

The Day Before

by h_vic

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Notes: Written for lilyevans_snape for the less_for_you Severus/Lily exchange on LJ. Huge thanks go to Snape's Talon for beta-ing and prodding my muse towards an ending with her wonderful suggestions. Of course, I own nothing; I'm only playing in JKR's world.

II.

Footsteps, slow and heavy, walking away.

Guilt. Regret.

"Sorry."

The word echoes hollowly, falsely, in the air between them, sinking into the leaden shadows, absorbed by the implacable stone.

Silence. The rhythm of the footsteps stills. A slow, grudging turn.

Green eyes lift to meet black and then fall again, ashamed.

"Severus, please ... Wait. I'm sorry."

He stares at her, eyes burning holes in her skin, or perhaps the heat just emanates from the fireplace behind her or the flush of her shame. The tension of thwarted flight thrums through him.

"Why be sorry? You meant it. You think I deserve it *..this*." He wrenches back his sleeve to bare the livid bruises that mar his arms.

Her lip trembles, and moisture gathers in her eyes, and he wonders if she is right. Perhaps he does deserve it; he isn't sure. He doesn't know if it even matters, but she matters. Lily Evans matters. That's why he remains rooted to the spot, why her unintentionally cruel words sting more than the bruises.

She shakes her head. Her hair brushes across her shoulders with languid grace. He aches for it to brush his skin even in his anger.

"I didn't ... It came out all wrong. Of course you don't deserve ..." She flaps a hand weakly towards the marks on his pale skin, but she can't quite bring herself to look at it at him. "But you have to admit you do provoke them."

His dark eyes flash; his temper sparks cruelly.

"Wait," she says again. "It's all coming out wrong. I just ... You don't help yourself."

"What would you have me do? What would *you* do? Why don't you tell me how the oh-so-virtuous Lily Evans would stop someone treating her that way?" He demands harshly, stepping back towards her in a way that makes her step back too, closer to the heat of the fire. He notes her response and stops, chastened. "Do you expect me not to react? I'm not you; I'm no saint."

"That's not fair," she says. It's an old argument though, long since lost. "You put me on too high a pedestal. But four against one are no odds at all."

"It could be four against two," he suggests, although he knows it won't be.

"They don't like the Dark Arts ..." She defends them; she does not respond to his suggestion. He did not expect her to.

"They don't like Slytherins." He does not respond to her half-formed implication either. His comment is not a contradiction, merely a statement. Perhaps both are equally true.

"I'm not sure I do." She regrets it as soon as she says it. She doesn't mean him. He knows that, but he won't admit it. Somehow, it smarts anyway.

"I should go," he says. "Return to the Slytherins." There is a certain mocking venom in his voice, or so it seems to her. That may be only because she expects it, but it probably isn't.

"Wait," she says again, unsure why but knowing she needs to say something to make it right. He won't stay though; she knows this. He does not belong with her any longer.

He turns away to leave. "I need to revise the chapter on werewolves again for tomorrow's exam," he says as if that explains everything and is the only necessity that separates them. They both see through the frail pretence of the lie.

III.

She walks out of the church; everyone else has left she told them to. She told them that she'd meet them at the rehearsal dinner, that she needed a few moments alone a bride's prerogative.

He stands in the churchyard waiting for her. She is not surprised. She might have guessed he'd be there. He looks different somehow, but then she knows she does too older, less innocent perhaps, with all that entails.

He does not approach her; he is standing to one side of the gate, leaning against the stone wall. She could walk right by him, as if he were a phantom, and leave without ever acknowledging his presence. She doubts he would stop her, but instead she smiles. She should walk on by, but how can she?

Awkward. Hesitant.

He smiles back, or at least his mouth does; his eyes fail to follow suit. "I waited," he says. She knows he doesn't mean that afternoon. She says nothing. He seems to fold a little further into himself, his shoulders slumping gracelessly. "It was too long, wasn't it?"

She looks at him, taking in his thin frame and the dark circles under his eyes he hasn't been looking after himself. "It's too late, Severus," she says softly.

He nods, a nod of resignation. "It always was," he says. His voice should be bitter, but defiance seems to have died. She thinks perhaps there's something in her that died a long time ago too the girl she once was. He has lost more; she still knows who she is at least, even if she is someone else.

Pity hangs between them.

She smiles a little, a crooked, uncharacteristically empty smile. The fickle twists of callous fate amuse her then. "Perhaps."

"There was a time ..." he says quietly, so she has to strain to hear. His shadowy eyes flicker involuntarily to the church and then to her left hand. She nods ever so slightly, or perhaps it's just the breeze rustling her hair.

Illusion.

"There was a time," she echoes, although she's not sure if she means it. He averts his eyes; she allows him that moment of privacy, or perhaps it's her weakness that she can't bear to see what's in his eyes. She looks down too, and the raised hems of his trousers, which fail to compensate for his impractical height, remind her of a little boy in cast-off clothes. She thinks perhaps she does mean it, or at least that the little girl who was the only one to care for that boy would have meant it.

She leans in to kiss his cheek for his sake or hers, she is unsure. It tastes of salt; he shudders a little beneath the chaste contact.

She turns and walks away. "Be happy, Lily," she swears she hears him say, but perhaps it's her imagination or the creak of the gate.

I.

She sits cross-legged on her bed, her back against the wall. He sits on the floor, slouched against the opposite wall. Although if he reaches out, he could almost touch her the room is so small. His bony knees are tucked beneath his chin, and grubby socks peak from beneath his too-short trousers. She looks down on him from where she sits.

"Have you finished packing yet?" she asks.

He shrugs. He hasn't started really; he doesn't have much to pack. She doesn't seem to mind his reticence. She's used to it.

"I can't work out what I want to take. I mean robes and books and stuff are easy, but I don't know what to take to make it feel like home." She picks up a teddy bear with a crooked ear and patched arm from beside her, stares at it a moment and then returns it with a sigh.

He looks away. He knows this is the difference between them he doesn't want to be reminded of home. He thinks perhaps that might be the most exciting thing Hogwarts offers that it isn't home and that might be why he can't wait to get on the train tomorrow.

"Just think of all the new friends we'll make," she says, hugging herself in excitement.

He frowns. He doesn't understand why he should want new friends when he has her.

"We'll be in the same House; we'll be in Slytherin," he says definitively as if he can bend the world to his will.

She laughs, at him and his childish presumption. "Of course we'll be together, silly," she says. "But I want other friends too."

Hurt clouds his face; shadows sweep through eyes that look older, more distant than a child's eyes have any right to look. She can't help but notice.

"Don't be daft, Sev," she says. "I don't mean I don't want you to be my friend..."

"Good," he interrupts her with awkward enthusiasm as if to reassure himself, "Because we are friends best friends."

She nods. "But we can't just be friends with only each other."

"Why not?"

Possessive. Petulant.

She laughs again; it's a little shriller this time. Fake. Her voice is a little shakier and her eyes flicker like those of a caged animal as she says, "That's not the way the world works. People need more than one friend."

"I don't," he says, and he means it he doesn't want other friends, and he doesn't want her to have any either because they'll take her away from him, he's sure. Suddenly, Hogwarts doesn't seem such a bright prospect. It looms gloomily now, and he realises hope was a mistake. He is not meant to hope.

She doesn't answer him this time. Instead, she unfolds her legs and clammers off the bed. "Mum made cupcakes earlier," she says, stepping over him to reach the door. He watches her leave.

IV.

He doesn't understand as he stares at her. He doesn't understand how she is there, nor why she'd wish to be, and yet there's something that feels almost right to him that she should be standing there in his living room.

Full Circle.

She looks up from the photograph she holds in her hand. She looks almost guilty, like the child she once was caught in her mother's jewellery box. The glass covering the picture shimmers, the light dancing across its surface, and the thud of the wooden frame striking the mantelpiece is too loud in the quiet of the room as she sets it down.

"Hello, Severus," she says and the words seem woefully inadequate, although his name on her lips feels almost like a caress to him. Her presence is confusing. He can't think straight. He never could around her.

"I remember that day," she says gesturing towards the photograph, where their teenage selves laugh on a summer's afternoon, arms interlocked and faces bright with youth. "I didn't know you'd kept it."

He nods. He tries to persuade himself that he doesn't know why he kept it, but cannot sustain the delusion with her standing there before him. He knows exactly why he looks at it every day. It is his penance to see her and what he lost.

He looks away from her to clear his head. His eyes settle on the mess of paperwork on the desk in the far corner. He wishes he had tidied up. It is a silly, vain impulse, made worthless by the surprise of her visit, but he berates himself none the less for the untidiness that has never bothered him before. She throws him off balance; she always has. He resents that now.

"You shouldn't be here," he says. The one sentence holds so much. She is a married woman; he is her betrayer. She should not have left the safety of her home; she should not have been able to breach the sanctity of his.

It is only this last part that she chooses to address, wisely perhaps. Unwisely, she laughs. "I know you too well, Sev. Or at least I did," she amends. He shivers slightly at the nickname. It is his name on her lips once again, but it is more than that. It is an intimacy to which he is no longer accustomed. No one has cared to call him that in several years.

"I think you taught me every ward that's out there," she says. "I knew exactly what you'd have used and in which order, because it's the same way I've gone about it."

"Don't," he hisses suddenly. She freezes awkwardly, one hand not quite lowered back to her side from the final gesture accompanying her words. Its progress is arrested by the urgency in his tone. She cocks her head a little, her motion a clear question. "Don't tell me the details of your protection," he begs her he will not risk her further. He can't know anything that could be used against her, not until he is better able to guard his thoughts more fully from his Master. "It's enough to know you've done something to make yourself safe."

"I did it to keep my family safe," she clarifies. He doesn't want to hear about her family, about the child who has brought this fate upon her. It is safer to blame the child, not to cast the net too wide or think on it too long, or he might reach a more honest conclusion that he will not like. He finds honesty best avoided.

Her stance softens a little, and the tired angles of her face seem smoother. She opens her mouth as if to speak, closes it, looks at the photo once more and takes a slow breath.

"It's almost Halloween," she says as if she seeks to find a way to start a normal conversation.

"Tomorrow," he agrees, unsure where this could be leading.

"Do you remember when we used to sneak down to the kitchens the night before Halloween?" she asks with a conspiratorial smile.

He nods. "You used to persuade the House-Elves to let us try the food for the feast that they'd prepared early." He'd always wondered why she took him with her at the risk of failure the House-elves disliked him but they liked her enough that it did not seem to matter. It does not occur to him that it was for her simple pleasure in his company, because he can never understand that perhaps she is or has been as tied to him in her own way as he is to her.

Silence falls between them. He wonders why she is there. He does not ask.

"Thank you," she says finally. He does not understand what she could have to thank him for. "Dumbledore told me," she says, and he feels something leaden settle within his stomach. "He said you were the one who warned him we were in danger."

She smiles at him a hesitant half-smile of gratitude and apology. It might even be a smile to wipe away the years between them, if he could only smile back. He can't. He blames his father. He blames his upbringing and his father's Catholic guilt. He thought he had long since left his conscience on a roadside somewhere, bleeding onto the tarmac, but now it returns, limping, damaged, but all too present. He cannot let her think him the hero he is not. It would be a happy delusion for them both, but he will not lie to her. To be around him is not safe. It is better she should hate him.

He does not know how to do this well, so he does not try, but he cannot look at her whilst the mirror shatters. He turns away and pretends to be fascinated by the bookshelf beside him. At random, he draws out a slim, leather-bound volume and flicks through it as if idly.

Two and a third ounces of crushed gurdyroot.

Six spiderwebs, collected at dawn when soaked with dew.

Half a pint of hippogriff blood.

One fluid ounce of banshee's tears

...

A soothing liturgy of familiarity.

Finally, he chances the words. His voice is deliberately harsh to hide the tremor. "I'm not your saviour." The smile falls from her eyes; his fall back to the empty judgement of the page.

Cowardice.

... Stir seven times counter-clockwise until the mixture turns cloudy. Add the willow bark slowly and leave to boil for fifteen minutes ...

"How do you think I knew you were in danger?"

Silence.

"I betrayed you to the Dark Lord."

A disbelieving sob breaks the silence. Her face crumbles, her beauty contorting in shock. Then anger asserts itself. She steps forward, lifts her chin, squares her shoulders and faces him as the tears mar her pale cheeks.

"What will you do now that you have me here?" she demands. There is an imperious tone to her voice that requires not that he obey, but that somehow he prove her wrong.

... Distil the clear liquid forming the top layer, and discard the lower, green layer. Mix the distillate with the extract of murtl...

The book crashes suddenly to the floor, folding back on itself and breaking the aging spine, as she sweeps it from his hands.

"Look at me, you bastard! What will you do? Hand me to your master? Kill me yourself?" The air crackles with her anger. He steps back involuntarily. She notices and reins in her temper. "Well?" she demands a little less viciously.

"No," he says defiantly, stepping closer to her arms outstretched in supplication. "Never. I didn't know it was you. I never meant it, I swear. I wouldn't..."

She looks so vulnerable, so fragile a wrecked angel. He's broken her faith. What must come next can only hurt her more, and yet he cannot help himself. She's so beautiful, and standing there before him, it's as if every decision has led them to this moment. He leans forward, closing the small distance between them and kisses her.

V.

He raises the flower to brush his lips, breathes its heavy scent and then drops it a white gash on the dark earth. It's a lily, a flower of death, and yet to him it cannot mean that. It means *her*. Yet she is dead. He does not need the cold marble to tell him that. He has lived her death. It has been his world for sixteen and a half years.

Obsession.

He fears the end is near now, or perhaps he welcomes it and the peace it might bring. Rumours have come to him of a disturbance at Gringotts; he assumes it is the boy. He knows things will escalate and quickly, so he has come to say once again what was said years before *goodbye* and what was not *sorry*.

She would not listen when he had tried to say it once before. He did not say it for the betrayal to which it ought to have applied and did not mean it for the minor transgression to which it did. How could he mean it when for the briefest moment she had returned his kiss? For a single heartbeat, maybe two, she was his completely; then she'd pushed him away. Her eyes had been feral as she'd denounced his selfish manipulation. She was a mother, she'd said, a wife, and not his, and his presumption drove her from him in a manner even treachery could not. To kiss her, it seemed, was the ultimate betrayal.

There had been no chance to mend the breach, no time for calm reflection. She had had no time at all merely a single day left to live; he had had too long for reason. He thinks perhaps though that he does not have much longer, the chances that he will survive the final confrontation are slim, he is sure, and he cannot seem to find the will left to care.

Surrender.

He kneels, as if in supplication, his hands digging into the raw dirt. There is fresh growth on the mound of her grave green shoots that hint at spring, green as the eyes that haunt his thoughts still, echoing through the years. There is an irony he thinks in this continuity of life that they should sprout from where she lays.

His thumb brushes the frail head of a simple daisy. If he closes his eyes he can see her still as he first saw her, revelling in the early sun of spring, a chain of daisies woven through her hair flashes of muted light in the fire. She was laughing as she flew from the swing, and he'd held his breath until she landed gracefully on dainty feet.

But she flies no more. He crushes the flower between his fingers and petals bleed back to the earth from which they came.

"I'm sorry, Lily."