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SLUGS AND SNAILS

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One afternoon while Alexis was supposed to be minding her baby brother Nicky, her cousin Eric fed him a handful of fat, slimy slugs. Alexis tried to pull Eric away from Nicky, but he was bigger than her, and his skin had always been slippery. Even when she grabbed him hard, her hands slid right off. It was hopeless.

As usual, *she* was the one who got into trouble.

Her mother said, “Alexis, why did you let your cousin do that to your baby brother? You’re older than Eric; you should have known better.”

There was no point arguing. No one but Alexis knew what Eric was really like. Alexis just said, “Sorry, Mum.”

But she couldn’t understand why her mum was so upset. Nicky had hardly swallowed any of the slugs, really. He’d spat most of them straight out. And they were *organic* slugs. The family never used poisons on the garden, not even snail pellets.

But then Eric did something even worse.

It all started with his mother’s strawberries. A few days after Aunty Vita promised the whole family her famous pavlova with masses of strawberries and cream on top, all the strawberries disappeared from

her garden overnight. Whatever ate them even ate the leaves. All that was left in the strawberry patch was a tough-looking brown stalk or two coming up out of the ground. At the family barbecue that weekend, they had to have last year's frozen passionfruit on the pav.

After they'd finished the pavlova, and Eric had licked up all the crunchy crumbs while the grown-ups weren't looking, everybody went out to the backyard to look at what had happened to the strawberries.

Aunty Vita leaned against her big green rainwater tank while the rest of the family poked around in her strawberry patch. She was tall and thin, bleached-blonde and worried-looking; not at all like her son Eric, who was sort of rounded and brown and smug, with brown hair and bulgy brown eyes. (Alexis thought that Aunty Vita was probably worried-looking after all her years with Eric.)

Alexis could see her mum and dad smirking at one another, and she knew they were thinking about how bad Aunty Vita's strawberry bed looked, and how good the fruit on their apricot trees looked, over the fence. The fruit would be ripe in a few weeks, and they would all have a feast — and Alexis's parents would be one up on Aunty Vita.

"Poor Vita," Alexis's mother said, shaking her long red hair.

"It's not so bad," Aunty Vita said. "I've still got the silverbeet, the zucchinis—"

Alexis's mother took no notice. She said, "Oh, but how *awful* for you, Vita, to lose all your lovely strawberries, after you'd promised them to us and everything."

Aunty Vita gave a smile that was a bit like a snarl. She said, "It was full moon — maybe that had something to do with it. But even if there were hundreds of snails, could they really have eaten all those plants in one night?"

"Maybe. Look at all the snail trails," Alexis's mother said, pointing.

There shouldn't have been *any* snails in Aunty Vita's garden. Alexis got most of her pocket money from collecting snails and slugs from the family backyards and taking them around the street to Poppa for his ducks to eat. She got paid per snail or slug, and she'd only found two snails in Aunty Vita's yard the last time, even though she'd looked *everywhere*.

Her grandfather was just watching, and not saying anything. He looked worried, though.

“What do you think, Poppa?” she asked him quietly, in Italian. His English was fine, but it felt special, speaking Italian to him.

“If it was snails that ate those strawberries,” he said in a deep, serious voice, “they must have been very big, and very greedy. Take a good look.”

Alexis was a lot closer to the ground than the grown-ups, and she knelt down so she was even closer. It looked like just one, single, really wide snail trail. As Alexis looked up, her hands held half a metre apart, Poppa nodded. But the wrinkle between his bushy eyebrows grew even deeper.

Then he said, “It was full moon last night.”

“What could that have to do with it?” Alexis asked, but he wouldn’t say any more.

Eric went to sleep at school the next day, and Alexis wanted to fall through the floor when he started to snore. Living next door to him was bad enough, but being in the same class at school was worse. But what could she do? After all, he was her cousin.

It was funny, though: Eric didn’t seem upset about the strawberries disappearing, even though he was always so greedy.

Four weeks later, the same thing happened to the apricots. All the golden fruit, and even all the leaves, disappeared overnight, and there was silver snail slime over the trees. Mum and Dad didn’t smirk this time, but maybe Aunty Vita didn’t look quite sympathetic enough. Eric smirked, though.

Typical, Alexis thought. She looked at Poppa, who held his hands wide apart and frowned. She knew what he meant — ordinary garden snails couldn’t have done that. It must have been something *really* big. But what?

“It was full moon again,” he said.

The day after the apricots disappeared, Eric was looking so sleepy and smug at school that Alexis knew he’d soon be snoring. He looked

even rounder than usual, and his big brown eyes looked bulgier than ever.

She usually tried not to touch him, but it was better than having the whole class stare at her when he started snoring. She leaned over the gap between them and shook him by the elbow.

Yuk! There was some weird sort of slime on his skin, and it came off on her fingers. She tried to wipe it off on her T-shirt, but her hand still felt all slimy. Eric really was disgusting.

Alexis started to wonder why the strawberries and the apricots had both disappeared at full moon. Could there be some weird sort of monster that only came out at full moon, and gorged itself on fruit? But it couldn't be a werewolf; they ate meat, not fruit; and vampires drank blood.

Maybe it was a giant vampire fruit-bat that only came out at full moon! But she wasn't sure, because it didn't explain the snail trails.

The next full moon, Alexis had a plan. She thought it was going to be Aunty Vita's figs, this time. It was Tuesday, which was the evening Aunty Vita went to her art class, so Eric had dinner with Alexis and her mum and dad, and baby Nicky. Alexis had seen Aunty Vita's paintings, and thought that her aunt probably only went to the class to get away from Eric. As usual, Eric kicked Alexis's ankles under the table, and yelled so much that he made poor baby Nicky scream and scream.

As soon as Aunty Vita finally came to pick up Eric, Alexis went to her bedroom. She put on jeans and a dark blue T-shirt and trainers so she'd be hard to see in the dark, and sat in her chair near the window, watching. She was going to stay awake until eleven, when her parents should be asleep, and then she would sneak out and over the fence to see if anything happened to Aunty Vita's fig trees overnight — but she was really sleepy. She suddenly woke up in her chair and looked at the clock. It was 2.00 am.

Oh, no! She'd fallen asleep! The light of the full moon was coming straight through her window.

Without turning the light on, she sneaked out into the garden, up one of the apricot trees and over the fence to Aunty Vita's garden.

On the other side of the yard, the fig trees were stripped bare. Every fruit and leaf had been eaten. Silver slime glistened on the bare bark in the moonlight.

Alexis's plan had failed: she'd slept right through it. She'd missed whatever was eating the fruit at the full moon.

But Eric's window was wide open. Alexis walked over, very quietly, and looked in. There was no sign of Eric! What trouble was he up to this time, out of his room in the middle of the night? And would she get blamed for whatever he did?

She was just about to turn back when she noticed a wide, shiny trail on the windowsill. She stuck her head and shoulders through the window, trying to avoid touching the slimy windowsill, and looked where the trail led.

There was a huge, round, brown blob up near the ceiling. Could it be a giant fruit-bat? No — it was much too round. Alexis kept looking until her eyes got used to the dark in the room.

It was a giant snail! And it looked just like Eric, bulgy eyes and everything!

All at once, things fell into place.

It had to be *Eric* that was eating the fruit. Alexis's round, slimy cousin was a were-snail. At full moon, he slid out through his window and went hunting.

Alexis stood with her head and shoulders inside Eric's window, gazing up at the giant snail. Her mouth was hanging open. What could she do? There was no point telling Mum and Dad, or Aunty Vita. They would *never* believe her. And she couldn't use snail pellets to keep Eric out of the family's gardens; he was her cousin, after all.

Suddenly, Alexis felt a gentle tap on her back. She jumped, and hit her shoulder on the frame of the open window. She almost screamed, but she could hear someone saying "Shhh," very quietly. Then the person said, "It's all right, Alexis. It's just me, Poppa."

She let out a huge breath, and pulled her head out of the window. She whispered, "What are you doing here?"

Poppa pointed through the window. "It's your cousin Eric. He's a—" but then he stopped.

"He's a were-snail?" Alexis asked.

Poppa sighed. “Yes. My mother told me about them, when I was your age. There used to be some around her village, back in Italy. She said they were not as dangerous as werewolves, but still not good to have around.”

“Should we be standing here talking about him?” Alexis said. “Won’t he hear us?”

“Your cousin is fast asleep now, I think. After he ate all those figs, he’ll find it very hard to stay awake.”

That made sense. It explained why he’d kept going to sleep at school. “But we shouldn’t hang around here for too long. What if Auntie Vita wakes up and finds us here?”

Poppa nodded. “You’re right. Can you see me after school tomorrow? We have to protect my plums, next full moon.”

Alexis could hardly wait to get to Poppa’s place. She wriggled in her seat all afternoon. As soon as the bell rang, she raced off.

Poppa worked from home as an accountant. When Alexis ran around the corner into his driveway, he was just saying goodbye to one of his clients. Alexis said a polite hello to Mrs Papadopoulos, but she was too excited to concentrate on anything until she was sitting alone with Poppa in his den at the back of the house.

Poppa had a pile of white bulbs on the coffee table. He pointed to them, and said, “There’s our secret weapon.”

“Garlic?” she said.

“Yes, garlic. My mother told me that it works against all of the supernatural creatures: vampires, werewolves, even were-snails.”

“Cool,” Alexis said. But something was worrying her.

“And it tastes so good!” Poppa said.

“But Poppa, Eric eats garlic all the time. We’ll have to come up with something else. A moat around the fruit trees, maybe...”

“Ah,” Poppa said, seriously. “Garlic can’t hurt Eric when he’s a *boy*. But when he turns into a snail, it will work.”

“So what do we do?”

In the following weeks, Poppa and Alexis laboured on their secret plan. Their families didn’t notice; they thought they were just working in the garden, as usual.

In the first week, Poppa and Alexis split big papery white garlic bulbs into handfuls of single cloves, and put them in a bucket. Next, they used a wooden dibber to make holes about a hand's width apart around the edge of every single fruit or vegetable bed in all the family's gardens. Then Alexis put one of the garlic cloves from the bucket into each of the holes, pointy side up, and filled in the hole with soil. Poppa followed her around with a watering can filled from his old steel rainwater tank.

By the following week, little green shoots were appearing all around the edges of the garden beds. Alexis went around each of the gardens every afternoon to make sure that the baby garlic plants were growing and nothing was eating them.

Next, they mixed a special batch of Poppa's garlic mixture, which he usually sprayed onto his tomato plants to keep the bugs away. They mashed up a whole lot of garlic — ten big heads of it — in a big glass jar and poured boiling water over it, and left it sitting for a week. When Poppa opened the jar, it smelled almost as bad as Nicky's nappies, but different. They emptied it into a big bucket and topped it up with water from his tank.

Instead of spraying the garlic mixture onto leaves, they used clean paintbrushes to paint it around the trunks of all the fruit trees, from ground level up to Alexis's height. They paid special attention to Poppa's plum trees, which were practically bursting with purple fruit.

On the day of the full moon, just to be sure, they climbed up into the plum trees and hung garlic cloves all over the branches on bits of string.

Poppa said, "I think we're prepared for anything, now. I'll come to your window after your parents turn the lights off."

A bit after eleven that night, Alexis and Poppa were standing under his grape vine, watching his plum trees. The full moon was high above them. It gave a silvery gleam to the skins of the fat purple fruit hanging on the trees.

Poppa nudged Alexis and pointed: a huge snail, the size of Eric, was making its slimy way towards the trees. Alexis could see the snail's muscular brown foot rippling as it propelled the big round

shell along the ground. It left a wide silver trail that glistened in the moonlight.

Soon the front of the snail's foot touched the base of the closest plum tree, and wriggled its way upwards. In no time, the huge snail was hanging off the tree, about as high up as Alexis's shoulders.

Suddenly, the were-snail dropped back onto the mulch under the tree, upside down, with its slimy brown foot wiggling around in the air.

"What's happening?" Alexis whispered to Poppa.

"Just watch," he said.

The snail writhed and wriggled. Green slime bubbled out of the wet-looking surface of its foot.

Alexis swallowed.

The snail kept writhing, until it suddenly turned into — Eric! He looked up at Poppa and Alexis, guiltily.

"It wasn't me," he said. "It was Alexis's fault."

"Don't be silly, Eric," Poppa told him. "You're not going to get away with that this time. We saw everything."

"It's not true. I'm *not* a were-snail," Eric said.

Poppa said, firmly, "Rubbish. There's only one thing you can do."

"What?" Eric said, in a nasty voice.

"Stay inside on full-moon nights. Keep your window closed and your blind down. That will keep you safe."

"But *I'm* not in any danger," Eric said. "It's just a bit of fun."

Poppa said, "If you get squashed by someone who doesn't know who you are, it won't be much fun."

Eric looked sulky. "That's not going to happen."

Poppa said, "Promise me, Eric, or I'll tell your mother."

"You wouldn't." But then Eric looked less sure. "Would you?"

Poppa just nodded.

Eric said, "Alexis, you wouldn't let him, would you?"

Alexis smiled. "What do you think, Eric?"

On the weekend, Poppa held a barbecue for the whole family. They had lamb chops with tomato sauce, and chicken marinated with basil and olive oil, and fish cooked in foil with lemon and garlic, plus lots

of fresh salad from Poppa's garden. Afterwards, there were Alexis's mother's plum tarts and Auntie Vita's pavlova with poached plums and cream, as well as a pile of Poppa's fresh plums on a big plate in the centre of the table. Masses of big purple plums still hung on the branches.

While everyone was busy eating and drinking, Poppa nudged Alexis gently in the ribs and nodded his head towards Eric, who was shovelling plum tart into his mouth with one hand and pavlova with the other one.

"It's just as well we caught Eric," Poppa said.

"Or we wouldn't have had any plums?" Alexis said.

"No," Poppa said, very seriously. "He might have eaten so much that his shell burst!"

The picture sprung into Alexis's mind. The garden would have been covered in slimy splattered bits of giant snail! Eeyew!

Alexis looked at Eric, still stuffing food into his mouth, then looked back at Poppa, and started to laugh.