

Moonwillow

by Lariope

One moon. One willow. One night that changes everything.

One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: I was prompted for a James/Lily story almost two years ago by a reviewer on RS.org. For me, James and Lily are a tricky, if canonical, pairing, because we never really see how Lily came to see James as anything other than "an arrogant toerag." So I decided that would be the story I would try to write. I've been poking at this little fic ever since. I've tweaked the timeline a bit, but it is based in canon, and I do want to warn for a very canon Snape. My wonderful beta reader, OpalJade, soothed my worries over him by pointing out that this way he can end up with Hermione later. All my thanks and love to OpalJade and Lulabelle72 for betareading. This story is for Shellsnapelover, who listened to it a year ago and encouraged me to finish it.

Lily is waiting. It is May, early dusk, and the Quidditch match is finally over. She has watched most of her classmates make their way up the hill to the castle from the Quidditch pitch. The Gryffindors are celebrating their win over the Slytherins, but Lily has not seen Potter. Maybe he went up under that damned invisibility cloak that he thinks he such a big secret. *But why would Potter go incognito?* she thinks. *He's the star of the show tonight.* She expected to have to disentangle him from his admirers; she did not expect to be unable to find him.

She is beginning to feel uncomfortable out here in the creeping darkness. What is she doing, lurking out here by herself? Many of the Gryffindors tried to sweep her along into the celebration, but still, she's waiting for Potter. Maybe if she gets this right tonight she can stop talking to him altogether.

Severus is the thing. Severus and that rather nasty sense of humor he's been displaying lately. Nasty temper. Lily understands that her housemates torment him; she'd hex them too, no question. But this thing with Lupin is beginning to border on obsession, and privately, Lily thinks Remus is the nicest of the lot. Severus has become convinced that there's something wrong with the boy. *Not wrong, Lily, don't mince words, not with yourself.* Severus is convinced he's a werewolf. It's obviously not true; if it were, Black wouldn't have told him where they'd be tonight of all nights. As if Dumbledore would let a werewolf into Hogwarts anyway.

The moon is high and bright. It's throwing off a lot of light...she can see right down to the doors of the locker room, but still no sign of Potter. She's considering going back now; surely she has missed him, but she thinks *five more minutes*, and there she stays. Lily is afraid they're going to ambush him, lure him off the campus, the four of them, and... *and what? Beat him senseless? He's a wizard.* But so are they, and she thinks they underestimate him. Severus is not treating this like a summons from bullies to meet after dark in the schoolyard. He wants revenge.

Suddenly the door to the locker room opens, and Lily's heart jumps into her throat. *Startled me*, she tells herself. Potter starts up the hill toward her. He runs his hand through his hair, a gesture Lily has seen upward of a thousand times, and she sighs in irritation. She can tell from the way the pocket is fluttering about of its own accord that he has stolen a snitch. If he releases it, she may turn around and leave. Let Severus have him.

James doesn't want to go up to the castle. Partly, it's Remus; it's full moon night, and James knows he'd just have to beg off the party to get down to the Shrieking Shack,

but partly it's that he's embarrassed. Four hours to catch the snitch? Merlin. You'd think he'd been Confunded. His housemates will be pleased...all they cared about was the win...but Sirius will never let him hear the end of it. Nor the Slytherins. Nor Snape.

The night is warm, so he strips off his gear and hangs it up, but leaves on his shorts and t-shirt, throwing his school robes on overtop. Without really thinking about it, he grabs a snitch and thrusts it into the pocket of his robes. If he sees anyone he knows, he'll release it and end any taunting about whether or not James Potter can catch a snitch.

He throws open the door and automatically looks to the sky. *Moon's not yet over the trees. Still time,* he thinks and then he sees Evans standing by herself on the hill. His heart begins to beat faster. Unconsciously, he runs a hand through his hair and starts toward her.

"Lo Lily," he says, and his voice cracks a little from disuse.

"Potter," she says by way of greeting.

"Waiting for someone?"

"I'm waiting for you," she says, and his heart kicks into double time.

He grins and reaches for his pocket, but she says, "Take that thing out, and I'll hex you into next year. I came to talk, not to watch you show off. Seems like you would have had enough of that this afternoon."

His smile fades, but his heart is still trying to fight its way out of his chest.

"Talk?" he says.

"Yes, talk. I assume you can converse without the assistance of your cronies. I want to talk about Severus."

Lily doesn't like the way she's talking, like she has something to prove. She knows she should sweet talk Potter. He's had it terribly for her for more than a year. If she flirted and wheedled, she could probably get him to call it off, but he's pushing her buttons, and now she's just angry.

"Ah. So Snively's sent his girlfriend to call off the big boys, has he?" he says, and she flushes. She can feel the blood boiling in the tips of her ears, and her palms itch to smack him.

"I am not his girlfriend. And you are taking this too far."

"Taking what too far? So far as I can see, Snivellus is the one pursuing us, not the other way around."

Lily grits her teeth. Severus does pursue them. She can't deny it. And yet...this is not something that she can say out loud, but she feels it...they started it. They started it way back on the train that first day. And she knows it has to do with her...they embarrassed him in front of her, and he'll never forget it...but this is the only way she can think of to stop it.

"Stop calling him that, for one. And don't rise to it! You don't have to hex him every single time you see him."

"But he's so... hexable," James says, tilting his head to one side, and he's the one flirting now; there's an odd flippancy to his tone, though Lily is completely in earnest.

"James," Lily says, hoping if she uses his given name, she will soften him. "Whatever you're planning to do tonight, don't do it." She almost says, "for me," but she doesn't. She wants to hold onto that card as long as she can.

"Believe me, we're not planning anything tonight," James says and starts to brush by her. "I'm going up to the tower. I suspect there's quite a party going on there. You should come, Evans. I won't tell your boyfriend."

She grabs him by the sleeve of his robes. "It's not funny, James. You don't know him. He might hurt you. Leave him be."

"I'm touched by your concern," he says and starts to pull away from her. This isn't how he wants to be talking to her. This is ~~is~~ Evans for Merlin's sake. But the thing he can't explain to her is that he can't call off this rivalry with Severus any more than she can. Even if he wanted to, which maybe he would if she said it would make any difference. But he could only speak for himself; he can't speak for Sirius, and if he tried to protect him from Sirius, well, Snape would never accept that. James Potter as his defender? It would be worse for him. Not to mention that neither of them would ever hear the end of it.

Lily isn't letting go of his sleeve. He turns to her and tries to explain. "Look, you know he fancies you, right?"

She nods. He takes a step toward her. He thinks she'll flinch, but she doesn't.

"And you know I fancy you, right?"

Her jaw tightens, but she nods again.

What is that smell? he thinks, and the air seems thick with it, a rich, wanting smell. She takes a step back, and it fades. *What am I, turning into Remus?* But maybe there is some animal in him now, after all. He steps toward her again, and the smell seems to bloom through his head.

"So the thing is..."

"The thing is that you'll fight each other like animals over something that neither of you will ever have?" She raises her eyebrow at him. "He'll hurt you, Potter, or kill you. Or you'll do something you end up sorry for later."

"Evans, I don't know what you're on about. No one is attacking anyone."

"James, call it off. Go and find him and call it off." There is pleading in her tone, and she doesn't step back from him again.

He touches her. Gently. "Whatever you want, Evans, I'll try. Next time I see Sni...Snape. I'll try to make peace."

Now she does shrug him off. "Next time you see him?" She sneers. "Has it not got through your thick skull that I know what's going on tonight?"

Does she know about Remus? he thinks. *Then why is she going on about Snively?*

"Tonight?" he says, stalling for time.

"Yes, tonight. Do I need to Scourgify your ears for you? I heard Black tell him to meet you in the Shrieking Shack at nine..."

His head snaps up, and he looks to the sky again. The moon is just cresting the trees. He's behind ... and if what she's saying is true... Sirius wouldn't. It's just a childish game... he wouldn't... would he?

He looks to the right, over Evans's shoulder, toward the Whomping Willow, and it does seem like there's something moving out there. His mind gibbers that it could be Remus, getting a late start out to the Shrieking Shack, but Remus would never do that; Remus would never endanger...

As he stares, his eyes seem to refocus, taking in the available light. He wonders again at where this talent is coming from...what mistake have they made in their incantations? He will never know, he thinks, as they can't tell anyone what they've done. But his mind snaps back to the problem at hand and that is Snape, out there, creeping along the grounds like an overgrown bat.

Lily can tell that she's finally gotten through, though Potter's reaction is not what she'd expected. He's scanning the sky and grounds, and she begins to turn to follow his gaze when he whirls on her, eyes wide, and shrugs out of his school robes, balling them up and thrusting them into her arms.

He looks at her, hard. "I hope you can keep a secret, Evans."

She sputters for a moment, but he is already moving, sprinting away from her. She stands rooted to the spot, watching him run, seemingly unable to look away from the bunch and flex of the muscles in his calves as he moves.

He's really a very athletic person, she thinks nonsensically, before she begins to run after him.

While she's trotting behind him, her eyes are still on his legs, not whatever's out there, whatever's making him run like this *Oh, God, what are we running toward?* She cuts that thought off roundly. *Just run, Lily.*

As she watches, she sees his muscles start to elongate *Merlin alive, what the fuck is happening?* she thinks. His gait is changing; he's dropping forward now and...

She stops momentarily, paralyzed by what she is seeing. She brings her free hand over her mouth and tells herself sharply not to scream. For she has just watched James Potter change into a deer.

There's a twisting in her gut, an almost painful surge of wanting, because it was beautiful, wasn't it? To see his pale skin becoming sleek and furred, to watch muscle become muscle, the lifting of the rump, the strengthening of the stride... *What are you thinking of?* she asks herself, shaking her head to clear it.

Animagus, her mind sputters. *Potter...an unregistered Animagus? But that must have taken months, years even. Why would he..* Lily is running again, following the stag, though he's outstripped her distance by far now. She's letting herself think of Potter because it keeps her from thinking of where they're going, whatever has frightened him badly enough for him to let on what he can do.

James is almost at a full gallop, charging across the lawn. Enough of his human mind remains to know where he is going and when to stop. Dimly, he understands that he must hurry.

Wind rushes through his nostrils, and he recognizes moor grass, mushrooms, heather. There is also a female smell. Somewhere behind him, there is something like a doe. The smell is tangled, half-animal and half-human, and something in it tells him that it is *his* doe, but there is no time to stop and investigate. The human James is ordering this body on.

Soon, he can smell men, aggression. There is fear in the air, and also punishment, and a smell he does not like, that smells high and dangerous on the wind, a smell this brain recognizes as *enemy*. He slows to a canter and finally stops in front of an enormous willow.

James reaches with his mind, through the body of the animal, toward his human form. It is harder to change back than it is to change. To him, this is because it is so difficult to take the stag into himself. He wonders if Sirius finds it easier, because the dog is smaller than his human body. He glances around for Sirius or Snape, but sees no one. Snape must already have tamed the willow.

He looks back. Evans is running, but she won't make it here in time. His clothes are in tatters; really, he'd be better off naked, but he dares not wait for her to bring his robes. He scans the ground for a stick and... *Wingardium Leviosa!*...moves it toward the tree to touch the spot at the base of its trunk that will calm it enough to let him pass. The entrance seemed cavernous to them as first years. Now he has to wiggle through, sparing only a tiny thought for the view Evans will get if she arrives now.

Lily watches, still a fair distance away, as James levitates a branch and stills the tree. She is too far away to make it to the hole in the roots before it becomes violent again. As she skids to a halt just outside the range of the Willow's agitated branches, she hears Potter screaming Snape's name. It is muffled, somewhere deep inside the earth, or the tree, or wherever he's gone, but the sound of it...and worse, the fact that he's using Severus's name instead of that ridiculous moniker...strikes a cold note of terror through her limbs.

Dear God, what have they done?

She is completely at a loss. She cannot hear Potter now, and she never heard an answer from Severus. To stand there doing nothing feels wrong, so she levitates a twig as she saw Potter do, but she has no idea where to touch the tree, so she stands there stupidly, waving a stick about in the air. She thinks of going to get Dumbledore, but what sense would that make? *Excuse me, Professor Dumbledore, but James Potter turned into a stag and crawled into the Whomping Willow, and I'm terribly afraid* No, that will not do. And for reasons that she cannot fathom, she intends to keep Potter's secret.

A rat runs out from between the roots of the tree, and it startles Lily so badly that she shrieks a little, but before she can reprimand herself. *what kind of Gryffindor are you, anyway?*...it is gone, up toward the castle in the strange moon-brightness.

James catches up to him just as he reaches the end of the tunnel, where it widens enough for him to stand.

"Snape," he pants. "Stop. Stop."

"So you intend to ambush me in a tunnel? And here I thought you were supposed to be the pride of the Gryffindor house. That's rather Slytherin of you, Potter. Perhaps I should be impressed," Snape says, the boredom in his voice belied by the fact that it is rather higher pitched than usual. "*Petrificus Totalis!*" He shoots the charm over his left shoulder almost casually.

James is struggling against the hex, lying frozen on the dirt floor of the tunnel. He has not regained the use of his body, but his voice breaks through. His voice is all he has to stop this. "You don't understand. You can't go in there."

"Really? Because I was rather under the impression that it's *you* who can't go in there."

"Snape. Please... listen. If you go in there, you will be killed. Or worse."

"I think you overestimate your friends. And what, pray tell, is worse than death?"

James is torn. He must keep Remus's secret. He must. And yet, he must stop Snape from entering that room.

"Remus?" he calls. "Are you in there?"

There is no answer. *Fuck.* "Sirius? Peter?" Still nothing. "Sirius!"

Snape chuckles. "No one to help you, then? All the better." He raises his wand and adopts a thoughtful expression. "You know, I wonder who the joke is on tonight, Potter."

James is straining for any sound, any clue to what lies behind that door. Is it Remus, or is it... Moony? He thinks he hears a snuffling, but it is too faint to be sure.

"Speechless?" Snape intones. "Why, Potter, you do flatter me this evening."

"Lily is just outside the tree," James says quietly. "And if you want to see her again, you will leave here immediately."

Lily is still pacing when she sees Black and Pettigrew running across the lawn. For a moment, she forgets that they are the enemy, that whatever is happening in there is surely the fault of the two young men before her.

"Sirius! Peter!" she cries, "Severus went into the tunnel, and James went after him, and I don't know how to get in! But James..."

"James is in there?" Sirius says, turning to Peter. "Then what are you coming to get me for? James will handle it."

"Handle what?" Lily asks, turning to face him, hands balled up on her hips, Potter's robes abandoned on the ground, her wand clutched in one fist.

"Nothing," he says. "A harmless joke. They're fine, Evans. Go on back to the castle."

"A harmless joke? Then why did I see Potter change into a stag in his haste to get here? I heard him screaming Severus's name in that tunnel *What is in there, Black?*"

Black's face registers surprise and alarm before it returns to its rich boy sneer. If the moon hadn't been so bright tonight, she would have never seen it. "Nothing that you need to concern yourself with. Come on, Peter. Let's go see what James has done to old Snively."

Black steps toward the Willow, wand in hand.

"If you open that hole, I'm going in there with you," Lily says.

"Evans, step back," he snarls.

Snape's face pales at the mention of Evan's name, and James has a wild hope for a moment that he has said exactly the right thing. But then the stringy boy steps forward and plants the heel of his boot in the center of James's chest.

"You disgusting piece of filth," Snape says and spits into James's face. "You want me to believe Lily Evans is out there, that she would come here with you?" He pauses, and his lips twist in what passes for a smile. "You think I don't know how badly you want her? We laugh at you, Potter. Why, just today, we sat under the stands and watched you playing your pathetic little game, and we laughed at you."

Partly because enough time has passed to weaken the hex, and partly because he's angry enough now to break through the last of the magic, James is able to scramble to his feet. "*Stupefy!*" he screams, but Snape dodges, and the spell shatters against the wall of the tunnel in a shower of red sparks.

"Pathetic," Snape says and raises his wand. James thinks for a moment that there's no way he's going to be fast enough to get out of this...he still feels half-drugged from the hex, and fear is pumping through him as steady as the fury. There is a growl from behind the door, low and warning and interested. Snape hesitates for a moment, and his wand lowers just a fraction of an inch.

"Lupin," he hisses, half triumphant. "You called for Lupin. I knew it! And now I will get the pleasure of telling Dumbledore what you and your nasty little friends have been hiding. You thought you'd throw me to a werewolf? By morning you'll be gone, the lot of you...he'll make sure you never..."

Moony is beginning to snarl. The sound of it...even now, even knowing that inside it is just Remus, terrified and in pain...still nearly stops James's heart. Snape has him trapped against the door, and he can feel the body of the thing on the other side, throwing itself against the wood, howling, yelping and then charging once more.

"Ah, Snively.... Don't you realize? He already knows."

Sirius's voice has never been so awful or so welcome. Snape whirls, and James watches as something terrible happens to the other boy's face. Suddenly all the victorious light falls from Snape's eyes, and his skin looks bruised and waxy in the semi-dark of Sirius's wand light.

"Lily?" he says hollowly, and James Stupefies him. He will tell himself later that he had to, that it was the only way to get Snape safely out of there without dueling or involving Remus. He will tell himself over and over again that it had nothing to do with pity.

Lily can barely take in what she is seeing: the darkness of the tunnel, Severus holding James at wand point, James's back against a door that's been battered by... by what? Except that she knows. The way James ran, the way he screamed, the hitching, frothing sounds behind the door. She knows.

And then Severus falls to the ground, and Black begins shouting orders.

"James, get Evans the fuck out of here. I'll deal with Snape."

But before Lily can protest, James rounds on Sirius, his wand still drawn.

"I think you've done enough for one evening. Peter, go to Remus. Make sure he's all right."

Lily's eyes widen as Peter Pettigrew takes two steps forward and disappears. Her gaze drops, and she watches with a kind of numb horror as a rat worms its way beneath the door. *But Pettigrew...*

"James!" Black protests, but James jabs his wand into Black's chest.

"Oh, you want to protect him now?" James hisses, and Lily is almost paralyzed with fear. She has never known James Potter to sound like this. "It's no secret anymore. She knows, and Snape knows because of what you did."

"James, I didn't mean..."

"Yes, you did! Of course you did, Sirius! Because if you hadn't, you'd have told me what you had done. But you knew I would try to stop him."

"James, I swear..." Black's hands are open, his wand stuffed into the pocket of his robes.

James looks at Black for a long moment. Lily cannot help but feel that James is somehow staring him down. "Take Lily back to the tower," he says wearily. "I'll take Snape to the Headmaster's office."

Sirius takes a step back, but Lily hesitates, looking at the tired, frightened-looking boy in the remains of his Quidditch shorts.

"But James..." she says. She doesn't know what she's pleading for, but something about this seems wrong.

"Go on, then," he says gently. "You shouldn't have to be involved in this. I'll get Snape to Dumbledore."

She obeys for the same reason that she spoke a moment ago...because she feels someone should apologize to him, though for what she has no idea.

It is well past midnight when James emerges from Dumbledore's office. The castle is dark and silent as he makes his way to Gryffindor Tower. The three flights of steps feel as forbidding as the first time he climbed them five years ago.

Most likely, his housemates are still celebrating their victory over Slytherin today, although it feels now, to him, like an empty one. Oh, he's come off better than Snape in the Headmaster's Office. Snape's got detention for the next three weeks, with a Silencing Charm on him to boot... and James himself has essentially only been reprimanded. But he doesn't suppose this comes from any favoritism on the Headmaster's part. No, he thinks Dumbledore knows that the thought of telling Remus what has happened will weigh on James's heart much more than any detention ever could.

Will Remus forgive them? Maybe the worst of it is that he thinks Remus will, if only to keep up appearances, if only because Remus will not dare to start over, to tell anyone else his secret. *Because we're the bloody best he could do*, James thinks bitterly.

He supposes that he will have to find Evans, tonight, and force her to promise that she will never tell. Maybe he can make her take a Wizard's Oath... For there is much he did not reveal to the Headmaster. He's said nothing about their animal forms, or Lily, or Peter, for that matter...Peter, who did everything right tonight, who ran for help, who stayed with Remus. He thinks of all the times that he and Sirius have bullied Peter, forcing him into their plans, making him the butt of their jokes. How they laughed when his Animagus form turned out to be a rat. Wormtail, they call him. Suddenly, everything in James's life feels like a terrible mistake.

But it seems he will not have to go hunting for Lily, because when he reaches the tower, she is there at the foot of the portrait hole, curled up on herself like a frightened animal, asleep.

Her eyes open slowly as he approaches, dreamy and urgent. "James," she says.

He reaches a hand down to help her up. "Come on. Let's go inside."

"No, wait." She takes his hand and tugs on it, pulling him to a squat beside her. "Is..." Her voice drops. "Is Remus all right?"

It startles a laugh out of him, her question. She's seen boys turn into beasts tonight, and her own best friend nearly lured to his death and then levitated, unconscious, to the Headmaster's office, and the question she wants to ask is if the werewolf is all right. But something inside him stands down when she asks it. It's the *right* question. He thinks he may be able to trust Lily Evans.

"Remus is..." he says, and his voice is earnest, but it lacks the whinging quality she's used to from him. "You've got to understand, Lily, this is not his fault...he was bitten when he was just a kid. It's only one night of every month...the rest of the time he's just Remus! If you say anything, he'll be thrown out of Hogwarts. No one was supposed to know. Sirius was totally out of line tonight, you were right, and I..."

"James," she says. "What happened in the Headmaster's office?"

His face closes a little. "I didn't tell him you were there if that's what you're fussed about."

His words are hard, and she reaches for his hand to bring back the James of a moment ago. "No...!...are you in trouble?"

"He took my last Hogsmeade weekend," James says, shrugging as if in apology, and she knows there is something more.

"He'll see Sirius tomorrow," he offers. She looks at James, and she sees in the way that he glances up at the portrait that they are both picturing Sirius inside, flagon of butterbeer held aloft, the reigning king of Gryffindor. James is angry with Sirius, she knows, but it will pass. And perhaps that is something she can understand. She knows what it is to love someone who can disappoint you.

"And Severus?"

He pauses. "He got some detentions."

Inside, she flinches. "He'll tell, James," she says solemnly. "I know he will. He... he's suspected for a long time. I guess that's what I came to tell you earlier. To Severus, this isn't...this will only make him *more* determined..."

"He won't."

"He will. He's not..." she is about to say, *He's not like us*, but that seems wrong, unfaithful somehow, and not quite the truth.

"He won't. Dumbledore put a Silencing Charm on him."

And it is then that Lily knows for certain what she knew in her gut the moment that she saw Sev's face in the tunnel. This can't be salvaged. If there had been no charm, if he hadn't known for certain, she might have been able to convince him that she hadn't come with James, that she'd had nothing to do with it. But now, now he will expect her to be his voice for him, to tell what she has seen, and she cannot do that.

She leans into James, selfishly perhaps, like a child wanting comfort, for she has lost her oldest friend. His arms open a bit haltingly to accept her; his hands flutter awkwardly on her back.

"Lily..." he says.

"I won't tell," she whispers. "Not any of it. Not ever."

"I'm sorry," he whispers back, and Lily sees, for a moment, the space that has opened in the ranks for her, as surely as if it has been there all along, waiting for a Lily who

knows. As she reaches for James, sorrow mixes with terrible purpose, as if she has been noticed by something larger than herself and is being prodded firmly into a world that has existed beneath the surface of her own for as long as she can recall.

"I promise," she says. She lays her head on his shoulder, and her old life passes away from her like the moon slipping behind a cloud.