

The Redemption

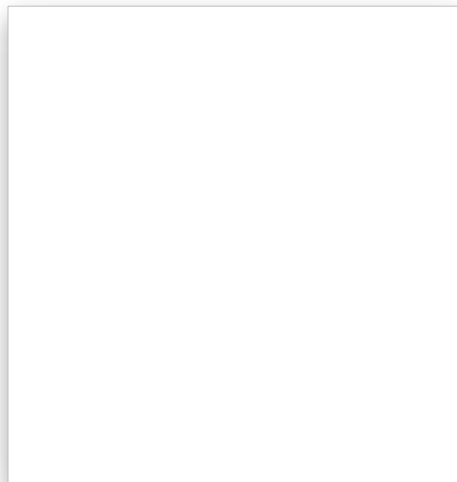
by Tarpeia

The Dark Lord has won the First Wizarding War. Lily Potter has been given to Severus Snape as a prize, and the Marauders wish they had never become Animagi.
WARNING: Very dark.

At Malfoy Manor

Chapter 1 of 5

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Note: Dedicated to Lucyferr, who suggested it would be interesting to write a Voldemort-won-in-1981 fic with Lily as Severus' prize and who specified the way the Marauders could have died. I hope you will like it!

A thousand thanks to Blue Artemis and to Antalya1705, who kindly agreed to beta this story and to give me their precious advice.

The darkness dissipated in meandering, twirling shadows. Lily woke with the impression of being plunged into an endless well. Her body felt heavy, her mind in a daze. She rose languidly on her elbows to glance around the unknown chamber illuminated by the soft light emanating from the fireplace. She was lying on the silver blankets of a large four-poster bed. On the other side of the small yet sumptuous room, she discerned a familiar silhouette. The dark-haired wizard, dressed in a raven-black robe, was leaning against the wall, his hands folded across his chest, his inscrutable obsidian eyes fixed on her face. She knew he had intended to join the followers of the Dark Lord after finishing his studies at Hogwarts, and had later been proven right by the members of the Order. But the motive of his presence did not matter at this moment. Reality invaded her mind with powerful waves of an almost paralyzing pain. She could remember Voldemort's sudden Apparition, her husband's desperate cries, the Dark Lord's sinister laughter as he forced his way to Harry's room... then the dazzling red light of the Stunning Spell.

She leaped out of the bed and ran towards the wizard, who was still watching her in silence.

"Severus!"

He nodded gravely.

"Where is my son? What happened to him?" she asked, seizing his arms feverishly.

His voice was deep and composed, not unlike black velvet. "He is gone, Lily. The war is over."

Her knees buckled in shock. Her son... Her baby... He could not be... That must be an error. Voldemort's horrid laughter resonated in her ears. She felt as though her body was speared by a sharp pain, and her chest was imprisoned in an inflexible metallic vice that cut off her breath before she sank into obscurity. *It was over.*

When she regained consciousness, she realized she had been laid down on the bed again, and Severus' hands were stroking her face and hair, wiping away the tears that were uncontrollably running from her eyes. She sobbed silently in his arms for what seemed to be an eternity.

"James is alive," he whispered calmly.

She felt a small quiver of relief. *Was it possible?* She raised her blurred gaze to look at him. His face was earnest and almost expressionless, but there was an odd glint in his eyes she had never noticed before. It made her shudder.

"Where is he? Can I see him?"

He nodded again and gave her his arm. She followed him uneasily to the long corridor bordered with old portraits of pretentious blond aristocrats, her view obscured with tears.

Snape lifted his wand to open a massive door which revealed a magnificent hall. A rich cacophony of voices hit Lily's ears. The huge room was lit by a cloud of flying lanterns of various colours and contained a multitude of little tables the guests were hanging around. It was a celebration. In spite of her distress, Lily had the clear feeling it had a connection with the end of the war. This could only mean they were in one of the Death Eaters' houses. If only she were wrong.

As they entered, several faces turned in their direction. Nearly all of them were familiar. A tall wizard, equipped with a walking stick decorated by a finely wrought silver snake, forced his way to them. He had a haughty face framed by long silver-blond hair and was wearing an expensive dark robe. Lucius Malfoy. He granted her a scornful look before turning to Snape.

"There you are, Severus! They finished about an hour ago. Would you like to come and see?"

Snape merely smiled in response and followed Malfoy into the crowd, dragging Lily behind him. She saw where they were taking her, and all the blood left her face. A narrow cage was hovering in the middle of the hall, encircled by a dozen of inebriated Death Eaters. A cage in which a beautiful stag and a large black dog were crouching.

"James! Sirius!" she cried, ignoring the laughter that assailed her from every side. The two Animagi instantly extended their heads towards her, both displaying apprehension and concern. She leaned forward, but was immediately stopped by Severus' arm, which wrapped around her waist. His other hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back. She gasped in indignation, as he bent down and kissed her dark red locks, his lips slowly descending on her neck. There was another explosion of laughter, and Snape sneered at the stag, who was trying to thrust against the bars of his tiny prison, while the dog was growling furiously. A brunette she recognised as Bellatrix Black laughed with such a frantic joy that she spilled her wine on Narcissa Malfoy's exquisite turquoise gown.

"Come," Snape said quietly, his face still buried in her hair. Lily could feel his erect member pressing against her back. Livid with rage, she tried to break his embrace and to throw herself to the cage. He tossed her up over his shoulder without a word and walked out of the hall, acclaimed on his passage by exhilarated guests.

Once back in the room she had woken up in, he put her softly on her feet after locking the door with his wand. She withdrew from him with an angry glare.

"What the hell are you doing?" she yelled. "How dare you? How dare you treat them in such a way?"

"I believe it's the only thing I owe to them," he replied impassively, propping himself against the table with the same puzzling expression as before. It was almost a smile, but a repressed one.

"What have you done to them?"

"We used a curse to keep them in their Animagus form. One of my own invention actually."

She could distinctly hear the mockery under his modest tone.

"Release them right now!"

"We most certainly will in a week or two. It depends on the two of them."

"What do you mean?"

She could not let them be harmed. It was not imaginable.

"You will discover soon enough."

"Severus!" She seized his shoulders again, but let go of them instantaneously as she saw his prominent erection. She gulped nervously and raised her eyes. "What are you waiting for to let them out?"

He nonchalantly adjusted his robe where she had creased it. "The Marauders Games."

"The *what?*"

"The show our Animagi friends and the werewolf are starring in. They will be... unleashed on this occasion."

He explained, as she stared at him in confusion: "There is an interdiction on feeding them. It is a test for their reputed Gryffindor friendship; I've always suspected Black might have something of a Slytherin in him when he is in need. When the experience is over, we'll submit the werewolf to a similar test. Perhaps he will reveal himself as more human than he seems to be."

Lily had to gather all of the self-control she possessed not to pass out again. It was a horrifying nightmare, nothing more.

"Severus," she said in a voice she desperately tried to make firm, "don't do such a thing. Remember, James saved your life."

The muscles of Snape's face contracted convulsively. But within a few seconds, he disguised his anger with indifference.

"He saved my life because he was afraid of being expelled," he claimed. "He did his best to make my life unbearable during our school years. As to Black..."

"I beg you, Severus. Don't. I'll do anything you wish. Just spare them."

He glanced at her with a mild interest. "That's very kind of you, Lily. But although I am immensely tempted by your offer, I'm afraid they are not to be spared."

Rage began to overwhelm her in spite of her terror. "Then I want to be locked in that cage as well. I will starve with them."

"No."

"Then what? What do you intend to do with me? Submit me to the Unforgivables?"

"You have a debt of your own to pay." He pointed at the mirror next to the fireplace. When she saw her reflection, her heart froze. In her grief, she had not noticed the gauzy red nightgown she was wearing, nor the... leather collar. Comprehension dawned upon her. She lifted her hand to touch it. No doubt it had been ensorcelled to prevent her from leaving the place. Snape's reflection appeared behind hers.

"You owe me ten years of suffering. Of unrequited love. Of the attentions you didn't care about. You had the impudence to marry Potter despite the fact it was I who made you discover our world. It is time I took back what is mine."

His hands cupped Lily's arms. The contact made her tremble with revulsion.

"You have never loved me," she stated coldly. "This is not love, it is vengeance."

"Think as you like."

"What is the service Voldemort has rewarded you for?"

There was a brief silence. His grip tightened. "None of your concern. And don't say the Dark Lord's name."

"Then you should know I'm not going to take a single one of your orders. You will have to use Imperius or Cruciatius."

Strangely, his fingers relaxed their hold, and his voice sounded calm again. "That would be humiliating for both of us. You know I wouldn't harm you, Lily."

His hands slid over her hips and continued up to her breasts. She let her fury explode. She tried to hit him, to kick him, to do anything to avoid the hands of the hateful man she had once trusted. Snape caught her wrists and held her at some distance from him. She struggled for long minutes before her weary body collapsed in exhaustion and frustration. Then he positioned her on the bed with a surprising tenderness and made her nightgown vanish with a flick of his wand. She closed her eyes, praying for a blackout, or better, for a quick death. Even if she did not die of the humiliation she was going to endure, there was nothing left in the world she should live for. Her husband and her dearest friend were to be killed in the most inhumane way possible, and she had been given as a slave to Snape, who was directing the whole thing. Her son... She was ashamed to have survived to the dreadful news.

Before she could pull away, she felt the touch of his bare skin against her own. His hands were sliding on her body, stroking her in smooth waves, whilst his lips were leaving light kisses on their way down her face and neck. She attempted to push him away once more, but he stilled her. The sinister Dark Mark flashed on his arm, and she flinched.

"Get used to it," he whispered.

His head was slowly moving down her torso to linger near her groin. Lily could only try to strengthen her mind to make it resist the waves of arousal that were beginning to pump through her veins. Never had she felt so humiliated. She kept repeating to herself that it was only one of the natural reactions of her body she could not control. It was a manipulation designed to make her admit she had desired it and make her feel guilty.

Her reason was still trying to fortify her mind when a muffled cry escaped her lips, drowning her mental barriers in a savage surge of pleasure. She was vaguely aware of Severus' hands fondling her arms, breasts and hips again, as he softly penetrated her. His lips swooped down on hers in a hungry kiss, which seemed to last hours, and a new avalanche of pleasure rolled over her body. The sweet nothingness swept her pain away for a while.

When her daze dispersed, she was lying in Severus' tight embrace under the silver blankets. He was stroking her hair, his possessive black eyes studying her face.

When he noticed she had recovered, he gave her a kiss on the forehead and pulled her closer to his chest before closing his eyes with a murmur: "Sleep."

Lily fought back the tears that were burning her eyes, trying to repress her anger and shame. She could not permit herself to be drawn into depression and self-pity, nor to lose her self-esteem. She had to save James and Sirius. She had to put aside her distress and think.

It was impossible to release the two Animagi and remove her collar without a wand. She was certain hers had been destroyed, given the circumstances, but she would use Snape's. The war was not over as long as Dumbledore was alive. The day before Voldemort's attack, she had received news that he had attended the most recent meeting of the Order. Hogwarts still was a safe place. They would continue fighting until they have had avenged...

She lay still, waiting for Severus' respiration to become slow and regular. When she was sure he was asleep, she attempted to free herself imperceptibly from his embrace. After several minutes of discreet wriggling, she managed to slip out of his arms. Just as she was going to steal away, she felt a painful grip on her wrist.

"You cannot have my wand, Lily," he said placidly, pulling her back. "And you cannot take your collar off. I'm the only one who knows the right incantation. Be a good girl and sleep."

She spent the rest of that sleepless night mourning for her son.

The following morning, Lily simulated slumber, waiting for Severus to leave. As she suspected, he did not lock the door. She hung on a moment before jumping swiftly from the bed. She wanted to go to the hall, to comfort James and Sirius and assure them she would find a way to free them. Her red nightgown was folded on the chair. She put it on and looked around the room to find another piece of clothing that would make her less visible. There was only Snape's black cloak he had left on the armchair. She pulled it on as well and walked into the corridor.

There were still crowds in the hall the celebration had lasted all night. She got hastily through the huge room without looking around. Fortunately, no one was paying attention to the imprisoned Animagi. She leaned forward and passed her hand through the bars to stroke the stag's head, then the dog's. Both of them were looking at her tenderly.

"I promise we'll leave this place," she whispered. "We'll find Dumbledore. Nothing is lo--"

"Step aside, Mudblood!" She was brutally pushed back with Malfoy's cane. "You are not allowed to talk to the other prisoners," the snob declared haughtily. "Crabbe, Goyle, could you drag the Mudblood back to Severus' room?"

She was seized by two enormous Death Eaters with rude and slightly dumb faces. At this instant, Snape emerged from the crowd.

"Thank you, I'll take her myself. Keep your hands away from her, Crabbe. KEEP YOUR HANDS AWAY, OR I WILL CURSE THEM OFF!"

"But... I was wondering..." mumbled the latter. "You've got the best slave... So maybe... you could..."

"No, I could not. Get out of my way!"

Malfoy watched the two troll-like colossuses retreat.

"They are harmless, Severus."

"Then how on earth did they manage to get their Dark Marks?" snarled Snape, seizing Lily's arms himself.

"They are stupid and evil, and therefore useful." He pointed at Lily with his cane. "Why don't you give her restraints, Severus? She seems to have discipline problems."

"Much more amusing this way," Snape replied laconically. "Excuse me for a while."

He turned his head to the cage and had a slight smile. "You too, Potter, Black."

Then he hauled the furious Lily from the hall, where Malfoy was shaking in a fit of silent laughter, covering his mouth with a lacy white handkerchief.

When he had closed the door, he looked at Lily intently, and she felt her vision blur. He had to have mastered Legilimency, she realized suddenly. Her troubling assumption was confirmed, as he said:

"Dumbledore is dead. We attacked the Order during their last meeting, and the Dark Lord killed him in a duel. All the members were made prisoners. It was we who sent you the report of the meeting. Forget your dreams about escaping to Hogwarts. There is no way you can break out: the collar won't let you go any further than to the hall. And there is nothing you can do to save the others."

The pain was so piercing that she had the feeling of being torn from inside. The casual way he was speaking of Dumbledore's death revolted her more than anything she had yet borne.

"What is intended for them?"

"They have been given to my colleagues. Some of them Moody, Aberforth, McGonagall will be executed after the Marauders Games."

She collapsed on the chair. This was too much.

"Severus... you know there is nothing I wouldn't do to make you... change your mind."

Snape's face remained impassive. "What *can* you do, Lily? What can you give me? You can certainly give me your consent, but as you could see, I don't need it to make us both enjoy our time."

"I do not *enjoy* it!" she protested, indignant.

He smirked. "Indeed? Well, I'll do my best to satisfy you the next time."

"Severus, do it for me. I beg you!"

"Oh, Lily, do you really take me for a mawkish Gryffindor?"

It was useless.

To hell with her self-esteem. She threw herself at his feet. "I've lost my son, Severus! I couldn't bear it if they were to be harmed."

Suddenly, his gaze hardened. "It is your fault. You should have never joined Potter," he growled darkly.

The door closed with a loud crash. This time, he locked it.

When Snape returned to the room that evening, he behaved as if nothing had happened. He glanced at the table containing three full trays sent by the house-elves the meals had gone cold hours ago then at Lily, who was lying on the bed, her face averted.

"That won't do," he admonished. "If you try to starve yourself, I will have to administer nutritive potions. Believe me, Lucius' menu is far better."

"I'm afraid I've lost my appetite," she replied coldly. She could not look at him.

He nodded and exited. A moment later, he was back with a violet phial.

"Will you take it, or would you prefer me to bind you?" he asked in his usual silky voice. It drove Lily mad. Nonetheless, she took the potion. There was no point in fighting him. She had to persuade him.

He put the empty phial on the night table and took her in his arms. She felt his hands stroking her again. His unnatural gentleness had something monstrous in it, and Lily suppressed a shiver of disgust. Reluctantly, she put her arms around his neck. He let out a little grunt of surprise and looked in her eyes. But his hesitation did not last more than a few seconds; he promptly leaned forward and kissed her eagerly. Determined to give him pleasure, she pushed him on his back and parted his robes and shirt to explore his body with her lips. He moaned and grabbed her hair as she unfastened his trousers, took his hard member in her hand and lowered her head to take him between her lips. Quickly, he came into her mouth, and she fought her nausea to swallow his seed.

While Severus was still gasping on his back, Lily took her nightgown off. It was the right thing to do. His caresses were much fiercer than the night before, but he did not forget about her own pleasure. She spared no effort to reciprocate all of his attentions, and both of them were soon writhing in orgasm.

Once they had recovered, Snape pulled the blankets over them and embraced her tightly.

"Thank you, Lily," he whispered in her ear. "You have no idea for how long I've dreamt of this night."

She kept silence for a moment.

"Then would you do me a favour, Severus?"

"Of course. Tomorrow morning, I'll tell the elves to bring you some decent clothes and jewellery. You deserve nothing but the best."

Her hurt expression made him smile.

"Sleep, my love."

After the second sleepless night, Lily began to succumb to the panic. It could not continue this way.

"Severus."

"Mmm?"

"I'll do anything if you don't condemn my husband--"

"For Merlin's sake, Lily, don't talk of Potter to me! It's not what I brought you here for. Besides, you don't have a husband."

However much he objected, he seemed to enjoy her pleas. *Why did it not work?*

He finished getting dressed and turned to face her.

"Do you want me to tell them exactly what you did to me last night?"

He could not mean that. She whimpered quietly.

"Then stop bothering me."

Bothering him!

He headed for the door. "I haven't forgotten my promise. You can also enter the hall once a day, provided you talk to no one."

"And what am I supposed to do the rest of the time?" she asked angrily.

"Anything you like. Just don't leave the room."

In the evening, Severus did not seem surprised to find another three full trays on the table, set next to an untouched wooden chest and an equally untouched little box. He had to bind Lily to the bed to make her swallow her nutritive potion and a brew destined to plunge her in a dreamless sleep. However, the conversation she had heard during the day haunted her even in her slumber.

That morning, agitated voices coming from one of the doors left ajar in the corridor had drawn her attention while she had been going to the hall.

"... and what do you expect me to do about it, Lucius?"

"Give them a stimulating potion, Severus. Nothing more."

"Make them aggressive by magic? Where is the fun in that? It should happen in a natural way; otherwise, it was useless to starve them."

"You misunderstand me. The Dark Lord wishes Potter and Black to fight at the full moon so that we can feed them. I mean, whatever remains of them to the werewolf immediately. There are four days left. Can anyone guarantee that Black will get hungry enough by then?"

"Be that as it may," Rookwood commented lazily, "I guess that Potter will sacrifice himself as a perfect altruist Gryffindor. And Black will take a little bite, then launch into heart-breaking moaning."

"And that would be much more entertaining than a fight, if you ask me," grumbled Snape. "The contrary would be artificial."

"I know, Severus," said Malfoy, "but a stimulant would only exacerbate their hunger. Believe me, it WILL be entertaining."

"So much trouble," drawled Dolohov. "If I were you, I would simply lock them up with a dozen Bludgers."

"We are not such barbarians, Antonin."

"Ha ha ha!"

"Shut up, Goyle."

Lily had barely been able to reach her room; her throat was completely dry, her legs weak and trembling. When she had regained control of herself, the door had already been locked.

Lily woke up alone. At first, she had the impulse to run to Harry's room and check he was well. Then the reality of the last three days overcame her, and she fell back on the pillows with her face in her hands. She was naked and had a deep bite mark on her shoulder. She was rather grateful Severus had taken her while she was unconscious. As she rose, she felt a piercing headache and a severe pain in her abdomen. None of it mattered.

While cleaning herself in the bathroom, she saw her hands were shaking unceasingly. Anxiety was submerging her, but she had to master herself.

After searching inside the chest, Lily realized that all the clothes she had been given were red. Was it to mark her as a Gryffindor? She put on a robe the only long piece of clothing available and draped herself in Snape's black cloak again. She did not open the smaller box.

Lily could almost believe the celebration in the hall was never intended to stop. On the contrary, it had become more unbridled: several couples had undressed and were lying on the floor in pools of wine. As Lily had suspected, no one was wearing red... except one familiar female figure. It was Dorcas Meadowes. She had a large blue bruise on her face, and her neck was encircled by a metallic collar, to which a chain was attached. She glanced at Lily sadly before being violently dragged away by Mulciber. It hurt Lily as much as the sight of James and Sirius lying half-conscious in their cage with wide empty eyes. Yet they lifted their heads in her direction as soon as she came closer.

At that instant, she felt an intense stare fixed on her back. She turned her head and saw Wormtail, who was pressing his back to the wall. His face was very pale, but he did not lower his eyes. After a minute of hesitation, he made a step towards her. Then he saw Snape entering the hall in Malfoy's company, and his face blanched completely white. He changed his direction abruptly and lost himself in the small crowd surrounding one of the tables.

"I see your pet is already in love with you," Malfoy mocked. "When you're absent, she wears your robes to feel you close to her, isn't it so?"

"I like to think so," Snape replied softly. "If you have satisfied your need to see these... friends of yours, my love, go back to your room."

Her imploring gaze had no effect on him. "Now."

The next days brought no change: Snape remained adamant. When all hope had left Lily, she tried to beg him for a more humane death for the Marauders.

"Would you prefer them to be killed with Bludgers?" he asked coolly.

Enraged, she threw a full tray at him, then expressed all the disgust and contempt he elicited in her. He listened with a stony face, only his eyes grew darker with every sentence. He hissed incantations to repair the dishes and to clean the carpet and left. In the evening, he was affectionate again.

Her anxiety was turning into depression.

He continued to make her drink the two potions. She was unconscious every time he took advantage of her. Maybe he knew his treacherous caresses would make her sick.

The day of the full moon, she woke up suffocating. The door was locked.

She would have given anything to be daily beaten like Dorcas, if only it could stop the slow torture she had been submitted to. Presently, she could understand that Snape's apparent gentleness and concessions were intended to weaken and destabilize her, to ruin her self-respect. How could the boy who had once been her best friend have become such a dark creature? How could she have proven herself so weak?

The hours passed in an excruciating silence. When she heard the spell opening the door, she felt paralyzed. Severus entered without a word. He pulled her unceremoniously up to her feet and led her out.

All of the Death Eaters were attending to the "show." They were wearing their best robes, as if invited to the theatre. Close to the wall, the red-dressed chained prisoners were aligned in a row. It was the entire Order. Some of them were to be executed in the next few hours. She envied them.

Unlike the others, Snape thrust her into an armchair next to him and mumbled a spell to tie her to her seat. Then he sat down himself.

"Some Firewhisky, Severus?" Avery gave him one of the two glasses he had taken from the tray held by a little house-elf with globular green eyes, and raised the other one. "To the Dark Lord's new world! The world of the pure-blood wizards! Would you join us, Narcissa?"

"With pleasure!" cooed the blond witch, proudly displaying her expensive green and silver gown. "But I'm not fond of Firewhisky. Would you mind, gentlemen, if I took some wine?"

Malfoy emerged from behind the armchairs and nearly stumbled over the house-elf, hidden behind his tray. "Oh, f...*damn!* DOBBY!"

"Dobby is so sorry, master, Dobby is a bad elf. Dobby is going to burn his nose with charcoal in the kitchen..."

"Out of my sight!" With a blow of his cane, he sent the little creature to the other side of the hall.

"Is everything ready, Cissy?" he asked, turning to his wife.

"I think so, darling."

"Then it is time I called the Dark Lord and..."

"I will bring him!" a hysterical female voice interrupted. "Leave it to me! I'll bring him!"

Lucius sighed, clearly annoyed. "Of course, Bella. Just don't hold the Dark Lord with your inane chatter. The effects of the potion will soon dissipate."

Lily did not hear the conversations around her. She was gazing at the cage where the two Animagi lay motionless. Cold sweat was trickling all over her body.

When the light was reduced and Malfoy stepped out to greet Voldemort, her heart began to beat frantically in her chest, and she succumbed to the vertiginous darkness that was slowly covering her eyes.

"*Rennervate*," whispered the silky voice by her ear.

Curse you, Severus.

With an exaggerated formality, Malfoy announced the beginning of the "Marauders Games" and seated himself comfortably beside Narcissa. At his signal, a voice presented the same spell as the one Snape had used to revive Lily.

The Animagi returned to consciousness with a jerk. The cage was so small that the stag could only rise on his front knees, and he was always in contact with the dog. The potion they had been given had accelerated their blood circulation and intoxicated their minds, already driven insane with hunger. Several Death Eaters cried out in anticipation as the dog bristled with a growl. Lily looked helplessly at Severus, but he was sipping his Firewhisky and paid her no attention.

And then it happened. Padfoot jumped at the stag. Excited cries and encouragements resounded from every part of the room as he sank his teeth into his thigh. Prongs drew himself up as much as the size of the cage allowed him and gave a violent blow to the dog's flank, flinging him against the bars. But Padfoot was too frenzied to stop. He threw himself on his adversary again, this time biting his throat, drawing blood. Numbed with pain, Prongs made desperate, febrile attempts to shake the dog down. Padfoot's head hit the bars again. However, the taste of the blood had strengthened him, blinded him. In a single leap, he was back on the stag, tearing through his flesh with his fangs.

Lily could not move. She could not take her eyes off the fighting Animagi, nor hear the exclamations and laughter of the Death Eaters, nor feel the tears running profusely down her cheeks. Her lips were parted in a voiceless scream; her breath was cut in her chest. She saw the stag shiver, covered in blood, and exhale under the dog's teeth, his huge velvet eyes distant and unfocused. Padfoot continued to gnaw at his wounds until the bigger animal stopped moving. Then the realization seemed to dawn on him. He stepped back feebly and pressed himself against the bars. A long agonizing howl rose from his throat, freezing the blood in Lily's veins.

"That was quick," complained Malfoy to Snape.

"I told you it would be, Lucius."

"I hope the werewolf will be better. Please, go ahead, Severus."

Snape waved his wand to apply the counter-spell to the curse that imprisoned the Animagi in their animal form.

"Now!"

Both of them cast the Animagus reversal spell, and the two prisoners were slowly transformed into humans. James' mutilated body lay in a puddle of blood, whereas Sirius was cowering against the bars. His handsome face was bruised and emaciated. Without a single look at the public surrounding them, he leaned on James' corpse and embraced it fiercely.

One of the doors opened, and a masked Death Eater entered, following the cage he was levitating in front of him a cage with a furious, famished werewolf. Remus. It was now obvious why the Animagi had been returned to their original form: werewolves attacked only the humans. No spell had been cast upon Sirius to prevent him from transforming into an animal again, as it was evident he would not abandon James. Everything had been calculated meticulously.

Sirius raised his head and glanced at the creature jerking in the approaching cage. His piercing grey eyes framed by dishevelled dark locks were the last thing Lily saw before the image vanished and the world dissolved in oblivion.

Voices and images were undulating in an indistinct brouhaha. A stag was perishing under the teeth of a large black dog, and rivers of blood were streaming all around. Sinister laughter was reverberating off the walls as the bright red light hit her. A little dark-haired boy was watching her in a tree's shadow. He rolled up his sleeve to uncover his Dark Mark. The black snake rose from the skull carved in his arm and shot up at her.

"Shhh. I'm here, Lily. No one can harm you."

A hand was gently stroking her face. Soothing and comforting.

"James..."

The hand withdrew brusquely.

"... and I suggest that you should do your very best to cure her, Madam Pomfrey."

"And if you try to smuggle poison to her, as you did to Mrs Longbottom... well, Lupin might be dead, but we still have Greyback. And he is quite enthusiastic about helping us dispose of the Order members. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Mr Rookwood."

"Good. Bring your potions here."

Soft steps on the carpet. Creaking of the door.

"Where is he exactly, Lucius?"

"He is inspecting his new manor."

"His new manor? He was given a manor?"

"Yes, one of the ancient Black domains."

"Bloody hell, Lucius, that's completely unfair! The Dark Lord never gives such things to any of his followers!"

"We wouldn't have won the war without Snape, Augustus."

"I mean, he managed to overhear the prophecy, but it is Pettigrew who told us of Potter's hiding place. And he was not rewarded for that."

"In fact, Pettigrew wasn't going to tell. He pretended it was Black they had chosen as their Secret-Keeper. But Severus had suspicions..."

"How?"

"Pettigrew is a lamentable Occlumens. However, he is resistant to Imperius and to Veritaserum. Eventually, Severus lost patience, and together we dragged Pettigrew to Spinner's End. There, he tortured him the whole night, and Pettigrew ended up telling. All in all, he is lucky to be still alive."

"That's why he runs away like a moron whenever he sees Severus?"

"Exactly. Besides, Severus had a kind of tantrum last week. He didn't tell me what the reason was, but he relieved himself by sending a couple of Cruciatus curses at Pettigrew."

"Hmmm. I wondered why the fool was stuttering all evening."

"But no one knows about the night at Spinner's End except the Dark Lord, Augustus. At least for now."

"I see. I'd never think Severus would take so much trouble for a Mudblood."

"Technically, he took that trouble out of his loyalty to the Dark Lord and his hatred for Potter and Black. But otherwise, you're right."

"I hope she is worth it."

"I'd prefer the manor."

"Hey look, she is moving. She might have heard."

"Severus can Obliviate her later, if he likes. But we have to stay here until Pomfrey does her job."

"Such a loyal friend you are, Lucius."

"Well, don't test my loyalty by locking yourself in a cage with me. I may surprise you."

Laughter.

"... You know you can stay here as long as you need, Severus."

"Thank you, Lucius. I'll wait until her fever subsides, so that we can Disapparate safely."

"Do you like it there?"

"It's quite decent. As soon as you are free from your mundane affairs, come for a drink."

"I certainly will. While we are at it, I wanted to invite you to Bella's wedding."

"Has she finally agreed to marry Lestranger?"

"Oh yes. Narcissa managed to explain to her she couldn't have the Dark Lord."

"I'm glad for you. You'll get rid of her after all these months."

"Yes. I wouldn't tolerate that lunatic in my house if my wife weren't on such good terms with her. I can't fathom out why she is."

"Forget it."

"But do me a favour, Severus. Don't bring the Mudblood with you."

"I don't like the idea of leaving her alone, but I guess I'll do it for you. And I don't want Bella to harm her."

Silence.

"Lucius."

"Yes?"

"I intend to legalize the children I'll have with Lily."

"That's not a problem."

"Would you agree to be their godfather?"

"Oh... err... of course I would, Severus. Do you give her... some potions?"

"I haven't yet. But I will."

A hand was gently stroking her face again. It took some time for her to focus on the familiar room, to recall where she was. She remembered nothing of the previous gloomy days. She guessed it mattered little. Despite the heat spreading in her whole body, she felt cold. And weak, so weak.

Snape's fingers were lightly caressing her forehead and cheeks. He was speaking to her in a soft, calming tone.

"Rest, my Lily. Everything will be fine. Nothing bad can happen to you when you're with me. When you feel better, we'll leave to my manor. You will love it. You will have the entire Northern Wing to your disposal. There is a library which I'm sure will please you. As soon as you recover completely, you can help me brew. Next year, when the necessary arrangements have been made, we'll go to Hogwarts, of which I've been named Headmaster. I know how much you have loved this school. The Dark Lord's reforms will improve it even further. You'll see, all will be well. Now rest, my love."

He left a kiss on her forehead, then on her cheeks and lips, and stood up.

"Severus?"

He turned to look at her.

"You told me I owed you ten years of suffering. Will you release me after the time is over?"

He shook his head. "In ten years, you will not want to leave, Lily. I assure you."

His black cloak billowed behind him as he disappeared in the shadow.

At Black Manor

Chapter 2 of 5

Lily lives with her captor at Black Manor, suffering, but unwilling to give in.

Note: Blue Artemis, thank you so much for the beta!

The picture "Winter Night" I used in this chapter was created by the awesome Lilyhbp.

"What do you think you're doing, gentlemen?"

James and Sirius froze, then quickly put their wands into their pockets. The corpulent policeman was approaching them hastily, wiping the sweat off his forehead. He drew himself up in front of them in a menacing posture.

"No fireworks in the park! It's written on the placard! No fireworks in the park!"

Lily suppressed a chuckle. To conceal her wide smile, she bent over the pram and checked that Harry was still carefully wrapped in a little duvet. Remus was standing a few steps further, watching them with a friendly indulgence, as though he were wondering how they would settle the conflict this time.

"Strictly speaking, there were no fireworks," Sirius objected with a feigned gravity. "Were there, Prongs?"

"Of course not!" cried James, simulating indignation. "It was just a bunch of sparks! In Latin, it's called *asciscin*!"

"You fancy yourself very funny, don't you?" the policeman barked. "Well, I won't need Latin to teach you a good lesson! Your papers!"

Sirius made a confused grimace. "Papers? I have only a piece of parchment with me. Would it be enough?"

"You don't seem to believe us, sir," James added amiably, taking his wand out. "But I assure you, we just made a few sparks! Let me show you. One, two, three!"

A bundle of blue sparks flew from his wand at the very nose of the obese man, who started. With a burst of laughter, the two young men ran to hide themselves behind a row of trees, leaving Lily and Remus somewhat scandalized, but unable to hide their amusement there to appease the policeman.

Lily had never been so happy. She tilted her head back, looking at the pure sky. The wind was rustling in the treetops, and yellow and red leaves were falling in a multicolored rain, forming a soft carpet at their feet. They seemed almost white in the sunshine. Like snow.

She blinked. There were no trees. She was staring at the pale winter night sky. The wind was howling in the high vaults of the galleries surrounding the court. Large snowflakes were whirling around her in a frenzied dance, and she had the impression that each one of them was biting her skin. She fastened her airy red robe, but made no other movement. In some way, the pain was liberating. It purified her.

Blankly, she looked at the spacious surface of the court, buried under deep layers of snow. How would it be to plunge into one of the snowdrifts, like in a soft bed, and sleep forever, with no one around but the singing wind? White, the colour of the innocence of the lily flower. Could the snow purge her spirit after all she had suffered?

Her bare feet stepped on the snow. Strange, she could believe she was walking on red-hot charcoal. Were the fire and the ice made of the same essence, after all? Or perhaps her plea had just been answered, and the white substance had been enchanted to purify her. She saw her destination: there, the soft silky drift. She fell rather than dropped on the mound of snow. The sensation was torturing, but she had to withstand it. It was her punishment for... something she had done. Or had not done. She could not tell at this moment. She was so tired.

At last, the pain was slowly vanishing. She had been forgiven. The wind was singing a quiet lullaby. She smiled lightly, succumbing to the peaceful drowse.

Suddenly, two strong arms yanked her from her refuge. They draped a cloak over her and then carried her away from the wind, from the snowy symphony. She wanted to protest, but had no force to do so.

□

After a while, she was laid under a pile of blankets. To her astonishment, she was shivering. A warm body entered in contact with hers. Instinctively, she leaned into the embrace and almost sighed in relief. Feeling gentle kisses on her hair, she opened her eyes, only to see the Dark Mark flash in front of her face. Promptly, she closed them again, repressing her tears.

The first thing Lily remembered after Apparating to Black Manor in Severus' arms was the vibration of magic around her neck. Her collar had been removed, and Snape's wand was swishing in the air in a series of complicated spells. She was now wearing a jade on a delicate silver chain.

"Much better," he had smiled. "It matches exactly your eye colour. You can go anywhere in the house, including the gardens. But first, get some rest."

As soon as Lily had recovered, she left her quarters to walk in the other parts of the manor. Incapable, with her mind lost in reverie, of noticing anything she was seeing, she was wandering in the rooms and the corridors like a red ghost. It seemed she had been condemned to wear red until the end of her days. Naturally, Severus had not failed to assure her she was allowed to wear nothing when they were alone. Her life was now about paying for her crimes. For being a Gryffindor, for being a Muggle-born. For having given birth to a child with James' traits.

Harry... She had constantly the feeling she could hear her baby's sweet laughter from the corners of the corridors. Sometimes, there were echoes of James' calls or of Remus' and Sirius' exclamations. She followed the source of the voices, unable to reach it, then always found herself in unknown chambers, confused and frustrated. Once, she had glimpsed a little knife put on a writing table. It was used to cut parchment. She had grasped it febrilely, but at the same moment, it had flown from her hand. A little female house-elf was standing behind her, an embarrassed look on her face. She had stuttered out excuses, explaining that she had been commanded to follow Lily everywhere in order to prevent her from harming herself.

There were hardly any nights when she did not suffer from nightmares. Regularly, she woke up in a cold sweat, her mind full of the visions of a black dog killing a stag in a cage flooded with blood. Then Severus' arms closed around her and pulled her back on the pillows. He would stroke her until she fell asleep again.

Two weeks after their arrival, he had left her alone all day ("I'm sorry, my sweet, I have to go to Lestranger's wedding. I'm sure you wouldn't enjoy it. Don't worry, I'll be back in the morning."). That night, she had woken up shuddering. In her dream, she had been encircled by a crowd of masked dark silhouettes, with the Dark Lord laughing demonically. Wrapped in a blanket, she had lain awake until the sunrise. Despite her relief to have avoided Snape's company for once, she felt helpless without him. It was a devastating feeling.

The voices were getting closer, more distinct than usual. As Lily followed them, they changed fluidly. It was no longer the Marauders' call, but persistent cries. She quickened her pace, nearly running after the wailing creatures. They were yelling, no, screaming with all the force of their lungs, as if submitted to Cruciatius. She spotted the door the sounds were coming from and burst inside, panting for breath.

Severus raised his head from the voluminous book he was consulting, and which was tirelessly trying to close under his hands. He snapped it shut, and the screams stopped immediately.

"Lily," he breathed, visibly pleased.

She sighed and dropped on the nearest couch, exhausted. She heard his robes billow in the air as he approached to sit beside her. Suddenly, she felt she could not take it any more.

"I can't live like this, Severus," she confessed, much to her own surprise.

He pulled her on his lap, cradling her like a child. She waited for words of comfort, but none came.

"Please, let me die," she muttered against his shoulder.

"You know I won't."

She sighed again. "I'm going mad." *Could he not see it?*

"No, Lily, it's just a difficult period for you. It's inevitable, but it will pass. You will be happy again."

This was a blasphemy. A particularly impertinent one.

"I'll make sure you will," he affirmed. "I'll protect you. I'll give you everything you want. All you have to do is to give in to me."

In other words, she had to try to love him in spite of the fact that he had engineered her husband's and her friends' death and that he served as her son's murderer. If she were ever to do so, she would deserve to be publicly lapidated, and her name to be forever struck out from history.

Snape looked at her attentively. "That's not what I am trying to say, my love. You must not feel ashamed to accept your fate. It's the only reasonable thing to do."

Who cared about being "reasonable?"

"How can I accept it if you treat me like an object?" she asked coldly. "Like some kind of property."

"But you *are* my property, Lily," he replied gently, as though he were explaining an elementary spell to a child. "You always were. You just didn't know it."

Had she not been so desperate, she would have wondered how it was possible for a man to be so twisted.

"I love you, Lily," he whispered, clasping her in his arms. "More than you can imagine. I love your name. So pure and melodious. I love your skin. It's soft and fair like your entire personality. I love your fragrant hair, your lovely lips, your eyes. So Slytherinesque by their colour, so Gryffindorish by their expression. So unadapted to Occlumency. You can't know how intoxicating their innocence is."

No, but the pressure she could feel against her thigh made it quite clear. His hand moved over her chest. Unwilling to listen to a litany about how arousing the other parts of her body were, Lily tried to lift herself, and her hand came across something solid in the folds of his robe. His wand. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized it could be her chance to put an end to her pitiful situation.

In a quick, feverish movement, she took it out of his pocket and cast the Full Body-Bind Curse nonverbally. Nothing happened. Snape's hand did not stop fondling her breasts, and he looked at her with an expression which resembled curiosity. She tried again, with more energy and insistence, and felt a strange pulsation around her neck. Her necklace! It had been enchanted both to restrain her magic and to prevent her from escaping from the manor.

Severus nodded. "Yes. It's a pity you were taking me for a fool."

He put his wand back into his pocket and embraced her as if nothing had happened. She wanted to cry in frustration.

"There were times when you admired my magic," she reminded him with sadness, her head on his shoulder again. "And not my body."

"True," he admitted. "But you can't use magic any more. It's for your own sake, my love. You are a M... Muggle-born."

Why did it still hurt?

"I can't change your social status," he stated. "It would have been different if you had married me. But you didn't."

Of course. Everything was her fault.

"What would your precious Mafloy and your dearest Death Eaters say if you married a Mudblood?" she asked sarcastically.

The thought seemed to amuse him. "They would be a bit repulsed, I guess. But despite the nonsense the Order used to disseminate about us, we stand by each other. If it can benefit us, we are able to tolerate certain divergences from the rules. And Lucius is my best friend."

"Why?" The friendship between two wizards of such different origins and characters though she was beginning to doubt they were really that different was too bizarre not to arouse curiosity.

"That's an interesting question. He has always supported me. He introduced me to the Dark Lord, who appreciated my abilities for what they were and gave me the chance to prove myself. He didn't spurn my services, like Dumbledore did. Thanks to Lucius, I could develop my knowledge and gain access to power. He has also overlooked the fact I wasn't a pure-blood, which is not easy for a Mafloy. And he has never betrayed me."

Here they were again.

"He has even agreed to be the godfather of our children," he added contentedly.

"*What?*" She was not expecting this. *Children? Their children?*

No, she could not take it any more. She slid down from the couch and ran out. A moment later, screams resounded again, which meant he had returned to his book.

In her indignation, Lily was unaware of the direction she had taken, and she entered the little door leading to the kitchen without noticing the surprised group of house-elves, who rapidly abandoned their task. They seated her enthusiastically at a small table and offered her tea with sweets. She had eaten nothing since her capture, thus being forced to drink a glass of nutritive potion every evening, and at first, she wanted to decline. However, their radiant expressions touched her, and to not upset them, she took a small cup of tea with a biscuit. It was stunning how quickly she had forgotten the taste of the food. She found it insipid and could not help feeling sick. Nonetheless, she thanked the elves and promised them she would soon come again.

To her surprise, one of the female elves she had seen in the kitchen Apparated to her chambers in the evening. She had brought a tray with a light dinner and stayed to entertain Lily during her meal. She launched into a description of the different members of the House of Black and the way they treated their servants. The manor had at first been supposed to belong to Sirius, but had been inherited by Regulus when the elder son had fallen out with his family. It was the only thing Lily retained while eating her vegetable soup reluctantly. It made sense. She was sure Snape would never have set his eyes on such a residence, had it not been a part of Sirius' inheritance.

The elf returned in the morning, then at noon. Manifestly, Severus had been informed of her visit to the kitchen and had assumed it was a way to accustom her to the food again. He joined her in the evening. They dined in silence, with Lily trying to ignore his presence, his dark eyes boring into hers. No water had been offered to her, and the small amount of wine she had drunk went to her head. She could not tell when he had changed his place, but before she knew it, he was sitting beside her. He dipped his fingers in honey and rubbed her lips with the gold liquid before pulling her into a kiss. Passively, she submitted herself to him, as she did every night. He gently pulled her robe off her shoulders, pouring more honey on her torso, and laid her on the carpet to taste her sweetened skin. She succumbed to the pleasure his adept hands and lips were arousing in her, opening up to his touch. And she came... with James' name on her lips.

Severus' rage was almost tangible in the eruption of magic in the air. The small fire flickering in the hearth swelled dangerously, and the flames spread onto the curtains. But Lily barely noticed the accident. The ferocity of Severus' stare had paralyzed her. His mask of composure had slid off, and she saw the Death Eater's nature in all its monstrosity. His eyes, furious and merciless, were burning with a dark fire. His hands were clasping her arms with an inhuman force, his nails deeply sunk into her skin. It was the look of a murderous, despotic creature. Hypnotized by the sight, she gazed back, trembling with fear. It looked as though he were going to attack her, to strangle her to death. But he withdrew.

He rose, grasped his wand and extinguished the fire with an angry movement that made the curtains fall in shreds. Then he left. Lily pulled her robe around her and cuddled up against the wall, massaging her arms, where his nails had left bloody marks. The manor quaked in a rapid succession of intense shocks, and bright green light inundated the chambers. She curled up even more, but the silence set in again. It lasted all night.

In the morning, Lily came to the Eastern Wing, where she knew Snape lingered most of the time, brewing or working on new spells. She found him writing a letter in a smaller room. He looked up at her, and she saw he was already fully in control of himself.

"Good morning, Lily," he said casually. "I'm afraid the breakfast isn't ready yet. We'll have to wait a few moments. Meanwhile, you can read if you wish."

He pointed at the pile of books on the table. She sat down and watched him finish his letter, which he handed to an owl with a strict instruction, "To Malfoy Manor."

"Why should we wait?" she asked timidly.

He glanced at her and opened a large volume. "I've asked Lucius to lend me several elves until I get some new ones. They should be here in a half an hour."

Lily's heart sank. He had massacred the house-elves. All because of her absurd declaration. He knew it had not been intentional, but this had only increased his fury. She felt faintness.

"I'm... not hungry," she mumbled, standing up.

"Stay where you are."

She dropped on her chair again. They sat in silence until a loud crack resounded through the room, indicating the Apparition of a group of house-elves. Snape barely raised his eyes from the book.

"Clean the kitchen and prepare breakfast."

Lily forced herself to take a thin slice of bread with a gulp of tea, then ran away precipitously. She spent hours standing at the window in one of her chambers, watching the snow-covered hills and the frozen lake. She could see nothing of it.

Malfoy came later that evening. Lily heard his arrogant voice carrying from the largest hall. She looked over the doorstep and saw him sitting opposite Snape by the fireplace, his walking stick in one hand, a glass of Firewhisky in the other.

"The wizarding community needs dynamic reforms," he was saying importantly. "Once we have disposed of the Mudbloods, we'll have to scout out and arrest the blood traitors. My father has always claimed they are the most dangerous part of the society, and that Muggle-lover Dumbledore and the mess he created in the hierarchy are the best example of it. Father has prepared a complete and structured political program for the next year. If, with these preparations, he doesn't win the elections, it will be the greatest scandal in the Malfoy House since 1799. But I'm certain that toad Umbridge has not the slightest chance against him."

He took a sip of his drink and continued, "Honestly, the pure-blood families are no longer what they used to be. Look at the Blacks. I dare say Narcissa is the only respectable Black of her generation. Sirius was a renegade, Regulus was odd, Andromeda was a blood traitor and Bella is a degenerate. And the others? The Crabbes and the Goyleys are idiots, the Parkinsons are deranged, the Flints and the Bulstrodes are brutes, the Macmillans and the Weasleys are dunglickers. Fortunately, I don't have to count the Potters nor the Longbottoms any more. It makes almost the half of pure-bloods! Oh, and the Lestranges! The Lestranges, Severus! Such wimps! You should have seen the way Rodolphus was nodding at everything Bella said when she came to grant us her stupid advice!"

"You couldn't expect Bella's husband to be particularly virile, Lucius."

"I'm sick of them, Severus! Why do I have to have such relatives?"

Disgusted, Lily was going to pass by when Snape called her. She hesitated.

"Come in, Lily. You can listen to us here."

He was extending an arm. Feeling Malfoy's dismissive look on her, she obeyed and regretted it instantly, as Severus pulled her swiftly on his knees and ran his hands over her body. She wriggled, her embarrassed face as red as her robe. He could not do this. He had already had his revenge. He could have it again later, anytime. *But please, not in front of Malfoy!*

"What are you doing?" she whispered to him, but he put a finger on her lips.

"Shhh," he murmured in her ear before nibbling her earlobe lightly. "You were saying, Lucius?"

Malfoy snorted and changed the subject abruptly. "Ahem... So you do agree to organize the next party here?"

"Yes," Severus replied, leaving sucking kisses down Lily's neck while his hand was sliding to her center despite her attempts to stop it. "But don't expect me to install any fluffy Christmas decorations."

"Narcissa loves the little reindeers of fire," Malfoy commented dreamily, then shook his head as to wake up. "I mean, no problem."

"Excellent," Snape purred, more to Lily than to his friend. He was already fully aroused.

The scene was obviously starting to affect Lucius. He took another sip of Firewhisky, watching them curiously, his fingers kneading his walking stick.

"How are the potions going?" he asked with a conspiratorial wink.

Severus let out a throaty laughter and cupped her breasts through the light fabric. "Splendidly..."

"Stop it!" Lily protested in a whisper. For all response, he sank his teeth into her shoulder.

Malfoy closed his hands on his cane, visibly fighting the urge to touch himself.

"Hmm... Lucius, would you mind if I..."

"No, not at all."

Unhurriedly, Severus unfastened his trousers and pleased himself, ejaculating on the carpet. Panting heavily, he grinned at the fascinated Lucius. "Feel better now?"

"Merlin." Malfoy lifted himself uneasily in his armchair. "I think I'll go."

"Good night, Lucius."

He had molested her to *arouse Malfoy?* To *comfort* him? Incredulous, Lily watched the blond wizard reach for a branded leather pouch and take carefully a handful of Floo powder out of it, which he threw into the fireplace.

"You know," he said jokingly, turning once more to Snape, "you should think of sending some photos to the redaction of *The Insatiable Chimaera*. It would be even better with the collar. We could call it 'The new headmas--'"

"Just go, Lucius."

With a chuckle, Malfoy disappeared in the emerald flames.

Lily turned slowly to Severus. This was beyond all limits. Boiling with rage, she smacked him with all the force she could muster. To her fury, a lazy smile made his way across his face.

"At last."

He rose from his seat and dropped on the ground, pinning her beneath him. He took her quickly, forcefully, but took care to give her pleasure.

When it was over, she felt more dejected than before. The feeling was so intense that she had no force to cry. She stared at the high ceiling decorated with the emblems of the Black family, at the ornate font of their motto, *Toujours Pur*.

"Please, never do this again," she begged.

He stroked her lightly. "I won't."

They lay silently for a long time. She was starting to relax in his embrace and to plunge into slumber when he added into her ear, his voice barely louder than a whisper, "But don't you ever dare mention his name again."

The white surface of the lake was shining in the sunlight. In the Muggle world, the hills would be scaled by children, and young skaters would be crossing the ice. Here, the landscape was deserted, but it still was beautiful. The fresh air of the morning was certainly delicious. The fresh air...

A soft *pop* indicated to Lily a house-elf had Apparated with her breakfast. She glanced at him as he put the tray down on the table. It was a little creature with globular eyes similar to two tennis balls. She had already seen him once. Dobby, that was his name. She remembered him being mistreated by Malfoy during the celebration. In some way, their conditions were alike. Even though his magical abilities had been preserved, he was not allowed to use them freely. There was nothing he *could* do freely.

"Thank you, Dobby," she uttered with melancholy.

The elf's eyes popped in surprise. For a minute, he gazed at her, unable to speak. Then, to her horror, he burst into tears.

"Never has a wizard thanked Dobby," he repeated again and again, sobbing inconsolably, then punching himself with his little fist. Apparently, Malfoy had forbidden his elves to talk to her.

Dobby Disapparated with a deep bow. When she returned to the room later, she found a vase full of lilies on the table. With an absent look, she stroked the flowers, and a strange, half-forgotten feeling of hope was starting to rise in her chest.

The elf returned at noon with a very full lunch tray and another bunch of lilies. He presented it to her with enthusiastic jumps, then left to let her eat calmly. Lily made an effort to finish all the meals, thinking feverishly. Could Dobby help her? Would he disobey his master's order and bring her a weapon she could use against herself?

When he came to take the tray away with the zealous question "Is there anything else Dobby can do for Mistress Lily?", she took a breath, ready to formulate her wish. Then her look fell on his small hands, and the words died on her lips. His arms, his palms, everything was covered with scars. The warmth she had felt bloom in her chest froze.

"N-no, Dobby. Just tea, please. Thank you."

She sat there for an hour, staring at her cup. She did not regret her decision. If she condemned to torture or death the only creature who had been kind to her, she would be worse than the Death Eaters. She would rather suffer.

At this thought, something indefinite moved inside her. It was so much easier to suffer for someone.

"What is that supposed to be?" Severus frowned at the Christmas tree towering in one of her rooms. It was decorated with festoons of crystal lilies with a luminous glass firefly inside each one of the flowers.

Lily did not reply. She hoped Dobby was already back at Malfoy Manor. He might be mistreated there, but his master did not kill his servants out of jealousy.

"It's actually tasteless. But the intention was touching, no doubt," Snape stated suspiciously.

"If you are jealous of a house-elf, then I feel sorry for you."

This seemed to cool him down. He turned away from the tree and sat on the couch she was lying on. As she had suspected, he had come to offer her a Christmas present.

"Lily... is there anything you wish? Anything you know I *would* give you?"

She had thought about it. There was only one thing that could relieve her. Only one that could give her a positive memory. And if she had one happy memory, she would find enough courage to suffer everything that was yet to come. It would be enough to illuminate her life, which, hopefully, would be short.

"I want to see my sister."

For the first time, she saw Snape completely taken aback.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I want to see my sister."

He was staring at her, and she discerned in his eyes a familiar glint, which expressed jealousy *For Merlin's sake*.

"Your sister," he repeated, expressionless.

"Petunia Dursley. 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey."

Another glint.

"Why do you want to see her?"

"Because she is my sister. She is the only family I have."

A dark silence. She should have chosen her words more carefully, but she did not care any more.

"A sister who despises you?" Severus asked scornfully. "A sister who pretends you don't exist? A sister who thinks of you as some sort of anomaly? A sister..."

"YES!"

Lily sat up brusquely, facing him. Until now, she had not realized how weary she was. One more word from him, and she would explode.

"I need to see her, Severus. If I mean anything to you, do it for me. I promise I'll never ask you anything again."

He contemplated her for a few moments. Then he slowly extended his hand and removed a stray auburn lock from her face.

"Very well, Lily," he said finally, stroking her cheek with his thumb. "I'll bring her here for an hour or two. But you must understand that I'll have to Obliviate her before sending her back. Or even to Confund her."

"Why? You know she is not a least bit dangerous."

It was going to be a shock for Petunia to see her sister at such place after such a long time. Lily did not wish to unsettle her mind even more.

"Do you really want her to remember the way you are living now?" he asked calmly. "Personally, I don't believe she cares that much, but it could disconcert her. It could ruin her perfect little Muggle Christmas and even make her undertake some nonsensical actions. Provided you tell her the truth, of course."

There was no way she could tell Petunia the truth. In spite of their arguments, Lily knew her sister had always cared for her. She would not spoil her life by showing her her suffering. It would be almost better if Petunia thought Lily was dead.

Severus had apparently been reading her mind. "I think so, my love. So you do agree to my conditions?"

She bent her head. "Yes."

"Good."

He brought her hand to his mouth and put a kiss on her palm, then reached for her lips.

"What are the potions Malfoy was talking about for?" she asked when he finally pulled back. She hoped her presentiment was unfounded.

"Oh," he said, standing up, "nothing important. Just a way to make sure my wish will come true as well, and as soon as possible."

The arrival of the Death Eaters to Black Manor was like the return of an old nightmare. Lily stayed obstinately in her rooms, but she could not avoid hearing the din they were making during their endless "Christmas" party. Unlike Malfoy's residence, Black Manor did not have the Silencing Charm on its walls. Perhaps it had been lifted by Snape at their arrival. For what reason, it was not hard to guess.

The first evening, she heard Rookwood and Dolohov get through the corridor leading to the Northern Wing. They seemed to be looking for a closet containing BDSM equipment. Their familiar hoarse voices gave her goose bumps.

"Are you sure it's here, Augustus?"

"He said the third door on the left."

"It would be interesting if the Blacks still kept some of their medieval stuff. To when do they date the origin of their 'Noble and Most Ancient House', anyway?"

"To the twelfth or thirteenth century."

"Yes, something like that. Do you think he uses some of those tools with his Mudblood?"

"To tell you the truth, Antonin, I don't know, and it matters little to me. The Mudbloods leave me supremely indifferent, even the domesticated ones."

"That's not what you said when we were dealing with the Fenwicks."

"Oh, that was Igor's idea, not mine. All I did was neutralize the blood traitor."

"Some might object it was the most evil part of the plan."

"Yeah. Evil me."

There were imperious female cries. "Hey, you there! Hey!"

"My name is Augustus, Bella."

"Whatever... Where are the bathrooms?"

"It's a *Black Manor*, you know. *You* should tell us."

Bellatrix left with a loud snort.

"Incredible! 'Where are the bathrooms?' As if she were going to a spa."

"Calm down, Augustus, and help me find that damn closet."

"Wait, this door is already the fourth one on the left. It should be there."

"Great. *Alohomora!* Let's see... Merlin's balls! And Regulus never said anything!"

"The snobs! They have restraints with *diamonds*?!"

For an unbearable half an hour, they stood there discussing and evaluating the different items of the equipment. Eventually, Mulciber came to hurry them up, and they levitated the tools to the main hall.

The next day, a group of Death Eaters passed quickly through the gallery. Snape's voice was irritated.

"Why don't you try to organize something yourself, Crabbe?"

"Merlin, no!" cried Malfoy, laughing. "Bad idea!"

"Yeah," added Avery with a snicker. "Don't even *think* of organizing anything! It would be just as disastrous."

"Very funny!" barked Crabbe, offended.

The steps faded out at the end of the corridor.

These were however the only times they came near to her quarters. She could stay all alone, even though Snape had given her his permission to join them, assuring her no one would touch her. As if she were missing them.

On the appointed day, Lily waited for Severus to come to her rooms. She could barely master her nervousness.

"Could you tell me her address again, my love?"

She did so, though she had the impression he remembered it perfectly.

"Very well. When she comes, don't let her leave the room. Most of my colleagues are drunk, and if they see a Muggle here, she will probably die under twenty simultaneous Cruciatu Curses."

He Disappeared. Less than five minutes later, he was back, holding a thin blonde woman scared to death. Judging by the flour she had on her hands and her apron, she had been roughly abducted while she was baking. Snape released her dismissively and wiped his hand on his cloak, almost exactly like Malfoy used to do.

Petunia glanced around her with her pale eyes full of fright. She spotted her sister and looked to be near to faint. Without waiting for a reaction, Lily threw herself to her and hugged her heartily a gesture Petunia did not reciprocate. Over her shoulder, she saw Severus exit with a look which clearly meant 'I told you.'

After a while, Petunia disengaged herself and stood back. She was studying her sister apprehensively, distrustfully.

"Lily?" Her voice was unnaturally high and squeaky.

"It's me, Tuney."

It was more difficult than she had imagined. So much more difficult. But she had asked for it, and there was no way back now.

"I'm so happy to see you." She let the words come freely, without calculation. It was so liberating to talk openly again, without her mind being constantly invaded, without receiving twisted answers. "I'm very sorry to disturb you, to have made you come here without warning or asking you. But I absolutely needed to see you. Please, Tuney, let me talk to you, just for a moment."

Still perplexed, Petunia let Lily seat her in an armchair beside a little table where an elf had set a teapot with two cups and a plate of biscuits. She looked around her again while Lily was pouring her some tea.

"Where are we?" she asked feebly.

"In Severus Snape's house."

Petunia's eyes dilated with horror. "*Snape?* You mean... *that* Snape? It was him?"

"Yes."

Her hands shook, and she nearly spilled her tea on her knees. Lily could not help smiling sadly at how ridiculous her unease was. How could she ever be able to hear the reality?

"And where is... your family?"

At that word, Lily felt her chest clench tight.

"They... they are not here. I would have loved to show you my little Harry. But you see... I'm here for a visit. They couldn't come with me."

Petunia was gazing at her. She was obviously starting to feel something was wrong.

"What happened, Lily?" she asked. "You are... so pale. So gaunt."

Despite the bitter laughter trying to make its way up her throat, Lily felt warmth spread in her veins. It was the first time since years her sister had looked at her with such a concern.

"I... nothing important, Tuney. I just don't feel very well. I've had problems with my magic. But it will pass."

The excuse was poor, but it was all Lily could imagine. She shook her head, forcing herself to smile.

"Please, tell me about yourself. I've missed you so much."

It took a half of an hour to reassure Petunia and to ease her tension. Finally, she started talking about her family her husband Vernon and her little son Dudley. Her cheeks turned pink and her eyes softened as she expanded on the baby, who was of the same age as Harry. Lily studied her face, touched by her exaltation and hardly perceiving the meaning of her words. Petunia seemed beautiful to her at that moment, as much as a woman, a mother, could be. She genuinely loved her husband and her child, and the rest did not matter. Their past conflicts were so insignificant. Now that they were reunited, reconciled, she felt the peace settle over her. She had a sister she loved and who cared for her, and she had a sacred memory no one could take from her. It would help her withstand all the difficulties.

Time passed quickly, so quickly that Lily was put out of countenance when she felt Severus' black stare fixed on her. He was standing at the doorstep, his face blank and inscrutable. She had no idea for how long he had been listening. Not that it mattered.

Imperceptibly, and with great reluctance, she nodded at him. He lifted his wand immediately, aiming it at Petunia.

"*Confundo.*"

The blonde woman froze, and the look in her eyes became vague, unfocused. He came closer, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

"You will remember this: your sister was killed with her husband and child on 31 October in Godric's Hollow. You were informed about it shortly after it happened, and you already mourned for her as the conventions required."

Lily repressed a sob. She had lost her last family member. But it was for Petunia's good, and hopefully, she would keep a positive image of her younger sister.

She raised her eyes at Severus, who was watching her with a thoughtful, calculating expression. She expected him to lower his wand, but he did not. Suddenly, he turned back to Petunia.

"You will never speak of her again. You'll behave as if you were an only child, like you have always desired."

Lily scowled. She did not understand what he meant, nor what he was getting at.

He continued, "You have always been jealous of Lily, no matter how much you tried to bottle it up. You parents preferred her over you, and you knew, deep inside, it was for a reason: you have never been half as beautiful, gifted and clever as she was. You have hated her, as you have hated yourself."

No. No. NO. This was not happening.

"Severus! Stop!"

Lily leaped from her armchair, but he raised his free hand, and she fell on the seat again, bound with invisible ropes.

"No! You bastard!"

He gave her a self-satisfied smile before turning to his victim again.

"Now, you have the chance to get on with your *normal* life, away from any kind of *freaks* and anomalies, and without anyone ever learning about your past."

Lily was nearly crying. He was there, perverting her sister's mind in front of her, destroying their relationship, soiling her last moment of happiness.

"Severus, don't! I beg you, don't!"

"Seize the occasion. Your sister exists no more for you."

"Severus, please!"

"Is it clear?"

"Yes," drawled Petunia, her voice distant and impersonal.

"SEVERUS!"

He grabbed Petunia's arm and Disapparated. Lily felt as though her chest were going to explode from rage and pain. She was suffocating, her throat contorted. Why could she not die, then and there? Why would her heart not stop pounding?

Snape returned two minutes later. He put calmly his wand into his pocket, then took out a handkerchief to wipe his hands, looking at Lily with the smug expression of a Slytherin who had just succeeded in a very sophisticated ruse.

You are a monster, Severus, she told him with her eyes, too shaken to be able to speak. *You have ruined the only good thing I had. You set my sister against me, while she could help me surmount my grief and even get me used to this nightmare. Why are you doing this? I could have found a way to accept what you call "my fate"!*

"Lily," he said almost wearily, "when you are ready to accept it, you will do so for me and for yourself. Not for Potter, not for your sister, not for Lucius' house-elves. For me. Until then, you will suffer."

"I hate you, Severus." It was all she could say, all she felt.

His lazy smile returned.

"I love you too, Lily."

He removed her bonds with a snap of his fingers, then quickly shut the door behind him to avoid the teapot she had thrown at him. It shattered into pieces, the gold-brown liquid trickling down the massive wood.

She heard him cast the Locking and the Silencing Charms on the entry to her quarters and flung herself to the door, unable to hold her burst of despair any longer. When exhaustion overpowered her, she slid down on the floor, pressing herself to the wooden entry. And there was nothing but the wind howling outside of the window in the high vaults of the galleries.

At Hogwarts

Chapter 3 of 5

Lily's return to Hogwarts changes her life once more. But is it for the best?

Note: Many many thanks to Blue Artemis for the beta, and to Ardnaxela for the scientific consultation! :)

The picture below, "Death Eaters to the death," was painted by the fantastic artist ElenaTria.

At first sight, it appeared as though nothing had changed at Hogwarts since their graduation. The illusion was lost, however, as soon as the visitor receded from the majestic walls of the castle, which made him inevitably run into the Dementors, who now patrolled the halls. Lily had dreaded to return to the place which reminded her of the most happy and sacred moments of her life, but now, she understood she would never see it the same way again. The younger part of herself was irremediably gone, buried with her memories in the depths of her mind. The sight of those dear, familiar places did not hurt. It was as though she were a distant observer, or as if Hogwarts were a place she had never seen before.

Dumbledore's office seemed unaltered as well, except for the absence of the magnificent phoenix, who had mysteriously disappeared after his master's death, and for the portraits of the former Headmasters of Hogwarts all removed with the exception of Phineas Nigellus'. An immense portrait of Salazar Slytherin had been added instead. Both pure-blood supremacists spent their time sleeping in their frames or watching Snape work at Dumbledore's desk admiringly. The Headmaster's private library proved to be another exception. When Lily had tried to open one of the volumes, it had growled and tried to bite her hands. All Severus' books were dedicated to the Dark Arts. Pleased to see that she was finally regaining her will to take part in daily occupations, he had offered to bring her any books she liked. But her feeble desire to distract herself had waned once more.

The silky surface of the lake was undulating in the breeze, reflecting the pale forms of the clouds. For a second, Lily believed she had seen a massive tentacle of the Giant Squid slide out of the water, but from the high window of the Headmaster's Tower, she could not tell for sure. It was so strange to have no emotion while contemplating this beautiful landscape.

She put a hand on her swollen abdomen as she felt insistent kicking in her womb. She glanced at Severus. His quill was swiftly dancing on the parchment, leaving in its passage tiny curled trails of black ink. His left hand was gliding over the flat surface, smoothing it. Lily stared unconsciously at his long pale fingers, recalling the way they would prepare ingredients when he was brewing. He had worked on one particular potion for an entire month. Since then, she had had to drink it several times a week, but he had never told her what effects it was supposed to have.

"What is it, love?"

She started. He was watching her with an amused sparkle in his eyes. She turned to the window again and looked down at the small crowds of students lounging on the meadows.

She was missing the fresh air so cruelly. Although allowed to walk in the castle, she could not cross the doorstep of the Entrance Hall. Sometimes, Severus took her for a walk by the lake. It was always in the evening, once the students had retired, and after putting a number of spells on her necklace. The rest of the time, she sat in his office, gazing in front of her. Now that the birth of their child was close, he always kept her within view.

In truth, the atmosphere was almost better in the tower than in the other parts of the castle. Every student or professor whose path she crossed avoided her, not even daring to look up. Snape seemed to inspire a fearful respect even to the ghosts. There were several other red-dressed slaves at school mainly the properties of the Carrows and the Notts but they hardly ever exited their rooms, and when they did so, they were too frightened to give her a single glance.

One event had particularly shaken Lily's apathetic composure. On one of the first school days, she had glimpsed Slughorn's unmistakable maroon velvet jacket in the second floor corridor. The old professor was strolling unhurriedly, a slice of crystallized pineapple in his hand. When he had seen her, he had nearly dropped his piece of sweet on the floor, and after an astounded look at her crimson robe, he had hurried away as quickly as his large stomach would allow. Lily could hardly believe her eyes. Although she knew he had refused to join the Order in the past, she would have never thought him capable of making a pact with Voldemort. Deeply shocked, she had stood motionlessly in the middle of the corridor until a distracted student ran into her. Snape had instantly emerged from nowhere.

"Off you go, Lily. Twenty points from Slytherin, Mr. Johnson, and a detention with Mr. Filch. That might teach you to behave in a civilized manner."

He then led her to the office of Amycus Carrow, the Dark Arts Professor and Deputy Headmaster, which was located on the other side of the corridor.

"We'll use his fireplace to go to our office. You are not going to take the stairs."

"Is Slughorn a Death Eater?" she had asked faintly.

"Oh, no," he had replied with a frank laughter. "Just an opportunist. But he remains the best Potions master we have, so no one minds."

Carrow had granted her the most unpleasant smirk she had ever seen while handing his sack of Floo powder to Severus. They had reappeared directly at the Headmaster's Tower. It had not been the end of surprises, though. Snape had noticed a small bag in one of the corners of his office and had opened it suspiciously. To Lily's horror, he had taken out James' Cloak of Invisibility. She had completely forgotten that Dumbledore had borrowed it from them a few days before they had been attacked. She had not seen such a dark smile on Severus' face since the Marauders Games. He had examined it in all its details, then had put it inside a chest he locked with numerous spells, not without uttering...

Lily closed her eyes, trying to chase the memories away. They would bring her nothing but pain. And she was tired of it.

There were moments when she felt nothing at all. They frightened her a little, but they did offer some degree of comfort. And yet, no matter how lifeless and worn out she was, a strange anxiety had been growing inside her as her pregnancy had been progressing. A feeling she had not yet been able to identify. What she did realize, however, was the fact that she was completely alone in the world. Severus was the only person who took interest in her, but it was he who had reduced her to this miserable state. It was he who had slowly and methodically showed her how much a person could suffer.

"You can't be entirely dark, Severus. There must be more."

The words had fled from her lips without her intention. She turned her head and saw that he was looking at her earnestly.

"And who am I according to you?"

Who had been the boy she had once known she had once believed she knew?

"I don't know. I don't think anyone can tell. And you the least of all."

He smiled, but his smile did not lack wickedness. "You are such a fascinating person, Lily. After all you have seen, all you have come through, you are still determined to see the best in people."

She *had* to do so. She *needed* it.

"Don't fool yourself," he said coolly. "It's because of this Gryffindorish mania the Order lost. You know who I am. You saw me once. And you can't change my nature, as I can't change yours."

"Then why do you keep me here?"

His voice and expression softened a little. "You are the innocence and the grace, Lily. You are my antipode. Isn't it obvious we've been made for each other?"

No.

"But it is possible to overcome our misunderstanding," he continued. "By love."

"I'll never love the darkness."

"Love is your essence. You can't live without it. That's why you will have to find something about me you ~~can~~ love. My fingers, perhaps."

He was smiling again. Lily sighed imperceptibly, her hands lightly stroking her stomach. She looked through the window once more. The children were retreating back to the castle to hide from the burning sun of the noon.

"I fully understand your reluctance to believe your luck, Headmaster. Gilderoy Lockhart in person in your school! And what's more, he is willing to devote his talent to the glory of Hogwarts and to transmit his knowledge to all those innocent young students, who have no idea what dangers they may come across if, like him, they choose the path of fame!"

The foolish young man was gesticulating dramatically, displaying his unnaturally white teeth in affected smiles after every sentence. Too absorbed in his florid monologue, he ignored the grimace of disgust on Snape's face. Lily found him comical above all else.

"Lockhart," Severus repeated drily. "It is interesting that I've never heard of you."

The blond man came closer, spreading his arms wide open and nearly knocking a bottle of ink off Snape's desk with his heavy lilac sleeve.

"With all respect, Headmaster, if you have never heard of me, it is probably because you don't read the most recent English publications! I've written *The Travel Trilogy*, which has incidentally been the most successful bestseller of the last year! Besides, I won the Witch Weekly's Most Charming Smile Award."

This elicited the first genuine smile from Lily in long months. She felt a mixture of amusement and pity for the narcissistic visitor. Lockhart seemed to misinterpret her reaction, as he turned to her and allowed himself another shiny grin.

"That's right, Madam, the Witch Weekly's Most Charming Smile Award! I'd never guess the ladies would choose *me*! But since they gave me their trust, I do my best not to deceive them, that's understood! If you give me a second, I'll leave you my autograph."

Snape's eyes flashed with such fire that a reasonable man would have apologized and backed out of the office immediately. But Lockhart was manifestly not a reasonable man. He began to search his pocket for a quill.

"You may have noticed that the school year started more than two weeks ago," Snape said in his most quiet and dangerous tone.

"Oh," the visitor laughed, releasing his robe to slap himself on the forehead, "I haven't told you yet that I have been offered the position of Seeker in the National Squad! But I made a profound reflection on my future, and I decided I would help the young hopes of the wizarding world develop their talents and their personality rather than spend my time pleasing the mobs of fans, despite the spiritual satisfaction their appreciation can undoubtedly..."

"And what position do you seek exactly?"

Lockhart stuck out his chest. "I have a particular fondness and predisposition for the Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"The Defense Against the Dark Arts." Severus' eyes were like two pieces of charcoal. "That's exactly what we are looking for."

"But I can teach other subjects as well!" shouted Lockhart, insensitive to Snape's irony. He pulled a cream-colored velvet glove on his right hand and took his wand out. "My old schoolmates are still used to consulting me whenever they have difficulties with any kind of magic. I suppose you would like to test my skills..."

"Indeed I would. *Expelliarmus!*"

The ornate wand flew from Lockhart's gloved hand before he could react to Snape's wandless spell. He looked at the Headmaster with surprise and incomprehension. Suddenly, the light of the fireplace and the candles faded, leaving a semi-darkness penetrated with cold and dread.

Whatever Lockhart had studied, he was clearly not familiar with the charm the Death Eaters had invented to induce the sensation caused by the Dementors. He looked around him frantically, searching for his wand.

"Since you are an expert in the Defense Against the Dark Arts, Gilderoy, I presume you have all the necessary experience with the Unforgivable Curses?" Snape asked silkily.

The blond man's voice got stuck in his throat. "I... I... I..."

"This is what we teach our students. This is what we expect of our students. One day, these young wizards will be the Dark Lord's elite and his most important supporters. Accordingly, my colleagues and I have strong principles concerning the school program. If you really wish to become part of our staff, I will take the liberty to send you to our Dark Arts Professor, Amycus Carrow, who will test your abilities to counter the major curses including beside the three Unforgivables the Conjunctivus Curse, the Jelly-Legs Curse, Sectumsempra, the Blasting Curse, the Entrail-Expelling Curse, the Flagrant Curse and Fiendfyre, and provide you additional training. Nothing but the current school topics. If not, you will have five minutes to leave this place."

This time, Lockhart understood. He spotted his wand on the carpet and grabbed it, crawling on his knees. Then he threw himself to the door, not bothering with courtesies.

Severus stretched luxuriously, and the light went on again.

"I've made up my mind. If the Dark Lord allows me to create the post of school clown, I'll be glad to hire him."

Lily thought Lockhart was rather fortunate to have got out unhurt, even though Snape would probably have taken no pleasure in harming such a weakling. With a quiver of apprehension, she saw his hand slip to his crotch. He was always excited when he had humiliated someone. Dark magic and intimidation had the effect of drugs on the Death Eaters. She remained still, hoping he would not transfer his attention to her.

"Lily."

She closed her eyes. *Too late.*

"I want you. I want your lips on my cock. Now."

"I'm not feeling well."

"Do you want a potion?"

"No."

"Then?"

Resigned, she knelt in front of him. Maybe he would leave her alone at night.

"I'll never leave you alone, Lily. You know this."

She did.

Empty. Indifferent. Emotionless. Unconcerned. Sluggish. Listless. Lackadaisical. Oblivious. Apathetic. Lethargic. Dispirited. Meaningless. Numb. Paralyzed.

"I need to speak with Nott, my love. I'll be back in twenty minutes. Stay here."

Paralyzed. Paralyzed. Paralyzed. Paralyzed.

Chiming of the clock.

Stuck. Silenced. Silent.

Silence. The clock had obeyed.

Empty. Indifferent. Emotionless. Eternal.

Was this the death? What did it matter? A star shining in the night sky had no feelings. It just existed. Silent, inert, eternal.

And if the legends were right? If people became stars after their death?

If only she could get rid of that violently red robe and put on something white...

She was rising to the stars. The heavenly constellations were whispering around her. There were various vibrations and steady, unceasing strokes. They were getting louder and louder...

The door shook under a strong blow. Lily stared at it for a few seconds, trying to orient herself. She felt sick. The imperious knocking continued, and she could almost feel it drumming in her head. She rose to open the door. Immediately, a long walking stick shot at her.

"Out of my way, Mudblood."

Malfoy and Rookwood entered, walking majestically to the Headmaster's desk, where they stopped and glanced around them. The latter looked at her severely.

"Where is Severus?"

She shrugged and went back to her seat. Her head was still dazed as if she had been brusquely woken up.

"I asked you a question, Mudblood."

"Oh, don't waste your time," Malfoy advised, sitting down and conjuring a bottle of mead and three glasses on the desk. "She's been playing the Inferius for months."

Visibly disgusted, Rookwood averted his face and helped his friend pour the drink.

"Do all the pregnant women act like this?"

"No, only the Mudbloods."

For a short period following the elections, where his father had been defeated by Umbridge, Malfoy had behaved a little less haughtily. Unfortunately, the change had not lasted.

"Oh, hello, Severus! Take a break!"

Snape had just entered the office, a pile of parchments in his hand. He seemed pleased to receive his fellows. Lily kept on looking from the window, but her trance had dissipated. Unable to find refuge in her thoughts again, she resigned herself to listening to the perverted conversation of the Death Eaters. She looked up in surprise when Severus put a cup of hot chocolate into her hand. His gaze was piercing and possessive.

"There is something I wanted to ask you," Rookwood said, his eyes narrowed over his glass. "Do you have any seventh years who need a detention? I wouldn't mind taking care of them."

Snape rolled his eyes. "What for?"

"Severus, really! I'd take them to Hogsmeade and buy them some lollipops! What else would I want them for?"

"Some *suckers*, you mean," Malfoy threw in, taking a sip to cover his chuckle.

"You forget one thing, Augustus. We no longer have Gryffindors here. All our students are pure-bloods and half-bloods of loyal families. We aren't supposed to fuck them. Besides, you have McKinnon."

Rookwood let out an exasperated sigh. "She's useless now. I lent her to Macnair, and he cut her hand with Sectumsempra."

"Macnair!" Malfoy chuckled again. "I wouldn't lend him a ribbon."

"Too bad," Snape stated, unimpressed. "And have you tried Azkaban?"

His colleagues nearly spat their mead out.

"What an idea!" Malfoy shuddered. "Imagine what their hygiene is like, Severus. They might have contagious diseases!"

"Yeah!" Rookwood shouted with revulsion. "Would you fuck them yourself?"

"No. But nor would I lend my property to Macnair."

"Oh, come on! It's not because you go crazy whenever someone even looks at your Mudblood that I should be mean with my friends."

Lily clenched her hand on her cup, looking resolutely at the residue of chocolate on its bottom.

"Then suffer the consequences. Or ask Macnair for a compensation."

"His own slave is mutilated too."

At that moment, someone knocked at the door. Slughorn's bald head appeared in the aperture. His eyes widened when he saw the three young Death Eaters drinking in Dumbledore's office, their feet on the desk. Snape looked at him strictly.

"Yes?"

The old professor cleared his throat. "Severus..."

"Headmaster."

"Headmaster... I presume you have been informed that Amycus punished Miss Stump for 'not doing her homework and talking back.'"

"Yes."

"I was there, and I can witness there was no insolence in Miss Stump's excuse; she explained she had been ill for three days, and he took no notice. I'm sure you will agree that public chaining is an inappropriate punishment in this case."

"Ten points from Slytherin will do. Good night."

Slughorn left after a short hesitation.

"Why do you keep taking points from Slytherin?" asked Malfoy. "Have the other houses not been abolished?"

Severus leaned relaxedly against the back of his chair. "They have, but the system is different now. Slytherins win various rewards depending on the amount of points they have received. This year, if they collect more than five hundred points, each class will be awarded a lesson of Dark Arts with the Dark Lord. If they earn between four hundred and five hundred points, they will be given a trip to Albania to learn more about the Dark Lord's journey. But if they receive less than four hundred points, they will lose their right to make experiments on Muggles. The student who wins the most points for Slytherin will be honored with an interview with the Dark Lord, while the loser will be given the Drink of Despair for the whole next year."

"That's a real reform!" Malfoy exclaimed excitedly. "And do you still take in account the points received during the Quidditch games?"

A spasm contorted Severus' features at the word *Quidditch*. "No. Otherwise, the Seekers would always be the winners."

"True! It's so good to know that our children will grow up in a better world than we have!" Malfoy's face was radiant.

"That's all fascinating," grumbled Rookwood, "but would you mind getting back to our topic?"

Snape poured himself another glass. "The only creature at Hogwarts I will allow you to fuck is Peeves."

"Well, that's generous! I can't believe you care for these brats!"

"I don't care for the brats, I care about the rules. The Dark Lord charged me to keep order here, and I WILL keep order here. No orgies at school."

"But it doesn't have to affect the order, Severus," Malfoy objected. "We can always Obliviate them. Or we can pick up volunteers. There must be a lot of seventh years who would be happy to f... please a Death Eater."

"'Fuck,' Lucius. Just say it," laughed Rookwood.

Lily could not stand it anymore.

"May I go out?" she asked, surprised by how sharp her voice sounded.

The three men looked at her.

"Of course, love," Severus said softly. "But I expect you to be in your rooms in an hour."

Once out, she sighed in contentment. The air in the castle seemed so fresh, compared to the one she breathed in the tower.

Lily knew where she would have liked to go. The Room of Requirement still existed, and it had lost nothing of its amazing magical properties. But even if she could ascend to the seventh floor, she would encounter the Dementor patrolling its entry. And then she would live the memory again. James and Sirius...

She stepped out into the deserted corridor. Moonlight was penetrating through the tinted glass of the large windows, drawing dancing shadows on the stone floor. She passed by a locked bathroom and took the small staircase leading to the fourth floor balcony. The night air was still warm, and she stood there for a long moment, drinking it with gratitude. Not too close to the edge, though, not to set the magic of her necklace off. After a fleeting glance at the mountains, she raised her eyes to the stars. She wondered mildly if they could see her. So many eyes.

As she was wending her way back to the Headmaster's quarters, she noticed a heavy half-closed door on her right. She believed she had already seen it. More on impulse than curiosity, she opened it completely. It was a simple storage room containing broken chairs and desks. But there was something else. A plain surface gleaming in the darkness indicated the presence of a mirror. Lily's attention sharpened, and she felt her heart jump slightly. The Mirror of Erised. She was sure it was it. Why had it been placed there, in the middle of this old, discarded furniture?

She unhooked a little lamp from the corridor wall and slowly approached the magical object. Its form, its inscription, everything was as she remembered it. The last time she had looked in this mirror shortly before graduation it had showed her James holding her smiling reflection. In the background, she had seen Petunia with her husband, their parents, all reconciled. Would she see them now as well, happy and alive? Should she look at all?

She sighed bitterly. The sight of her family could not bring her more pain than she had already suffered. After all, it would probably be the last time she would ever see them again. She took a step forward.

Her reflection was growing fluidly. A pale figure with loose auburn hair and sad green eyes. And a very swollen abdomen. Lily contemplated herself coldly, waiting for the image to change. But as the seconds passed, it remained the same. She examined it attentively. This was nonsense. Only the happiest person in the world would see her real reflection in the mirror. And it was hardly possible to feel more wretched than she did.

She lifted her lamp to scrutinize the inscription. *I show not your face but your heart's desire*, said the reversed text. Could the mirror have been damaged, or its magic undone? In that case, it would not be surprising it had been moved to a storage room.

And if... if it meant she had no desires any more? This would be true. No wishes. No hope.

She lowered her eyes and flinched. The image was changing. It was deforming, and she nearly asked herself whether this were a dream. The face was turning grey, dreadfully emaciated. The eyes were coming out of their sockets, huge, faded, dead. And the hair was growing white and thin; then it vanished, as did the blackened skin, leaving on its place a bare skull with empty orbits, which were turned to her. Its row of teeth seemed to form a grin: a deadly, ironic grin.

Lily recoiled in horror. Without looking back, she strode away as quickly as she could, her hands instinctively protecting her womb. She could feel the skeleton's sinister grimace set between her shoulder blades. Back in the Headmaster's quarters, she went directly to her bedroom, where she finally sat down in front of the fireplace, panting fearfully.

Had this been the reflection of her most desperate desire? Had it been her imagination, a vision due to her sorrow and her frequent reveries? She could not tell. The obsession with death, she had been living with it, seeking it, concentrating on it. It had become a part of her being.

For once, Lily felt relieved when Severus entered. He glanced at her while taking his cloak off to put it over a chair. His penetrating eyes instantly noticed her distress, and he sat at her side and raised her face up by her chin to read her mind. He had been doing it every evening, almost nonchalantly, but this was different. After a half of a minute, his fingers released her jaw and moved upwards to stroke her face. His look was thoughtful. He bent down to kiss her on the cheek, on the neck.

At that instant, something broke inside Lily. Her eyes were suddenly filled with tears. She gripped Severus' shoulders as a shipwrecked sailor clings to a piece of wood in the storming sea. What had she become? Was she now one of these repulsive creatures without soul, responding to nothing but unhappy memories and emotions? *An Inferius*, Malfoy had said. A marionette, dead, and yet existing. Without a positive thought whatsoever, without future, without hope.

Anything but the living death. Severus had been right, she could not surmount her grief alone, she could not bear mental torture any longer, without receiving a single kind look or gesture. And now, she could not even trust her own mind. She was going mad.

"Severus, I... need you," she breathed, and with the declaration, her throat shook with choked back sobs.

"I'm here, Lily. I'm yours. I'm all yours."

She knew this comforting tone, this false gentleness. But it was all she would ever get. And she desperately needed a little affection, even if it were not sincere.

"I'm so scared."

"Don't be. You are safe with me."

He was caressing her hair, her back, her pregnant abdomen, kissing her face, which was wet with tears.

"My sweet, my beautiful, my beloved Lily, I spent ten years waiting for you. Do you think I would abandon you?"

It was all she was asking for; his real intentions mattered nothing tonight. She pressed her face against his neck, inhaling the warmth and the pulsation she could feel there. He held her tightly until her body stopped shaking and relaxed in his arms like a rag doll. Then he led her to the bed and Transfigured her robe into a nightgown. He stroked her tenderly, soothing her with words of love until strain and weariness overcame her. Strangely, she had no nightmares that night.

She spent the whole of the following day in a state of shame and embarrassment. Her fit of weakness seemed remote to her now, and she was analyzing her feelings intensely, reassured that her desolation and her distaste towards Snape remained undiminished. Last night, she had asked him for protection. Him, the very man who had been torturing her for ten months. She had the unpleasant impression that she had fallen into one of his clever emotional traps. The uncharacteristic solicitude he had been showering her with since the morning had only strengthened this sensation. When she had woken up, he had escorted her to the bathroom, and they took a shower together. He had kissed and fondled her, pretending not to notice her unease. After the breakfast he always took his meals with her, leaving the surveillance of the students in the Great Hall to the Carrows they passed to his office, where she had watched him work until the lunch. He had been witty and full of attention... in his most disconcerting way.

But she could not deny she felt a little better now. Maybe because she had formally given him her trust. If he hurt her now, it would be entirely his fault. She smiled at how poor this consolation was.

She heard him crumple a piece of parchment and looked up.

"Damn Nott, he is becoming senile. I'll fix it up once and for all. Just a half an hour, my love."

When he exited, Lily wrapped herself in a woolen cloak and sank anxiously into her armchair. The same situation had occurred the day before: he had left to lecture Nott, and she had waited alone until the two visitors came. And then she had had the sinister vision. She hoped it would not happen again.

At this very moment, she heard knocking on the door.

Pettigrew jerked when Lily opened. He looked twenty years older than he had done the last time she had seen him, at Malfoy Manor. His curly brown hair had thinned and had even turned grey at the temples. Dark circles were visible under his roving eyes, which flitted at her nervously and stopped on her stomach.

"Lily... where is Snape?" he asked, trying to look over her shoulder.

"He just left."

She stepped aside to let him in. He entered, giving a distrustful glimpse to the portraits of Nigellus and Slytherin, who were peacefully snoring in their frames. As soon as she closed the door, he turned to her with a feverish determination and took her hands into his.

"Lily, listen to me. I'm so sorry, I'm so very sorry. I'd have never revealed your hiding place to the Death Eaters, I swear! I thought I could protect you. They tried to submit me to Veritaserum..."

"Why have you joined them, Peter?"

She freed her hands and sat down. He bowed his head, his face tense and desperate.

"It was the biggest mistake I've ever made. If I had known they were planning such things, if I had known they would go after Harry..."

He had to calm his breathing before he could continue. He dropped on his knees in front of her seat.

"Please, forgive me, Lily. You have no idea what I have suffered. I would never, never..."

"But I have an idea of what James and Sirius suffered. Why didn't you try to help them? At least, you could have given them a painless death."

"They were watching me!" he cried out. "I couldn't, Lily, I swear. I saw them die like you did, and it nearly killed me. Believe me, I would never tell them your secret. He tortured me for hours."

She remained quiet. He sighed and puckered his eyebrows in concentration.

"I'm not good in Legilimency, but I'll try to show you. Please, forgive me if you can."

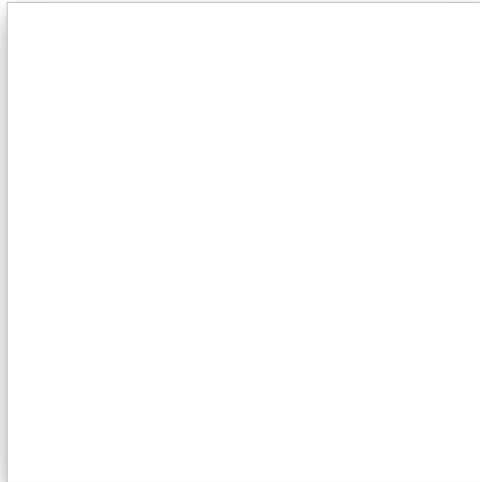
He whispered the incantation, looking in her eyes, and she entered his memories.

The floating candles were arranged in such a way that all the light was concentrated on the figure chained in the middle of the room, while the wobbly furnishings remained in the shadows. Malfoy was lying on the sofa, his dark robe spread around him to avoid creasing. His silvery-blond hair seemed to shine in the dim light, and he was looking at the prisoner with a cold, detached interest. Snape was standing aside, almost blending with the dark background. His eyes were glowing, and a small, barely visible smile was playing on his lips.

Peter was trying to rise on his knees despite the magical ropes binding his hands and feet. He ignored the two captors until Snape spoke.

"I'm pleased to receive you as my guest tonight, Pettigrew. There is a question I would like to ask you. In fact, I won't hold you for long if you are a little cooperative. All I want to know is where the Potters are hiding."

Peter stopped struggling and turned his face to them. His expression was neutral.



"Only the Secret-Keeper can reveal the place, Severus, you know it as well as I do. And Sirius is their Secret-Keeper. I don't understand why you keep on..."

"Crucio."

The two Death Eaters watched him writhe and shriek without any emotion. When the curse was lifted, he collapsed on the floor, panting and shaking.

"The address."

There was no reply.

"Crucio."

This time, he let out a long, wild scream.

"Speak."

"I can't say it!" Peter moaned. "I'm not..."

"You should have learned Occlumency before trying to lie to me. Crucio."

The scene repeated itself over and over again. When Peter started to cough in suffocation, Malfoy spoke for the first time.

"Don't think I'm trying to correct you, Severus, but if you go on like this, you'll drive him insane in less than ten minutes. There are many other spells, and it won't be difficult to heal him when you're done."

Snape took the advice seriously.

"True enough. Are you going to speak, Pettigrew? No? Lacarnum inflamarae."

The image dissipated, then formed itself again. A few hours seemed to have passed. Peter was lying on his face; only his shallow, erratic breathing showed he was still alive. Severus was pacing up and down the room under Malfoy's indolent gaze.

"I'm sick of this idiot, Lucius. I'm switching back to Cruciatius."

He approached the prisoner and turned him over with a kick. "Wake up. We're starting from the beginning."

Peter moved his lips, but could only give a rasp of pain. The veins on his face were bulged, and he had large burn marks on his skin. "Please..."

"You know what I want."

His eyelids shivered and half-opened. He had to hawk to formulate his words. "Swear that you won't harm James and Lily."

"Harm them?" Snape bent over him, his eyes blazing, his voice low and gleeful. "I swear I will. I have invented a nice curse for Potter and Black to show them what

happens with those who like to break the rules. As to Lily, she is my reward for revealing the prophecy. I'll fuck her every single day and night, in all the existing positions. And she will love it. There is a subtle and quite inoffensive potion which will make her very responsive to my touch. She will forget Potter before the year is over. Right, Lucius?"

"Right, but I'm afraid you just ruined your chance to get it over with."

"Don't overestimate Pettigrew. A true Gryffindor wouldn't join the Death Eaters. You have been jealous of your friends, haven't you, Wormtail? Come, just a couple more curses."

Peter closed his eyes in a helpless resignation.

The scene changed once more. The pale light of the dawn was penetrating through the dark curtains. The prisoner was limp on the floor, his hair lank with sweat and blood, which were also trickling down his face.

Snape and Malfoy were buttoning their cloaks.

"When the affair is over, you should find yourself a decent house," the blond wizard was saying. "I'm sure the Dark Lord will give you any residence you wish. How about..."

The vision was abruptly interrupted: Peter had heard a noise outside the office and had jumped on his feet. He looked at Lily with panic and took out a piece of parchment, which he put on the desk.

"Please, give him this; it's a message from the Dark Lord. He wanted me to deliver it personally he knew Snape couldn't resist torturing me again. I wonder when they will get bored and... Please, Lily, try to understand that I never wanted to give you away."

He was gone. Lily hid her face in her hands.

She did not want to think, to feel, to exist any more. She just wanted to disappear from the surface of Earth. At once.

"What happened?"

She winced as Severus' voice hit her ears the voice she had just heard throw the Torture Curse so casually.

"What happened?!"

He seized her hands and drew her up to him, his eyes drilling into hers. As she saw his look darken with rage, she felt an unbearable pain in her womb.

"The bleeding has stopped, Headmaster. There will be no complications."

The caring hands of Madam Pomfrey stroked Lily's sweaty face.

"You have a wonderful little boy, my dear. Don't worry, you are both safe."

Whatever, Lily thought painfully, pulling herself away before she lost consciousness.

"When do you want to do it?"

"In six days."

"You mean, before the..."

"Yes. I'm telling you, Lucius, I'll break all his bones and I'll bathe my son in his blood. He will curse the day when he saw Potter and Black die in that bloody cage and didn't join them."

"If you don't mind, I'll bring Augustus. He said he would like to join us for the next soirée."

"As you wish."

Knocking.

"Is it you, Narcissa?"

"Yes. Bella and Rodolphus just arrived. They brought a lovely black present box! You should come quickly!"

"We'll be there in a moment. Thank you."

Creaking of the door.

"I wanted to ask you... Does this potion have any impact on the child's character?"

"No, it affects only his appearance. My son will have black eyes and hair, but his features will be Lily's."

"Why hers?"

"She will love him more if he has her face. She ignored her pregnancy as much as she could. She never talked about his birth, never made any plans."

"I see. Is it difficult to brew?"

"It was difficult to perfect, but the preparation itself is quite simple. It's made on the basis of Polyjuice Potion, except for the Bicorn horn, which has to be replaced with a powdered scale of a Portuguese Long-Snout. You also have to mix a dose of Venus and Mars with hair of both parents in proportion with the degree of resemblance you are looking for. Add a handful of wartzome with five crushed shrivelfigs, grill the concoction in Ptolemy and pour some Horklump juice over it. Once you have dissolved a sack of Octopus Powder in Re'em blood, add three Runespoor eggs, three Dandelion roots and a dozen lacewing flies soaked with werewolf's urine. Then you have to make the whole potion boil for eleven hours at 185.75°C. When it's ready, leave it to ripen in a pewter vessel greased with Nux Myristica oil. It's administered three times a week. You see, very easy."

"Uh-uh, uh-uh... Very easy indeed. Does it have any side effects?"

"No. What do you think the Dandelion roots are for?"

"Oh, of course! I was just wondering... Now that Draco is two years old, Narcissa and I were thinking of having a daughter. I would like her to have her mother's features. Would it be possible?"

"Certainly."

"Then I'll have to speak with her. She said she wanted the girl to have my eyes, but I'm sure I can bring her round."

Silence.

"By the way, do you still give your pet the Lust Potion?"

"It's not a Lust Potion, Lucius, it's a brew that stimulates..."

"Yes, yes, I know. Does she still have to drink it?"

"Still. She is so incredibly stubborn. But it is time I tried to limit its use."

"Sometimes I think we killed Potter too soon. He didn't see the best of it. You never even raped her in front of him."

"I preferred to show him everything through Legilimency."

"You did?! Everything?"

"Hmmm."

"And you never told me? I would have paid to see his expression!"

"I'll show you in the Pensieve."

Lily slowly opened her eyes. Her body was weary and sore, but she did not care. She tried to rise into sitting position, her dazed eyes fixed on the two vague silhouettes standing by the cradle on the other side of the room. SEVERUS...

Her voice was raspy. "You... you..."

"Obliviate!"

Blankness.

"You know, Severus, you are a brilliant wizard, but there are two things you know absolutely nothing about: teaching and seduction."

"You can't understand, Lucius. You've never loved a Gryffindor."

The baby looked peaceful and innocent in his little wizarding jumpsuit, his small fists clenched on either side of his head. Lily gazed at him, surprised by the disconcerting feeling of emptiness in her chest. Despite her best efforts, all she could think about was the education his father and his "colleagues" were going to provide him. And what kind of a person he would grow up to be in such a company.

She saw him move a little and crumple his face as he started to cry. After a long moment of stillness, as though she had woken up from a dream, she bent over the cradle. She took the baby into her arms, baring one of her breasts. As she cuddled him, he began to suckle gratefully, and she could not repress a reluctant quiver of tenderness.

Those black eyes. She could feel them boring into her back. Severus approached them silently and sat at her side. He watched her breastfeed the baby until the latter fell asleep. With a smile, he extended his arm to stroke her cheek.

"I love you, Lily. Both of you."

She lowered her eyes at the child. She still could not think of him as *her* child.

"What will his name be?" she asked.

"You can choose any name you like, my love. Almost any name." His hand slid over her bare shoulder to caress it too. "When he is one week old, he will be submitted to a specific ritual, which will make him enter the elite community. It is a custom of the Death Eaters."

Lily felt her blood freeze in her veins. Instinctively, she pulled the baby closer to her chest. "A ritual?"

"It has nothing to do with the Dark Mark," he assured. "It consists in the purification of the child by the blood of a mammal, after which the Dark Lord gives him his blessing. Then he officially receives his name."

He smiled at her frown of disapproval and disgust. "Don't worry, love. I would never let my son be hurt."

He came closer to embrace her.

"You know," he whispered into her hair, "I believe that one day, we will also have a little girl. And she will have beautiful green eyes and wavy black hair."

"How can you know this?"

"Just an intuition."

His arms were strong and gave her an impression of safety. Almost against her will, she relaxed in his clasp.

At the sunrise of the seventh day after the birth, Snape led Lily out of the castle with the baby in her arms. They were going to Disapparate to Black Manor, where the ritual was to be performed. She was not going to attend it, though.

As they passed through the massive portal, Lily saw Malfoy and Rookwood waiting downstairs with atypically satisfied expressions. Behind them, a house-elf was holding

a voluminous vessel. The blood of a mammal?

Then she sighted a strange pillar erected next to the entrance staircase. It was so high that she had to tilt her head back to see its top. An enormous wheel had been secured to it. Instead of spokes, it was decorated with wriggling snakes, either real or magical. And something was intertwined into them. It looked almost like a body, but its members were too loose, as if all its bones had been broken. A doll, no doubt. She even glimpsed a mop of curly brown hair.

Severus wrapped an arm around her waist. "Are you feeling all right, my sweet?"

She turned back and smiled shyly. "Yes."

With Malfoy and Rookwood at their heels, they stepped down the path. The sunrise was red.

Back at Black Manor

Chapter 4 of 5

As the time goes on, Lily has to face a terrible new danger: her captor's manipulation.

Note: As always, many thanks to my beta, Blue Artemis, for her precious help, and to Ardnaxela for her scientific advice!

The picture of Lily and Severus I used in this chapter was created by the amazing Lilyhbp. It is called "Light and Darkness."

Oddly beautiful like a black rose, and no less unsettling, the baby sprinkled with blood was stirring in his dark crib, frightened by the multitude of voices and movement in the hall. The Death Eaters were circulating between the tables in anticipation of the feast which was to follow the ritual. The Dark Lord had Disappeared immediately after fulfilling his part, and the atmosphere had become much more informal. But before the usual orgies could begin, one more rite had to be performed.

Lily listened to the wide cacophony of noise around her, gazing absently at the delicate ornaments of the tapestry on the opposite wall. All of this was like a dream a curious, intoxicating dream. Paradoxically, it had increased the acuity of her senses instead of dazing them. She could perceive every inflection of the voices in the hall, every clink of the glasses, every billowing of the cloaks, as if she were watching the entire gathering through Omniculars. But as soon as she felt the look of Severus' black eyes descend upon her, she roused from her reverie.

He was standing with a smile in front of the cradle, waiting. From the silence that settled in the hall, she deduced the moment had come to give the child a name. Severus had allowed her to choose it herself, and he had not interrogated her before the ritual. He considered it as a unique honor, no doubt. However, being the accomplished Legilimens he was, he should have realized that she could not care less.

Lily looked at the baby again, but it could not prevent her from pronouncing the only name she found appropriate.

"Severus."

The silence remained for a long instant, then a few giggles rose from the corners of the vast room. The Death Eaters were certainly thinking she was deeply in love with her captor. Or that she had been Imperiused, for that matter. But the dangerous flash she glimpsed in Snape's eyes told her he had understood. By giving the baby his name, she had put a distance between them. She marked the child as an enemy's son, a future Death Eater. Severus was surely the only person who had grasped the full significance of her gesture.

Their eye contact lasted but a second; the next instant, he took the baby in his arms to receive the toasts of his fellows. Lily returned to her lucid dreaming.

The small flames of the wandering lanterns were dancing lightly, projecting mysterious shadows on the walls and the floor. The air was charged with the aroma of roast meat and of a strange mixture of Croakoa, cinnamon and Bubotuber pus, which later proved to be Bellatrix Lestrangle's perfume.

The clamor seemed to intensify, to double its volume as the minutes passed. Unwillingly, she turned her head to the laughing company. Some of the diners were loitering near the tables, others were sitting in relaxed postures. At this moment, all were watching Crabbe and Goyle, who had stood up with important expressions.

"Believe it or not," Goyle declared, "but we have tangi... tangible proof that Crabbe and I are better than you all! Yes, you heard me correctly! The other day, when we came to Hogwarts to congratulate Severus, we went to the fourth floor... was it the fourth floor?"

He glanced at Crabbe, who nodded with a comical seriousness.

"So, yes... we went to the fourth floor. And we found a chamber with chairs and tables and desks and boards. And there was the Mirror of Eresid..."

"Erised," Crabbe corrected gravely, while the rest of the Death Eaters were shaking with laughter.

"I know! Erised... And we looked in it. And you know what we saw? Nothing! Nothing apart from our reflections!"

"Did you look separately or simultaneously?" Rookwood asked with amusement. "Because if you looked simultaneously, you couldn't possibly see anything but your reflections. But if you looked separately and you both saw the reflection of the two of you... then that might suggest..."

There was an outburst of laughter. Crabbe and Goyle had manifestly not comprehended the joke.

"We looked at the same time and then separately!" Crabbe assured with verve. "And each time, we saw our real reflection! And ask yourself how many of you would see the same! We are the only among you who did, so we are the only who are content with their life. This is the true key to wisdom, everyone says so."

Severus raised his glass in an ironic toast, his other hand supporting the baby. "I'm sorry to ruin your illusions, gentlemen," he commented, "but I must inform you that the *real* Mirror of Erised was moved to the Dark Lord's residence earlier this summer. What you saw at Hogwarts a week ago was a copy without any magical property. But then again, you have such a rich imagination that you would be able to see giant donuts even in a Muggle mirror."

The explosion of laughter in the hall was deafening. Across Crabbe's and Goyle's outraged faces, Lily caught Severus' look and realized his remark was secretly addressed to her. The dark vision she had had before the birth had thus been a figment of her anguished, distressed mind. He just could not take the slightest token of disobedience

without hurting her instantly.

With all the effort she was capable of, she lost herself in her daydreaming again.

A half an hour later, the time came to put the baby to bed. He passed him to her without a word, but the lust in his eyes was eloquent enough. Just a week after the birth. Why was she still surprised?

Before she left the hall, her look strayed to the table, where a mountain of presents had been amassed: expensive child's robes, male jewels, broomsticks, magical tools and an extravagant twelve hands pocket watch decorated with precious stones which was Malfoy's personal gift. He had obviously intended to show to everyone how dutiful he was as a godfather. She wondered for how many years the watch would lie in a box before the child would be able to use it.

After cleaning and feeding the baby, she put him in the cradle and sat on a chair beside him. Deep inside, she was vaguely ashamed of her prejudice, of her indifference towards her innocent child, of her incapacity to love him sincerely. Nothing of what she had suffered was his fault. He did not deserve the lack of affection. No child did. But she could do nothing to change it. He would not replace Harry in her heart, and thinking so was both absurd and unjust. Lily sighed unhappily. If Severus had assumed the birth would make her life easier, he had miscalculated.

She felt his hand on her arm. "Come."

Leaving the baby under the vigilant supervision of the house-elves, they went to their bedroom. She sat on the edge of the bed, and he joined her immediately.

As soon as he embraced her, she felt a sudden wave of repugnance overcome her. It only grew stronger when he kissed her on the neck. She could not bear it tonight.

"Severus, no. I'm not ready."

"I'm not going to hurt you."

Her chest smoldered with fury. For one time in his life, he could tolerate her needs.

"I'm serious! I don't feel like..."

"Hush."

He pressed his lips on hers. The kiss was long and harsh, and when he released her to fondle her breasts, she fixed her look on the fireplace, trying to distract herself by watching the changing forms of the flames. After a while, though, he withdrew with an annoyed scowl and rose to bring them a drink. For a minute, Lily thought bitterly of running from the room. Of course, it would be useless and would only make him angry. She decided instead to get drunk as quickly as possible. Docilely, she took a glass from him and sipped at the crimson wine. Little by little, a feeling of warmth spread in her veins, along with the habitual flush of arousal.

"Have you been drugging me?" she whispered as he lowered her on the bed. Her body was becoming languid.

"Why would I do such a thing?" he murmured against her skin, his fingers unfastening her robe.

It meant yes. She might have known.

"Thank you," she said quietly, her torso snuggling up against his chest independently of her will. If it were true, she had nothing to blame herself for.

He stopped in surprise, looking deep in her eyes, then tore the remaining buttons from her robe with one furious movement. Visibly trying to recompose himself, he bent down to her throat to tease her with his lips and tongue. His hand sneaked to her center to stroke and stimulate her. She sighed in pleasure against his shoulder, and with the climax, she sank limply into the pillow. At her side, she heard Severus remove his clothes. He kissed her again and guided her hand to his member. She did as he wanted. With relief, she realized he had not intended to go further.

Later, they lay face-to-face under the blankets. Lily's excitement still had not entirely dissipated. The potion had to be extremely subtle and powerful, as it had long-lasting effects and did not affect pregnancy. She was sure he had been giving it to her since their very first night.

"Did you invent it?"

He was lazily playing with her hair. "Invent what?"

"The potion."

"What potion?"

Did Slytherins ever tell the truth?

"Never mind." She paused. "At least, I'm grateful you haven't made me drink Amortentia."

He moved his hand over her hip and pulled her closer. "Amortentia can only create obsession. It's ineffective and dangerous. What I want from you is love, and love comes in a natural way."

She smiled a little. What *she* wanted from him was freedom, and she would never get it either. Too bad for them both.

"Do you know there is no difference between love and freedom?" he asked, his eyes locked on hers. "By accepting my love, you would find happiness and fulfillment. That's what freedom is truly about."

So now, he was lecturing her about love.

"Perhaps it would be easier for me to 'accept your love' if you didn't torture me all the time."

"Torture you?" His voice sounded so incredulous that the indignation he displayed could hardly be genuine. "Good Lord, Lily, I've never tortured you. You do it yourself."

How dare he?

"Yes, you do," he affirmed drily. "Have I ever used force against you? Have I ever been rude to you? Have I ever made love to you and didn't think of you first? No, and nor will I in the future. I love you too much. You know it, as you know you need me. But you would rather drown yourself in grief, you would rather bury yourself alive than admit it. I don't blame you. You spent too much time with those twisted Gryffindors, absorbing their twisted 'principles.' It doesn't matter. I love you, and I'll help you get through this difficult period. You can always trust me."

Lily blinked several times, staring at him. A new, so far unknown fear started to fill her heart. He was planning to wash her brain.

"Good night, Severus."

She turned on her other side and burrowed into the duvet. *Merlin, please, don't let him do this!* In the mirror hung on the wall, she glimpsed for a second his reflection behind her. He was smiling.

When the Death Eaters decided to have fun, they had fun, and nothing else mattered. Unsurprisingly, no one left after the celebration was formally over. The orgies continued for a week, as did the sessions of what seemed to be little competitions of dark magic. Judging by the laughter, the explosions, the vibration and the glowing streams of light penetrating from the hall, the diners were testing their abilities to destroy objects and to recreate them again.

What astonished Lily the most was their solidarity. She had never seen any of them have a serious argument with his colleagues, or even approach them impolitely except for Crabbe and Goyle, their buffoons. It should, however, have been impossible for a group of people without consciousness or moral sense to live in such a harmony with each other. Perhaps did they consider their pure-blood status too distinguished for common conflicts, or did they regard their group as some sort of family. But what seemed likely in Severus' case could hardly apply to Malfoy.

On the first days, Lily stayed near her son in the company of house-elves. But her seclusion became soon unbearable. Taking care not to come close to the guest's wing, she adventured into the deserted chambers, as she had often done before they had moved to Hogwarts. She thought of the first weeks she had spent in the manor: how desperate she had felt, how many times she had believed she could hear the voices of her husband and child calling her. Now, there was nothing but void. Everything around her was dead.

At the entrance to Severus' quarters, she hesitated. She had never gone there unless he had told her to. Besides, he was perfectly able to interpret such an initiative from her part as an advance. The consideration made her smile sadly, and she passed through several rooms. The doors leading to his potions laboratory and to his closet of instruments were magically sealed, but his study was unlocked. She looked at his desk. The folded parchments had clearly been enchanted, as they appeared to be articles on charms and potions.

She was going to turn away when she saw on the table something she did not expect. Two framed photographs. She came nearer and realized that the first one was her own magical portrait. The laughing girl in the Hogwarts uniform, with an armful of books, seemed to belong to another century. The other photo was much older. It depicted a strict young woman with a sullen expression and lank black hair. She was standing by a table supporting a beautiful globe of the solar system. The inscription below said, "Eileen Prince." Severus' mother.

Surprised by this unexpected display of attachment, Lily took the old photo in her hands to contemplate it. In spite of her glower, the woman's face looked fragile and melancholic. The resemblance was obvious. She put it carefully back. It was strange to see two such different portraits juxtaposed. She glanced around her, but found no other evidence of Severus' inner feelings or relationships. With a mixed sensation of emotion and discomfiture, she left as silently as she could.

After this revelation, Lily could not help thinking a little differently of Severus. He did have feelings after all, and he nourished a sincere affection for his mother and for herself. As much as it was possible for a Death Eater to do. She attempted to persuade herself it had no effect on her attitude towards him, but something *had* changed.

She found it easier that evening to respond to his caresses, and the next day, she even spent an hour with him in one of the reading rooms, where he tried to entertain her with horoscope charts. The eventual arrival of Dolohov instantaneously dampened the relaxed atmosphere, but his haughty ignoring of her was certainly better than open insults. He listened calmly to Severus' explanations, and they both started discussing the way centaurs interpreted celestial movements.

Their conversation was shortly interrupted by Malfoy, who stormed in, his face scarlet, his hair untidy, his cane brandished in the air. He was holding an exemplar of the *Daily Prophet* in his hand.

"Outrageous! Ignominious!" he fulminated. "I'll destroy her! I'll destroy them both!"

Snape and Dolohov shared a puzzled frown. Malfoy had not been seen in such a berserk state since the elections.

"Scandalous! Unthinkable! Obscene!" he boiled.

"What is it, Lucius?" Severus asked dispassionately.

"I'll crush them! I'll smash them!"

"Whom?"

"I'll make them regret having ever interfered in politics!"

They rose from their chairs and approached him carefully, each seizing one of his arms to immobilize him.

"All right, Lucius, calm down," Dolohov admonished. It was no use.

"I won't calm down! I'm going to..." Malfoy flicked his cane and nearly struck his friends, who dodged at the last second.

"Calm down, I said."

"No! I'll destr..."

Without further ado Severus slapped him brutally across the face. Malfoy staggered, but to Lily's surprise, he took no offense. The blow seemed to bring him back to reality.

"Thank you," he growled, taking a deep breath and righting his disheveled hair.

"No problem. What happened?"

"Umbridge. Umbridge and her hack, Rita Skeeter. They lashed out at my father again. Just look."

He flung the newspaper on the table, panting furiously. "They can't handle the fact that he is better than that toad. And they won't admit she was cheating during the elections, so they dish the dirt on him."

He exhaled nervously, and his voice became utterly hysterical. "How am I supposed to come before the Dark Lord now? How can I show up in front of my colleagues? They will mock me! The Malfoys will be figures of fun like some vulgar scum..."

Snape and Dolohov flew over the text. When they finished, they exchanged weary looks.

"Let's go, Lucius," Severus said, propping Malfoy up with Dolohov's help. "You're going to take a calming potion."

"I swear by my great-grandfather, Leopold Malfoy," the blond wizard snarled as they were hauling him out, "that I'll Transfigure that miserable little journalist into the insect she truly is, and then I'll tear all her miserable little legs off, one by one..."

"Come on." They dragged him out of the room.

"... and then I'll crush her with my boot! As to Umbridge..."

His voice gradually faded away. Astounded, Lily bent over the table and looked at the article. The title formed itself with large font *Abraxas Malfoy: fanatic or lunatic?*

Snape came back a quarter hour later. He threw the newspaper away with a conspiratorial shake of his head. "Conceited paranoiacs."

Lily forced herself to smile.

"Now then," he purred, bypassing the table, "how about a little game of chess in our bedroom, where no Malfoy would disturb us? I think we should tell the elves to bring us some refreshments."

He gave her his hand and pulled her on her feet, placing a small kiss on her hair. Lily felt torn between a distrustful unease and a vague pleasure. Despite being disconcerted, following him was somewhat easier than she would have liked to admit.

□

Several hours later, she lay in his arms in a bed strewn with chess pieces, grapes and Chocolate Cauldrons. His eyes never left hers as he stroked her face.

"I wish all our evenings were like this," he whispered. "Don't you?"

She said nothing, but her cheeks became pink.

This could not be happening. This should not be happening. How could two portraits have made such an effect on her?

In truth, Lily sensed she could not do otherwise. She was so tired of suffering that succumbing to the necessity of loving and of feeling loved was inexorable. It was the only way to avoid the madness. And this was far more pressing than her self-esteem. Reminding herself of the atrocities he had committed only made things worse.

The baby's cries distracted her from her tormenting reflections. As Lily started breastfeeding him, she thought that, ironically, the name she had given him, hoping it would keep distance between them, could end up doing quite the opposite.

Once he fell asleep, she felt the urge to take a walk to ease her anxiety. As if they were magically drawing her to them, she set off to Severus' chambers again. Inwardly, she expected to find there something that would either justify the change of her mind, or help her free herself from her dangerous new inclination.

The minute she entered his quarters, she stopped abruptly. On the sofa, an elegant female gown was thrown carelessly. Lily stared at it. It looked familiar. It belonged to Narcissa Malfoy. Comprehension made her heart freeze. She raised her eyes at the aperture of the door, but her feet seemed to have grown into the ground. Served her right for having dared to think if only for a moment about forgiving him. More, about loving him! She had had it coming, and she would expiate her fault. Her teeth clenched, she headed for Snape's private bedroom, ready to endure the humiliation she deserved. At the doorstep, she glanced in discreetly.

He was sitting in front of the fireplace, turning his back to her. By his side, Narcissa was standing, dressed in a clinging black corset dress with long dark gloves. Her fair hair was loose, and she was wearing no jewels. She was evidently trying to reason with him as she said, "Lucius won't say a word, I guarantee. He, too, is sorry to see you so unhappy."

"I don't need your pity." His voice was chilling, and he had made no movement towards the blonde witch.

"Who talks about pity? You just don't deserve this! Tearing yourself apart for a pathetic Mudblood who isn't even good enough to..."

His outburst was as sudden as it was violent. "Don't you talk about her like that!"

She started, but did not retreat. "All right, you might like her, but it's not a reason to ruin your life and to throw your best years away. You are young and attractive, Severus. You are more powerful than most wizards are by the end of their lives. Don't give your life up. You can have everything you want. Even more."

She went closer, swaying her hips sensually, and laid her hand on his arm. He did not budge.

"I assure you," she whispered, "any witch would be honored to do your bidding. Any witch would be... delighted to do your bidding."

Unable to draw any reaction from him, she continued, "You don't have to change anything. You want to keep her it's all right, she is the mother of your child. But you don't have to suffer any more. Just let yourself go. You'll see, your life will be much better." She dropped on her knees beside his seat and breathed in addition, "I'm ready to show you just how much better it can be."

There was a long silence. Lily listened, holding her breath. When Severus spoke, she felt an inexplicable relief.

"My life will be better when I have her love. Only then."

Narcissa inhaled sharply and stood up. She looked at him with a hurt expression, yet still did not turn away. "Don't be a fool, Severus."

"Leave me alone."

Her face blushed, and she took a few steps back, but manifestly, desire was overwhelming her.

"Three years ago, it was I who told you that," she reminded him haughtily. "Remember? And remember what you answered? But eventually, I didn't reject you!"

"And do you think I would have sought you out if I had had Lily?" he snapped. "Do you?"

This was too much for Narcissa's pride. She grabbed her silky scarf from the chair and went hastily to the door opposite the one Lily was hiding behind. Before exiting the room, she considered him coolly.

"She will never love you!" she declared with grudge. "She will dream of Potter for the rest of her pitiful life, and there is nothing you can do about it!"

Severus sprang from his armchair with such a terrible look that she ran away without another word. Lily saw him strain to contain himself and turn to the hearth. He stood there for minutes, silent, motionless. Finally, she felt she could not stand the tension any longer. She approached him quietly and stroked his shoulder. When he saw her, his eyes lit up, and he clasped her in his arms. She hesitated, then reciprocated his embrace.

"I want you so much," he whispered in her ear.

"I know." It was the gentlest answer she could think of.

He raised her face up and captured her lips with his. His hands were caressing her hair and her back, and when he moved to suck lightly on her earlobe, she felt a tingle of pleasure run through her loins.

"Would you like to resume our little chess session?" he asked, nuzzling her neck.

She nodded reluctantly.

"Then why don't we do it here? I'll tell an elf to bring us something to eat." He smiled at her. "Meanwhile, do you think you could put on your satin nightgown? Please, my love. It looks so beautiful on you."

The nightgown was red, as were all her clothes, but this would probably never change. She nodded again.

"I'll be waiting for you," he said, kissing her once more.

Lily entered the corridor leading to her own chambers, ashamed to have accepted, but unable to chase away a tiny wave of excitement. Suddenly, she heard Narcissa's voice again. It was carrying from one of the half-open doors. She quickened her pace to pass as swiftly as she could. But then, she caught a fragment of a sentence she had heard a moment sooner and stopped in astonishment.

"And then I cried, 'She will never love you! She will dream of Potter for the rest of her pitiful life, and there is nothing you can do about it!' And he leaped from his seat with that funny expression we practiced all afternoon, and I ran away. I came back about five minutes later to see how it progressed, and what do you think? She was kissing him! You would say they were glued to each other!"

Malfoy's laughter seemed to last for ages.

"Gryffindors!" he exclaimed. "See what a cloying scene can do to them? I told him he should have tried it months ago. Come here, my little actress!"

"Oh, Lu, tickle me here too!"

Lily kept standing there without motion, her arms dropping limply by her sides. Only when the giggles in the room began to increase in volume, her mind woke from its stupor, and she burst into an open chamber, where she huddled up on a sofa. *What had she done to deserve this?* She thought with a deep sadness beyond all tears that the two portraits had surely been placed on his desk on purpose. It could not have been a coincidence. How many new ploys would he use to make her fall in love with him? And how many more would she be able to take before she broke or went completely insane?

After a long instant of mental blankness, she rose to retire to her rooms, but realized it was there Severus would look for her first. He would end up finding her anyway, but she wanted to postpone that moment as much as possible. She had better stay where she was.

A few minutes later, angry cries resounded through the whole corridor, startling Lily in her desolation. It was him.

"I suppose it was difficult to close the door?!"

"Sorry, Severus, we didn't know she would listen at the doorstep."

"I could hear your games at the rear of my quarters!"

"We're used to the Silencing Charm. You should put it on your doors too."

Narcissa intervened. "What's the fuss about, Severus? Oblivate her, and then we'll play it again! I love being an actress!"

"Yes, or just make her forget our conversation. After all, you've done it hundreds of times."

Lily could not deny the truth any more: her resistance was dying down. As if her sorrow had not been enough, she was now afflicted by a tremendous feeling of guilt and the growing desire to open herself to Severus. It was torturing her without respite, not leaving her a moment to rest.

The despair he had shown while refusing Narcissa's advances had made Lily understand he had been suffering too. He had desired her for years, vainly, hopelessly.

He had never been so gentle with her before. That night, he had been pampering her with attention, with caressing, with sweets. When she had fallen asleep, she had almost been ready to throw her barriers to the winds. In the morning, she was cursing herself for her weakness.

By the end of the following day, Lily could not bear it any longer. The anguish had to stop, even if it meant she would have to bury her self-respect.

Her eyes filled with tears of shame, but her breast heaving with relief, she ran to his rooms again.

"Merlin's robe! Who would have thought you had such a literary talent, Severus?"

Malfoy's voice was full of amusement.

"Did you imagine it yourself?"

"Love was inspiring me."

"Oh, I'll remember this one! And the one about the petals. Cissy likes this kind of repartee..."

Their steps faded away. Lily got into the study the two Death Eaters had just left, feverish, anxious.

There they were, the two portraits, just as she remembered them. She came closer, her heart pulsing with an odd, ridiculous satisfaction. Without any reason, she wanted to smile at the thoughtful young woman on the photo, to cheer her up, to hug her. Perhaps she had really lost her mind.

She backed away and collided with something rough behind her. It was the Pensieve on its carved stone stand. Silvery memories were swirling on the cloud-like surface. *Severus'* memories. Without questioning herself, without thinking twice, without thinking at all, she plunged into the depths of the magical basin.

"Is it merely an impression, or have your antlers grown longer since last night, Potter?"

The infernal hall at Malfoy Manor, the cage. The stag and the dog crouching behind the bars. Snape's soft, derisive intonations.

"Horns are a symbol of cuckolds. Since one's Animagus form reflects one's true nature, isn't it an interesting coincidence that yours is horned?"

A pause for effect.

"Actually, you should be grateful, Potter. Your wife gave herself to me, hoping I would spare your worthless life. And yours, of course, Black. It almost broke my heart to refuse the first thing she had ever asked me for, but at least, I gave her pleasure. It began when she laid her beautiful hands around my neck to kiss me on the lips... Oh, no, Potter, don't turn your back on me. You are going to listen until the end, or I'll show you the entire intercourse through Legilimency. Believe me, you won't like it. Petrificus Totalus. That's better."

A sinister smirk at the frozen stag. Ferocious growls from the dog.

"So we kissed. Her lips felt like petals of a rose: so soft, so pink, so sweet. Without breaking the kiss, she gently pushed me down onto the mattress and unfastened my robes. I felt those delicate lips slide over my neck, then over my chest. I couldn't help groaning when her little tongue moved over my nipple. I'll show you this, it's worth seeing: Legilimens. Take notice of the care she took to make my pleasure as intense as possible.

"All this time, she was straddling me, and feeling her firm body on mine filled my cock with a desire I had never experienced before. But I had to wait a little longer. She bent her head over my stomach, leaving sweet little kisses on her way down, and slowly, very slowly unbuttoned my trousers. You can imagine how hard I was by then. She took my cock in her hand to stroke it, first tenderly, lovingly, than harder. And when she stooped down to encircle it with her lips, I thought I would be quiet, Black melt and become one big receptor of pleasure. Like a string vibrating under the musician's skillful fingers. Legilimens.

"The most mesmerizing thing, though, was the innocence in her eyes when she glanced at me. With her lips closed around my cock, her auburn locks tickling my hips, her gorgeous breasts shining through the red fabric of her nightgown, she was still as pure as a virgin. Those emerald eyes looked at me with such trust, such hope that I would take pity on you. As if you deserved it! You're getting on my nerves, Black. Langlock! Hmm, I've never tried this spell on animals yet."

A ruthless smile, and Severus began to walk unhurriedly around the cage, letting his voice caress his victims like a flow of air.

"My orgasm lasted for an eternity. I doubt you have ever felt something comparable, Potter. When my vision returned, a charming surprise was awaiting me. I saw my lover's body without clothes, uncovered to my desirous eyes, tremulous. Her hair was falling on her shoulders, hiding one of her lotus-like nipples from my view. I placed my lips on her neck, enjoying her worried intakes of breath. They were soon lost in sighs of pleasure, as I bent her torso over mine and caught her nipple between my teeth. It was an ecstasy to feel her silky skin against mine. I was eager to smother her with pleasure, to give her back every kiss, every caress she had honored me with. My hands left no place on her body unnoticed, and I put a little love mark on her neck. Don't worry, it didn't hurt. It actually excited her.

"Do you know what position I chose to possess my beautiful flower? I decided to lean against the backrest of the bed and to seat her on my lap, so that our faces were on the same level. Like this: Legilimens. You might ask why. Because I wanted to kiss those perfect lips to my heart's content, to feel her breasts rise against my chest, to hear her accelerated breath, to see pleasure burn in her eyes. And so, in an immense explosion of passion and desire, we became one flesh. That's the end of the bedtime story, Potter, Black. The next session will be tomorrow at the same time. Finite incantatem, and good night."

A dismissive wave of his wand, and he was gone. The two Animagi, finally released, curled up on the base of their cage, powerless, devastated.

Lily had listened immobile. She did not know how she had managed to stand it for this long, but she felt obliged to do so. Out of solidarity with James, out of protest. But even her unfortunate husband and his friend could not have been more dejected.

She saw the setting change slightly and realized it was not the end of the memories. She was unable to take more, though. Her view blurred with tears, she rose from the Pensieve.

As her feet hit the ground, a pair of blazing black eyes glared at her, and a wand was pointed at her face.

"Oblivi..."

"No."

She seized Snape's arm to make him draw his wand away. "Don't, Severus."

Disregarding her protests, he attempted to throw the spell again, but she held his hand tightly. "Please, don't."

Her heart was pounding wildly, but her mind was clear like never before. For a second, a bizarre thought flitted through her head: and if she had got past the limits of suffering, where pain existed no more?

"Don't Obliviate me," she begged, gazing in his eyes. "If this is who you truly are, I must learn to accept it. It's the only way to love you, even if it's painful at first."

What was this nonsense about? She could not tell how the words had come to her lips, but she instinctively felt it was the right thing to say. Although he had still not lowered his wand, she could see he was thinking about it.

"I don't know how many times you Obliviated me," she added, "but it would be so much simpler for me to try to get used to reality. Please, Severus."

His look flaming, he flicked his wand. Memories overloaded Lily's brain: the truth about the prophecy, about Wormtail's torture and death, about the potions she had been given, about Severus' stratagems to make her love him. She lurched under their weight.

Clinging to the table not to fall, she lifted her eyes. He was watching her coldly. His expression was no longer inscrutable; it was as fierce and hateful as the night when he had massacred the house-elves. His true face.

"I can... handle it," she whimpered.

He contemplated her darkly. "Three days, Lily. You have three days to 'get used to it,' as you said. We're going to return to Hogwarts, and I expect you not to think about it any more by then. Otherwise, I'll Obliviate you for good."

She nodded, panting shallowly. "Don't you... regret it?"

He raised an eyebrow at the hope in her voice. "If I did, do you think I would view my memories in the Pensieve? Do you think I would show them to Lucius?"

He left, not without another icy remark. "One last thing, Lily. Don't try to use these memories against me. It won't work."

Still shaking, Lily remained where she was. Suddenly, a sharp twinge in her chest made her double over. She stumbled to the nearest couch and collapsed onto it with her hands on her heart.

She writhed there for hours, convinced it was the end. By midnight, however, the pain eased off.

The three days had passed. Lily had spent them in a half-stupefied state. Never in her dreams would she be able to handle the dreadful reality. Exhausted, knowing what would happen, she waited for Severus to join her.

This night, she could not passively submit to his desires. She allowed her hands to travel over his body, his cruel description still resonating in her ears. Barely realizing what she was doing, she began to retrace, gesture by gesture, every detail she had heard. All she was aware of was her vehement feeling of discontent, which was inciting her to continue obstinately. She pleased him with her hands and lips before swallowing his semen, and when he recovered, she let him penetrate her in the same position as he had done that night at Malfoy Manor. The pain was blinding. She felt the blood flow from her torn flesh, still not healed after delivery. Yet she could not stop.

The urge to hurt herself, to mutilate her cursed body, and the hope that their intercourse would finally bring her death, were insurmountable. But as every cell of her body seemed to take fire, her dissatisfaction only intensified. There was no escape.

This was certainly what the real torture was like. Now, she understood. She had experienced a tiny part of what James and Sirius had gone through. But they were still the lucky ones: they did not have to live after the horror was over.

Severus' muscles tensed up in orgasm. The pain was reaching its apogee. Then, as he withdrew from her, it abated a little. Not the mental pain, though. Lily fell on the sheets, and her body shook in a fit of hysterical sobbing. At this instant, nothing existed around her.

She did not notice that the intolerable ache in her abdomen had gradually disappeared in a vibration of magic, and that a hand was now stroking her hair. She cried until there was no strength left in her. The gentle hand kept on soothing her, and without knowing it, she started to relax under the touch.

After a moment which seemed to take forever, Severus turned her to him and pulled her in his arms. In spite of the blood, the semen and the tears dried on her body, the contact felt good. Lily looked at his face. She loathed his cold dark eyes, his curved nose, his thin lips, his oily black hair. And yet... his eyes sparkled whenever he saw her. His lips had a smile for her whenever she became nice to him. The face exuded intelligence, power and self-confidence. And it was the only face she was allowed to love.

The Dark Mark shone blackly on his arm as he gently but firmly took hold of her chin to meet her gaze.

"My love," he whispered, "would it be easier for you if we were married?"

What?

"No." The word had escaped her before she had the time to think of what he had said. But it mattered little.

Her head on his chest, she slowly succumbed to the slumber, if only for a few hours.

Back at Malfoy Manor

Chapter 5 of 5

When Lily returns to the place where her suffering began, she is offered an unexpected favor which seems to put an end to her misfortunes. But is it the reality or just another ploy?

Note: I can't thank enough blue artemis for the time she dedicated to this fic. She is the best beta I could have ever asked for.

At the end of this chapter, you will find a beautiful picture by perselus, *Lily's Embrace*.

"This Barty Crouch shouldn't be trusted so easily," drawled an indiscreet voice in the corridor. "If my opinion had any weight, he wouldn't be receiving the Dark Mark tonight. He's not been tested enough."

"Nonsense!" protested another voice, a female one. "Crouch is the most zealous person ever admitted to the Dark Lord's circle. And he's very gifted with the Dark Arts. Without him, the Lestranges wouldn't have captured the Longbottoms so quickly they say he took the man out with a single curse. Besides, his initiation task was much more difficult than ours. Imagine for a minute that *you* are told to find the sword of Gryffindor, and there is absolutely no clue as to where it could be hidden, and you have no idea about the properties the object has, only that it appears and disappears randomly."

"Fascinating."

"So he spent months ransacking what remained of the residences and the meeting places of Gryffindors, which was not particularly safe or entertaining."

"Bah! The task I had to fulfill to receive the Dark Mark wasn't exactly easy either. The Dark Lord has never treated anyone with kid gloves. As to Crouch's first 'exploit,' it didn't help much, since the Longbottoms managed to kill themselves under their very noses. He's done nothing special so far."

"Oh, yes, he has! Killing a few blood traitors is nothing compared to getting this sword. Between you and me, I don't believe the Dark Lord actually expected him to succeed when he made his request."

"It doesn't surprise me a whit. If you look at his family..."

"That's the point. He has nothing in common with his father or with any of his Gryffindor ancestors. He's hated them since he was a child. If you'd seen the way he looks at the Dark Lord, or speaks to him! Or the way he showed up in this manor when he came back from his journey just as he was, in his ragged travel clothes, with the sword in his pack, without questions, without complaints..."

"Oh, I'm going to cry!"

"... and showing nothing of his exhaustion! Even Bella was impressed. I'm telling you, he'll do wonders."

"I know he's skilled, and it makes him even more dangerous. What if he uses Occlumency? How can you know this touching masquerade isn't just bait?"

"If I didn't know you better, I would think you're jealous, Thorfinn."

"If I didn't know you better, I would think you're infatuated with our young new hero, Alecto."

"Bugger off!"

"With great pleasure, if you drop the word 'off.'"

"You wish."

"Why not? I noticed you haven't brought your little brother with you..."

"Someone had to stay at Hogwarts. He kind of likes to play the Headmaster when Severus isn't there. Which has been quite often since Junior was born. First the ritual and the feast, and now... well, I promised not to tell anyone yet. And when Severus isn't on holiday, he's locked up in his office with the Mudblood. Working day and night, no doubt. So Amycus stayed behind to replace him while we assist Crouch."

"You could have stayed as well, since you care about the work so much."

"I think I can get along well enough without your advice."

Severus snapped the door shut, making the two voices die down immediately. A tiny smile of amusement had lit his face at Alecto's remark about his frequent absences. He withdrew into the back part of the chamber, transferring his attention to the wooden chest in one of the shadowy corners.

Across the room, propped against the window ledge, Lily was contemplating the peaks of the distant hills looming against the ruddy sky. As the last glints of light faded, a peaceful calm settled over the extensive landscape with its permanently green shrubs.

For a brief moment, she turned her head towards Severus. He was wearing the Death Eater ritual attire a robe of a rough black cloth with a narrow pointed hood. Its austerity was in truth far more impressive than the adornments of any expensive gown the pure-bloods used to wear. She could feel intensely how true his allegiance to the Dark Lord was. A nearly palpable aura of menace and power was surrounding him. He was a Death Eater with every fiber of his being.

He took a small serpent-decorated box from the chest and opened it with a swirling movement of his wand, which produced a feeble greenish light. It contained his mask a monstrous metal figure. He pulled it out reverently. The mask, the most accurate symbol of Slytherins.

The question she had been holding since the beginning of the conversation in the corridor finally made its way to her lips. She tried to make her voice sound neutral.

"Why do you think the Dark Lord requested the sword of Gryffindor?"

If the legends told the truth, the magical object only came to the aid of Gryffindors who were in grave danger and asked the Sorting Hat for help. Whether the Hat had been preserved, however, she had no idea.

"The Dark Lord's intentions are none of our business," he replied, putting the empty box back into the chest.

There was probably no way to find out.

"What about Barty Crouch?"

"A curious young man. Gifted indeed, and good at Occlumency, but his loyalty is beyond doubt."

He approached Lily from behind and gently turned her to him, embracing her waist. His robe smelled of smoke and Moondew.

"I'll be back at dawn. Get some sleep."

He looked at her piercingly, as though he were going to add something more but, after a long silence, contented himself with kissing her. With a glance at the baby sleeping in his crib, he put his mask and hood on and exited.

She watched the horizon darken. Obsessive memories of her past imprisonment at Malfoy Manor, of the sinister hall and the bedroom she had been locked in for days, were haunting her mind. She was more grateful than she would admit that she did not have to stay in the same part of the manor again. The chambers they were currently occupying were spacious and comfortable, although they were not isolated from the rooms of the other guests.

Far away, beams of bright light flared up in the sky. The Death Eaters had begun their rite. Lily turned from the window and went to the cradle to see if the child was still asleep. Severus had brought one of their own house-elves with them so that he would look after him at night. She returned the little creature's smile and bent over the baby. A few weeks had passed, and his features had started to take shape. Soft dark hair had appeared on the top of his head. She knew he would have her face, except for the eye colour. However reprehensible Severus' methods to determine his appearance had been, she was touched by the increasing resemblance between the child and herself. She wished so much he would grow up happy.

She stretched out on a couch beside the crib, her eyes fixed on the ceiling, where reflections of the blue and silver flashes penetrating through the window glass were dancing. Little by little, her eyelids grew heavy, and she plunged into a troubled sleep. Outside, the sky was tinged with a dim green, and the light formed into a skull with an immense snake rising from its jaws, hovering over the countryside like an oppressive dark cloud.

It was not the rays of the sun that woke her the gloom had barely dispersed. It was a strident feeling of anxiety and threat. In the semi-darkness, Lily discerned two black silhouettes towering over her like statues. Severus was no longer wearing his mask. His eyes were cool and his expression unreadable as he gazed at her. But it was the second figure that caught her entire attention, paralyzing her with shock. Glowing, predatory red eyes were looking at her with an undisguised, almost scholarly interest.

The dreadful evening when this man, this *monster*, had broken into her and James' house to kill their child, thus destroying both their world and their lives, instantly rose to the surface of her mind. Voldemort looked more terrifying than ever before, if such thing were even possible. His distorted face, which had already been unnaturally pale the year before, had become chalk-white, and his nose was flat like a snake's, with two slits at the place of the nostrils. There was nothing human left within him.

He invaded her mind with the speed and the strength of the lightning, knocking her tentative mental barriers down like a house of cards, scrutinizing her most inner thoughts. She was used to Severus' daily intrusions, but this was nothing alike. When he finally pulled away, she slumped deeper into the couch in fright and exhaustion.

"Extraordinary," he commented, and Lily could not help wincing at the sound of his imperious, yet insipid voice. "Perhaps Dumbledore didn't lie. Perhaps they are simply different type of creatures. You could torture them as much as you please, and the only reaction you will be able to draw from them is love. Not hatred, not rage, not grudge, but *love*."

The scarlet eyes looked into hers once more, forcing a way through her memories. This mental violation seemed to take an eternity. When she was released again, her mind was transfixed, and her body was shaking. She had the feeling that the words the two men exchanged next were reaching her ears through a curtain of fog.

"I'm impressed, Severus."

"Thank you, my Lord."

"What do you intend to do now?"

"With your permission, my Lord, I wish to marry her."

Even through her daze Lily sensed the atmosphere of the room change sharply, as if the temperature had suddenly dropped ten degrees.

"Marry a Mudblood, Severus? How have you come to this decision?"

"It is the ultimate way to humiliate her, my Lord. The ultimate way to break her and to destroy her dignity."

Lily could barely hear Snape's reasons. The tiny part of her mind which was still able to think had revolted at the proposal. He intended to ~~marry~~ her after what had happened? He *had* been serious the night when he had first alluded to marriage?

Quick-fire thoughts and emotions were boiling in her head. No, it could not be. Merlin knew she needed him. She belonged to him. She could forgive him. But ~~to marry~~ him? To let him arrogate to himself James' sacred place? To allow him to transform from the torturer he truly was into her rightful husband, as though the suffering and the abuse he had inflicted on her did not matter? *No! No! No!*

She heard a snigger and looked up feverishly. A smirk had disfigured Voldemort's hideous features.

"Hmmm. Walk with me, Severus."

They disappeared as silently as they had come, leaving Lily gasping in outrage. As her shock started to wane, her mind cleared quickly.

The idea of marriage was laughable. Why would he do such a thing? Not only it would threaten his position among the pure-bloods, but it would also bring him disdain and animosity from his closest colleagues. Could he be thinking of her? Trying to make her condition more bearable? It made no sense. Married or not, she would remain his slave, an insignificant Mudblood obliged to submit to all his caprices and desires. She still would not be allowed to do magic, and she would surely have to keep wearing the necklace preventing her from escaping. It would change nothing at all.

Could it be another of his ruses? The mere thought made her body tense with sorrow.

An entire hour passed before Severus returned, visibly in an excellent mood. Without putting his ritual robe off, he sat on the edge of her couch and pulled her to his chest.

"It's all right, my love," he said, squeezing her in his arms with such eagerness that she could hardly breathe. "The Dark Lord has agreed. No one can stop us now. He even promised to preside over our wedding ceremony before leaving for Albania, which will be in three weeks. It's an immense honor."

Wonderful news.

He captured her face between his hands, pulling her into a kiss. Then, at last, he noticed her distressed expression and looked at her with more seriousness. "This was necessary. The Dark Lord needed to be assured of my honesty. The unpleasant part is over, my sweet. You'll be happy. You will see."

Lily could not hold silence any longer. Her tone was firm. "Will I still have to wear the necklace?"

He replied without a second of hesitation, twiddling the magical pendant hanging from her neck in his hand. "It depends on you, Lily."

Liar.

"Then I don't see what would be different if we got married."

"Everything," he affirmed resolutely. "As my wife, you would be the Mistress of my house and the mother of my heirs, equal to the most eminent pure-blood witches. My colleagues would treat you with respect and consideration."

He could not possibly believe this claptrap. It was nothing but an empty talk.

"Why are you endangering your position for a ceremony that will neither benefit you, nor have much impact on the way I live?"

"Are you worried about me?" His eyes glittered, and the corners of his mouth rose imperceptibly.

She clenched her teeth with annoyance. "No. I'm just wondering why you want to go through such complications."

"Because I'm certain it will make things much easier for you," he whispered, moving his face closer to hers. "And also because I desire no other woman. You are the only one who has the right to become my wife."

Lily suppressed a sigh. She had been right. He would continue to manipulate her, justifying his dictatorial demeanor with passion, without any concern whatsoever for her needs. He had not even asked her whether or not she actually wished to accept his proposal.

With a new wave of anger, she watched Severus' smile grow.

"Will you marry me, Lily?"

How very amusing.

"What do my wishes matter, since you never take them in account?"

"Excellent."

He kissed her hands in a heartless parody of the customs, then stood up to change his clothes. She looked despondently at the crib. The baby had been taken to another room, and the house-elf was nowhere in sight.

"By the way," he said from behind her, "the wedding night is an important ritual which cannot be rushed, or it will be spoiled. We'll have to practice every day to make it as memorable as possible."

"NO!" Malfoy sounded as though he had been told his line was to die out in a decade. His cries were reverberating throughout Severus' rooms, and without the Silencing Charm protecting the entrance, he would certainly be heard in the corridor. As the interior doors were open, Lily had no choice but to listen to their argument.

"You can't be serious! You are not!"

"I am."

"Have you lost your mind?"

There was the noise of a chair being pushed away.

"Severus, she is a *Mudblood!* You can't marry a Mudblood, just as you can't marry an animal! It's against the conventions of all decent society! It's against the nature! They are inferior to us in almost every way. You know this."

"If she was good enough to give me a son, then she is good enough to be my wife."

Malfoy sighed in a hopeless exasperation.

"This must be an awful dream! Listen, I never said a word as long as you used her for f... *fucking*. I took it as an honor to be the godfather of your child. Narcissa and I even agreed to help you seduce her, though the idea of it was grotesque. But this exceeds all limits. I don't believe the Dark Lord gave you his consent. He wouldn't."

"He did," Rookwood drawled. "I heard them."

"Merlin! What is the world coming to?" Malfoy's voice trembled as if he were reading a monologue from a pompous tragedy. He tore into Snape with a new verve. "Severus, don't be stupid. If you still like her, keep her as your slave. What you need is to marry a decent girl from a good family. There are so many choices; so many pure-blood and half-blood wizards have marriageable daughters, and they would be honored to admit you into their family. Don't bind yourself to that filth. When my grandfather was Minister..."

"Oh, don't start that again!" Rookwood cried out with irritation. "Leave him alone! It's you who are being grotesque."

A short pause followed, during which Malfoy turned to him angrily. "So you find his decision perfectly justifiable?"

"I knew it would turn out this way. If he wants to marry her, then he will marry her; it doesn't mean he's not a Death Eater any more."

"There are things that a real Death Eater should never do."

"The Dark Lord said it was acceptable, so it's not up to you to moralize."

Malfoy exhaled coldly. Judging from his hasty steps, he was about to exit the room.

"I wonder what our victory was for, since you both have started to think like a couple of Gryffindor blood traitors," he declared at the doorstep. "It makes me sick! And you," he seemed to point at Severus, "don't expect me to come to your wedding! I refuse to take part in the downfall of the wizarding world."

He slammed the door behind him. After a new silence, Rookwood spoke.

"You know him. In a few days, he'll be back to apologize, and he'll ask to be your best man. He's just like that. As to your marriage, I understand perfectly. It's better to marry a Mudblood than to have your house haunted forever by someone like Bellatrix."

"Thanks."

"No problem. See you later."

He left as well. Severus appeared at the doorstep of Lily's room. A carefree smile curved his lips as their eyes met, and he joined her on the sofa. Gently, his hand found hers, entwining their fingers. Lily's gaze was fixed on the fire in the hearth, but she could not see it. What she had heard was going round and round in her head. Why had he decided to do this? Why was he compromising himself? Why now? Was it really for her sake? Could such a thing be possible?

Unconsciously, she leaned against his shoulder, allowing his arm to wrap around her. And if *it were* true, would their life be at least somewhat different? She did not care about the hostility of the Death Eaters. She preferred to be despised and insulted rather than be admitted into their circle, which would never happen anyway. What she wanted was... *no, nothing*.

She felt Severus' fingers start to play with her locks, brushing against her neck. His touch was light and delicate. Too delicate.

It is the ultimate way to humiliate her. Was this what he had said? Had it been merely an excuse to appease Voldemort's suspicions?

She was suddenly lowered onto the couch, and he trapped her beneath him, distracting her from further thought.

Rookwood's prediction had been precise. Several days after their quarrel, Malfoy knocked at the door of Severus' office at Hogwarts to make his apologies, offering to organize the wedding at his manor. He even provided recommendations as to where to purchase the best suits and some other items. Naturally, he did not give a single glance to Lily while presenting his compliments.

With the approach of the ceremony, a curious sensation had been growing in her chest—a feeling of apprehension, mixed with a secret pleasure. Or was it hope? What did it matter? She was tired of analyzing herself.

On her wedding day, she got up early, her eyes red from insomnia. Light rain was falling; by noon, it became a violent downpour. She spent these hours watching the weeping sky and the baby in her arms. The doors leading to her chambers still being soundproof, she had not the vaguest idea of how the preparations in the rest of the manor were going, and could hardly imagine the hustle and the bustle.

As the afternoon deepened, a group of female house-elves entered and carried the child away. They prepared a luxurious bath for her and then left to give her some privacy. Relaxing in the warm water covered with foam and bubbles of various colors, Lily resented bitterly that she had to spend the evening in the Death Eaters' company. *What would have been better than staying in this bathroom for the entire night?*

Once the time came, she rose from the tub reluctantly, drying herself and putting a crimson bathrobe on. Her wedding dress had been unfolded upon a special low table in the bedroom. It consisted of a dazzlingly white, almost silvery corset with fine embroidery depicting two unicorns frolicking in the woods, and abundant skirts. A veil was a part of the attire, as were a bouquet of snow-white lilies, a pair of delicate high heels and a set of pearl-decorated jewelry. She examined them uninterestedly, forcing herself to chase away the memory of the simple yet elegant dress she had worn to her first wedding. Nothing like this grandiloquent magnificence, where she could discern a twisted allusion to her joyless fate. Lilies, unicorns—a sarcastic reminder of the fact that the core of her wand had been made of unicorn hair. And was she not, in some way, a unicorn the Death Eaters had captured and tortured, drinking her blood, but unwilling to kill her?

Very well, they had asked for it. Only a few days earlier, she would have given anything to receive a white piece of clothing again, instead of the red robes she had been wearing for so long. But now, she found it inappropriate. It would equal sacrilege.

"Dobby?"

The elf Apparated with a soft pop, an expression of devotion on his beaming face.

"Could you please turn these clothes black? With a charm a wizard cannot undo?"

In the wink of an eye, the dress, the veil, the shoes, the flowers, even the pearls in her jewels, everything was as dark as the moonless night. Dobby left with a bow.

A moment later, the female elves returned to arrange her hair and to make her up. They stopped in consternation at the sight of the funeral-like attire. She gave them her most charming smile.

"My future husband wishes for me to wear black, as he always does."

Whether they had believed her or not, they made no objection. They fixed her hair into a tasteful chignon, letting a few small curls frame her slightly made up face. Then

they helped her dress. Her reflection in the mirror was satisfying. Black was definitely the color that fitted her best, given the circumstances. Before exiting, she gave one last glance at the window. The rainstorm showed no sign of relenting. For a second, a flash of lightning lit the dark sky, and a lonely tree caught fire.

The hall. She should have foreseen it. Her throat tightened as she saw the sinisterly familiar open portal, behind which she glimpsed a long green carpet running along the aisle. Malfoy was waiting for her at the entry, decked out in a suit that must have been at least as expensive as her dress. Over the jacket, he was wearing a stylish dark robe, and his hair was tied in a perfectly neat ponytail. As befitted the master of the manor, he was going to lead her to the altar.

He looked up, and she had to repress a grin at his expression of indignation and disbelief. "What the hell..."

In a quick reflexive movement, he pulled his wand out of his walking stick, casting several Color Change Charms upon her, without result.

"Damn it!" he cursed in a whisper.

Time was pressing. He glanced over his shoulder, visibly unsure of what to do, then, gritting his teeth, inserted his wand back into the cane. He had not dared to Transfigure her outfit.

"Now listen to me, you filthy ungrateful whore," he growled, grabbing her arm roughly. "We will pretend that your dress has always been black. If you try to make a fool of Severus or of any of our guests, I'll make you pay for it, and I'll be glad to duel him, should he be stupid enough to defend you. You're nothing but a parasite, a piece of dirt that doesn't deserve to walk on earth, unworthy of any wizard's notice. I agreed to participate in this farce because he is my friend, but be assured that I won't hesitate to show you your real place if necessary. Now let's go, and keep your mouth shut."

It was doubtless the most vulgar speech Malfoy was capable of. But of the two of them, he was the most frightened.

They stepped on the green line, and the discreet chatter in the hall died down immediately. The Death Eaters sitting in ebony chairs on each side of the aisle stared at her in confusion. In the deadly silence, each rustle of her dress, each of their steps, though muffled by the carpet, seemed to echo unpleasantly. Flushed with embarrassment, Malfoy led Lily to Snape, who was standing in front of the altar. His face was surprisingly cold and blank as he watched her approach, as was Voldemort's. Whatever they thought of her ruse, they displayed no emotion. The blond wizard stood back to join Rookwood and Avery, attending as groomsmen. Opposite them, Narcissa and Bellatrix waited, both dressed in splendid bridesmaid dresses. They cast her murderous looks before turning away haughtily.

The ceremony passed in an almost surrealistic silence. Severus remained impassive, and he did not look at Lily again. She glanced furtively at his profile, so reserved and expressionless, and a slight feeling of shame crept into her heart. Unsettling Malfoy had amused her, but she felt no satisfaction whatsoever from humiliating Severus; quite the contrary. She lowered her eyes, oblivious to Voldemort's solemn voice reciting pompous phrases.

Mechanically, she repeated the formulas she was supposed to say, and with the same aloofness, Snape slid a little gold ring onto her left hand. When he received his own, the Dark Lord whirled his wand over their heads, making a shower of sparks fall upon their conjoined hands. Severus pulled Lily to him to place a quick chaste kiss on her lips, and to general applause, the green and silver balloons by the altar rose to the ceiling and burst into miniature dragons of shadow spewing out small flames. It was over.

Once the magical contract was signed, Voldemort slipped his wand into the pocket of his robe. She caught a glimpse of it and recognized, with a painful jolt, Dumbledore's Elder Wand. He sneered at her before Disapparating with an icy "Congratulations, Mrs. Snape."

The top of the wedding cake was shaped as a unicorn. As soon as the knife touched the cream, the little creature reared up and rose in the air, trotting across the hall. A few meters further, it was swallowed by one of the shadow dragons gliding near the ceiling. Unperturbed, Severus cut a slice of cake and handed it to Lily on a dessert plate, still unwilling to look at her. It tasted like ashes in her mouth.

He sat beside her and raised a glass to his lips, sipping slowly and silently. With his somber and melancholic face, he looked very much like his mother. Lily felt another twinge of guilt. He did not need all this; it was against all his interests. She was the only person to benefit from this marriage. He *had* done it for her. And she had acted like a brainless child.

Timidly, she lifted her hand to touch his, but at this very moment, he stood up. He moved towards the crowd of guests and whispered a few words to Malfoy, who shrugged reluctantly. Then he left the hall. She stayed where she was, alone and dejected.

The light was gradually dimmed to induce a discotheque atmosphere. A dance floor had been formed where the chairs had been set up, and it was filling with couples. Lily noticed cursorily Alecto writhing rather than dancing in front of a pale man with straw-colored hair and a freckled face, surely the young Barty Crouch. Next to them, Rabastan Lestranger was flailing in the company of Rodolphus and Yaxley. At their encouragement, he unbuttoned the jacket and the shirt of his suit and threw them away. Laughing frantically, he let them conjure an enormous snake on his torso. She averted her face in disgust.

Several tables had been arranged along the walls to allow the guests to feast on the delicacies prepared by the house-elves. Lily saw her baby sleeping in the arms of Bellatrix, who was lounging on a chair in a corner; it alarmed her, but she knew she could do nothing. Narcissa was sitting alongside with a very blond little boy on her knees. She was speaking to him softly and seemed to be introducing the little Severus to him. As much as Lily could see from her seat, the older boy was looking at the baby with a genuine curiosity, and he even waved at him shyly. Two elves approached them in a while to take the children away. Bellatrix and Narcissa joined the dancers. They both had charmed their dresses to smoky black, probably to mock her defiant gesture.

Meanwhile, Malfoy was drinking with Rookwood, Dolohov and Mulciber at one of the tables. They were laughing unrestrainedly, and from their animated expressions, it was obvious that they were talking about their Gryffindor slaves.

"I've been trying to analyze the way they think," Rookwood threw in loudly. "Do you know how to summarize the difference between us and them in a few words? If someone is bothering them, they cast the Soundproof Charm around themselves, while we cast the Silencing Charm upon the disturber. And a permanent one, in most cases!"

"Yeah, but why would anyone use the Soundproof Charm in such a situation?" Mulciber asked, peering over his glass.

"I haven't figured that out yet," the other confessed.

They burst out laughing again.

Lily scrutinized the dark corners of the hall longingly, but Snape was still nowhere in view. She stared down at the dark lace of her skirts to avoid watching the dancing couples. Most of them had partially undressed, and ties and jackets were lying all around. A whip cracking resounded somewhere in the crowd. It was like an endless dark, numbing dream.

At last, she felt a hand on her shoulder. Severus gave her his arm without a word. They made their way from the hall, stopping only to receive the congratulations of the four chattering men, who bid them a good night with meaningful smiles.

This night, they were going to sleep in special chambers, remote from the guest quarters. The spacious bedroom, decorated with stone engravings, was dominated by a huge fireplace; the three candlesticks set on the table were lit as well. The four-poster bed was larger than any Lily had ever seen and was covered with flower petals. Through the half-open door, a small dining room could be glimpsed. She sat on a chair while Severus was locking the wood entry door. She wondered if he would hurt her

for having defied him. Not that she cared.

Slowly, he walked to the table and propped himself against the edge, his eyes locked on hers.

"I want to show you something," he murmured after a deep silence.

He dug his hand into the folds of his ceremonial robe and pulled his wand out. She noticed how tightly convulsively his fingers were clenched around the hilt. He whispered an incantation. Instantaneously, a beautiful silver doe swooped from the tip of the wand. It made a few graceful jumps in the air, then, quick as a flash, sprang out the high window.

Lily contemplated the place where the airy animal had disappeared, mesmerized. It was hardly believable. No Death Eater had ever managed to cast the Patronus Charm before. Only a strong and pure feeling of love and a truly happy memory could enable a wizard to do so. How could Severus nourish such emotions with all the horrors he had committed? When could he have learned this charm? How could his feelings for her be so genuine and powerful? She raised her eyes to him, and he gazed back.

"I've never loved anyone but you," he said. "All I've done, I've done for you. I don't regret it, and I wouldn't hesitate a second to go through it again. I won't rest until I possess your body and soul. I can't live without you. Do you believe me now?"

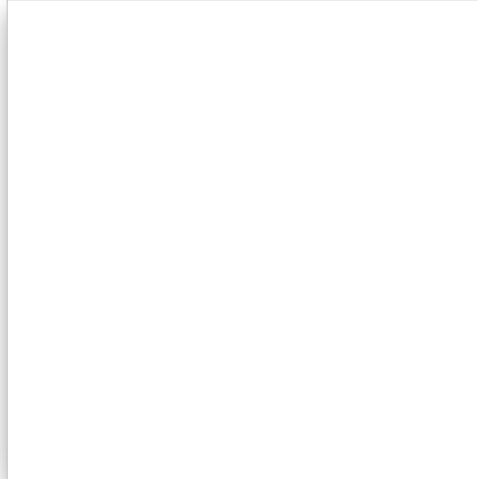
She did. Tenderness and remorse flooded her chest. She could not live without his love either.

"I'm sorry," she breathed, bowing her head.

Before she knew it, he was on his knees in front of her, kissing her hands passionately.

"It's nothing, my love. It's nothing at all."

He took her in his arms and carried her to the bed, laying her gently on the sheets. For a moment, he absented himself from the room to prepare them a drink. Lily looked at the window and saw with a mild surprise that the storm had still not stopped. But it did not concern her; she was in the warm chambers with Severus.



After they drank, he undressed her, removing the black pieces of her outfit one by one, unwrapping her like a gift, as he commented jokingly. When all her clothes and pearl jewels were on the floor, he held the tip of his wand at her magical necklace and performed a set of complicated spells. The chain fell off. Lily touched the base of her throat incredulously. All this was almost too good to be true. A wave of magic flowed through her body, concentrating, it seemed, in her left hand. But her questions died on her lips when she felt his soft kisses on her neck. They made love.

An hour later, she lay snuggled against him, trying to resist the tiredness that threatened to overcome her. She thought distantly that perhaps her impulse to have her dress turned black did not symbolize anything sinister. Maybe she had sensed the change coming. Instead of burying her spirit and hope, she had buried her despair, thus ending the dark period of her life. She had to hope so. She had...

He walked to the table and propped himself against the edge, his eyes locked on hers.

"I want to show you something."

His fingers clenched tightly around the hilt of his wand, and he whispered the incantation. This time, however, she could hear it distinctly.

"Prior Incantato."

A silver doe swept through the room, nimble and elegant, before springing into the night air. He swiftly concealed the wand in his pocket while Lily was staring at the window.

"... All I've done, I've done for you. I don't regret it, and I wouldn't hesitate a second to go through it again. I won't rest until I possess your body and soul." A horribly familiar glint in his black eyes. "Do you believe me now?"

He took her in his arms and carried her to the bed, laying her gently on the sheets. Then he passed to the dining room, where he stood by the fireplace. He drew the wand he had used to produce the pseudo-Patronus. Its willow hilt had the form of a spiral and was decorated on the top with a small carved flower. It was her wand. The Patronus had been hers as well. She realized this spell was the last one she had used before her capture. She had cast it on that fatal evening to entertain the little Harry.

With a dry crack, Severus broke her wand in two and threw the pieces into the hearth. The fire shot high and emitted a low, ghostly whimper. The wizard then pulled out his own wand to prepare the drinks and left with the full tray, not giving a glance back. The quiet wail continued, as did the storm behind the window.

"Shhh! It's just a dream, Lily. I'm here. Everything is all right."

Her body was trembling like a leaf, and beads of tears were streaking her cheeks, falling into her hair. She focused her blurred eyes to see Severus' solicitous face bent over her. *It had only been a dream.* Her breath shallow with fright, she sank into the mattress. He moved his hand to wipe her tears and brush a wet lock from her face.

"What did you dream of?"

She wanted to answer, but was suddenly unable to recall what she had seen. The nightmare had evaporated, leaving no clear trace or memory. All she remembered was the anxiety and the pain. Also the fact that the dream had been exceptionally vivid. Like a vision induced through Legilimency.

"Well, it doesn't matter. Everything is fine now. Don't worry, I'm here with you."

He nuzzled her ear, kissing the sensitive lobe. His hands caressed her as he left a trail of feather-light kisses down her neck, on her breasts. Lily squirmed a little, but did not pull away. His touch seemed to soothe her confused, agitated mind. Before allowing herself to close her eyes and try to relax, however, she noticed a shadow of a smirk cross his face. She looked at him intently. Indeed, the corners of his mouth were slightly raised.

"Why are you smiling?"

Severus lifted his head, his eyes warm and sparkling.

"I was watching you while you were asleep. You are so innocent. So incredibly beautiful."

He fondled her for long minutes. When he felt her loosen up, he lowered his head to hers, kissing her lightly and tenderly. Pleasure infused her senses, and she could not help returning his kiss.

"My flower," he whispered against her skin. "My treasure. My darling wife. Sleep. I'm here to protect you."

Carefully, he wrapped a blanket around her and pulled her closer to his chest. "I love you."

"I love you too."

The words had come spontaneously, and she was no longer ashamed of them. They were pure and liberating. She was rewarded by a rain of ardent kisses.

The peaceful sleep swept her last worries away.

Evil laughter resounded through the night, spreading to every corner of the manor. Somewhere in the dungeon, a green-eyed house-elf expired in anguish.

THE END

Note: Many readers suppose this fic is about Snape's redemption. In fact, the title is ironic: it is Lily's redemption from Snape's point of view. By her suffering, she repays her "debt" to him.

I used the trio Severus-Lucius-Augustus as a tribute to cmwinters, the author of my favorite fic, *His Heart's Desire*. I wish I could write as beautifully as she does!

Thank you for reading this story!