

"So he hasn't known you've been there."

Audrey thought he seemed to be taking her information well and relaxed slightly. "No. The priest at St. Pat's asked if I would help, and leaving before he'd be home was one of the conditions. That and stopping by the rectory the first night so that he'd know everything went all right."

"So, you don't 'stop by' every time." It was a statement that brought a malicious curl to his lips. She trembled at her error and his decided change in demeanor.

"You know it's dangerous to walk these areas alone at night?" His arm casually dropped from the mantel, and his hand dipped inside his jacket pocket.

Tonight it's dangerous to walk with someone. Swallowing, she nodded.

"And your neighbors failed to hear you. I made sure of that." He grinned, baring yellowed teeth, and pulled out his wand.

Alarmed, Audrey jumped up and back, the chair screeching across the floor from her movement. "What are you doing?" she asked wildly. "Please! I haven't done anything!"

"I told you, Audrey." He moved forward, eyes black as night and his face taut with menace. "You know too much."

"I don't know anything!" Now backed into the corner, her hands pressed desperately against the walls, as if for support.

"You've seen magic. You've seen our wands. You know of our books."

"I promise not to tell anyone!" she pleaded, eyes brightening with tears. "I-I swear!"

The unpleasant smirk returned to his face. "Swear? How touching. Would the Church approve?" Severus snorted with disgust even as he aimed his wand. *Petrificus Totalus!*

The young woman's body sprang to rigidity, her bum and upper back the only body parts now resting against the chair. Smiling at his handiwork, Severus Disappeared soundlessly.

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The dark shape of a tall, thin figure materialized in an alley a few yards from Spinner's End. Most of the row houses were unoccupied, and no one saw Severus Snape's sudden appearance. Likewise, he was not seen trudging home along the cracked sidewalks; neighborhood delinquents had broken most of the street lamps, and the council saw bulb replacement as a wasted expenditure in the hardscrabble vicinity.

Just as Severus expected, his father was passed out on the faded floral couch. Two empty beer bottles were scattered on the floor, and one of Tobias's arms dangled above the floor. The alcohol-ravaged man's mouth hung open, emitting fitful snorts, and the room reeked of stale ale. Severus' sensitive nostrils twitched at the unpleasant scent while his mouth set into a disgusted scowl.

He climbed the creaking stairs to the so-called master bedroom where his mother rested. Pulling out his wand, Severus cast a diagnostic spell that his mother had disallowed with a jerky wave when he'd visited earlier in the evening. All signs were that she was healing well. With proper potions she'd be restored in less than a week. He'd see to it.

Again he looked around the room. The girl certainly had made a difference in the old place. In her years-long depressed state, his mother hardly cared about the home's upkeep. It wasn't as if she had visitors. Perhaps when in better health, she'd turn things around. With a skilled curving movement of his wand, he put his mother into a deeper sleep.

Trudging downstairs, he impatiently cast an Anti-Squeaking spell on the stairs, something that should have been done years ago. Shutting his father's gob...well, that was another matter. The man lay with his mouth wide open, large hooked nose pointing to the cracked ceiling where the normally dusty overhead light gleamed from a bit of elbow grease. It was a toss-up as to which was worse: the snoring, the stench or putting up with the old man's vitriol when he was awake and full of himself.

Leaning back on the sitting room's single, battered bookcase, Severus stared at Tobias. The slob was drunk so often that it was amazing he was still able to find work, and he drank away what little he earned. The local constabulary was familiar with him, having put him up in jail many a night. Had Tobias ever made his mother happy? Severus could remember only her crying, huddling in fear as he approached her with clenched fists, and trying to cover painful bruises.

Fingering his wand, he finally pointed it at the sprawled figure. "Get up."

Snape Senior's snore broke into a brief, erratic cough before resuming.

"I said, get up!" Severus called loudly. For good measure, he strode over and kicked his father's arm.

"Wha'?" Gaggling and coughing, Tobias half-opened his unfocused eyes.

"Get off your arse, *Father*."

The sarcasm was plain in Severus' deep voice, and it triggered something dangerous in the old man. Spluttering, Tobias rolled to his side and tipsily sat up. Hands balled into fists, he tried a couple of times to rock himself to his feet before meeting success.

"Wha'cher think yer sayin' t'me, boy?" he demanded, swaying. His black hair was plastered to his head from a combination of sweat and too much hair cream, and spittle dribbled down one side of his mouth. "Ya know better'n speak t' yer father like that!"

Severus maintained a cocky sneer. "And you think you can do anything about it now, old man?"

"Why y!"

In a rage, Tobias stumbled forward, swinging for all of his might. Neatly stepping aside, Severus grabbed his father's arm and twisted. They were gone in an instant.

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They arrived in Audrey's living room, Severus firm-footed, his father still swinging but confused. Severus pulled his father a step sideways and spun him to face the young woman, flicking his wand to reverse the spell on her. She screamed.

A drunk he might be, but Tobias Snape carried a hard punch with his fists. His clenched fingers met the young woman's face with a sickening thud, and she stumbled backward.

"That's it!" Severus hissed encouragement. "Keep at the meddling bitch!"

"NO!" she shouted, looking wildly at Severus as she tried to dodge the crazed man's powerful blows.

"She's been sticking her nose in our family's business," Severus continued, standing beside them like a specter. "She needs to learn. Her. Place."

*Learn. Your. Place.* The words Toby had used so many times with wife and son.

Mind awash in alcohol, the elder Snape found it perfectly normal to be hitting someone smaller and weaker. His brain focused on one thing: to hit the stupid cow repeatedly until she quieted and submitted. The fact that she looked nothing like his wife escaped him entirely. He kept pounding the shrieking slut, his knuckles quickly becoming stained with blood.

Desperately trying to protect her head with one arm, the girl reached for the fireplace poker, but weakened by the pummeling she could only hold onto the instrument as a barrier. His arms flailing rapidly, Tobias suddenly stumbled and his head fell against the metal, breaking open a deep gash in his forehead. His eyes bugged out in pain, surprise and anger.

"Stop! Please!" Audrey cried, now pressed between the wall and the fireplace.

Bending forward, Severus egged on his father's madness. "Make her shut up! Keep hitting her in the skull!" he called enticingly, like the Snake to Eve. "Keep at her until she doesn't move!"

The poker was the last straw. Tobias gave the woman a last, terrific slug against her left ear, the impact sounding like a dull thwack against a ripe pumpkin. Eyes rolling upward, Audrey fell back and slid down the fireplace's side, blood seeping from her mouth and ear. Her head slumped onto her left shoulder, and she lay still.

Severus watched her closely for several moments until realizing her breathing had stopped. Tobias had finished her.

He turned to the panting man, who virtually frothed from his exhilarating exertion.

"Father."

Tobias looked up to see Severus' wand pointed at his chest.

"Thank you for taking care of that little problem. Goodbye."

A minor spell...one unlikely to attract Muggle or Auror suspicion...deepened the head wound into an artery. In moments, the elder Snape slumped to the floor, his breath and heartbeat ended. The eyes previously protruding in violence now did so in death.

A bit more minor wand work finished the job. The young woman's blouse popped open and her bra pulled down, as if it had occurred in violation. Tobias' trouser fly zipped opened.

Magical law enforcement wouldn't get involved in the deaths of two Muggles. Tobias already was frowned upon by the witches and wizards who were aware of him. The girl herself told him only a Church official knew she'd been quietly helping Mrs. Snape. Her walking route took her past Tobias' favorite pub.

In a few hours, police would arrive at the door of Spinner's End. They would find a woman recovering from an earlier assault by Tobias Snape. Tending to her would be her attentive son, concerned that his father hadn't been there to attend his wife.

Two problems eliminated in a single night. And there could be personal benefit: The Dark Lord would be satisfied that his young follower had finally eliminated the Snape family's Muggle.

With a satisfied smirk and twist, Severus vanished, arriving at his parents'...nay, his mother's...home to clear away signs of Audrey Cox and his father's final visit.

Finis