

The Ethereal

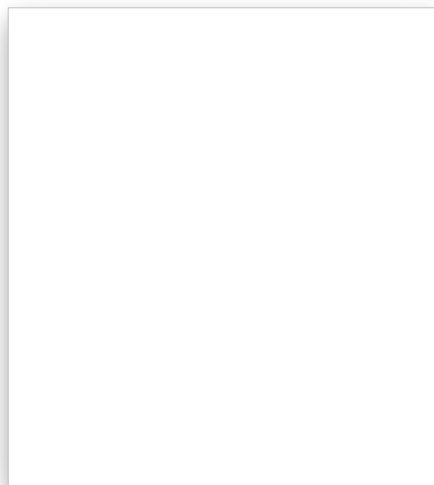
by Tarpeia

Determined to drive Severus away from the Dark side, Lily feigns to join him in his service to the Dark Lord. She cannot imagine that her reputation is the least of the things she will lose. WARNING: Very dark.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 2

Determined to drive Severus away from the Dark side, Lily feigns to join him in his service to the Dark Lord. She cannot imagine that her reputation is the least of the things she will lose. WARNING: Very dark.



Note: *The Ethereal* is dedicated to one of my anonymous readers who expressed the wish to find out what might have happened if Lily had willingly joined Severus in his service to the Dark Lord in a misguided attempt to drive him away from the Dark side. This is my version of the events.

I would like to thank both my awesome beta, blue artemis, and my dear friend, Almanera, for their precious time and advice. I appreciate their help more than I can say.

A huge thank you as well to madcarrot, the unique artist who designed Augustus Rookwood's look and personality the way they are described in this story. She kindly allowed me to resort to her vision of this character. Her beautiful works may be found on Deviant Art.

Warning: violence, torture, explicit sexual content, hints of non-con... and dark, dark!Snape.

Aligned in a semicircle, the black figures loomed in the light of the single torch, projecting long shadows upon the marble floor. Some among them still held their masks, which gleamed dully in their hands. A pallid figure stood in their center, its unusually thoughtful red eyes seeming to exude a glow of their own. The men, for once heedless of their master's example, had gone to no lengths to conceal their glee. There was ill will written on the face of the dark-haired Bellatrix, who waited on the Dark Lord's right, her lips pressed in a grim line. One would have said she was so absorbed in her bitter indignation that she had forgotten to display her contempt. Lucius had chosen a different attitude. His solemn, arrogant expression would have befitted the noblest of the pure-bloods forced to watch a gross Muggle pantomime. He towered over his colleagues, his gloved hands folded on the head of his walking stick.

Severus repressed a half-smile. The set-up was ready; the play could begin. He gently pushed against the small of the back of his companion, encouraging her to step forward. As she did so, she raised her bright green eyes to their avid faces.

Though she was wearing dark robes similar to those of her hosts, no one would have mistaken her for one of them. It was the extraordinary whiteness of her skin, inducing the impression that her delicate features were illuminated by inner light that made the contrast so striking. So did her heavy mane of red hair of rare beauty and, more than anything else, the peculiar aura of ease that surrounded her. Any person devoted to the Dark Arts would notice the difference at once—a difference Severus hardly ever sensed in other people's presence any more, but which rose to the surface of his mind whenever he set his gaze on her. This difference both disturbed and fascinated him.

He knew the Dark Lord had felt the same emotion. The scarlet eyes briefly met his black ones before refocusing on the angelic frame, scrutinizing her. They conveyed mild surprise equally due to his guest's innocence and to Severus' choice of pet. He discerned the slightest hint of threat in their depths as well. This he had foreseen.

"Miss Evans." The hiss, soft and quiet as it was, filled every nook in the hall. The black figures remained still; only the excited glint in their eyes allowed distinguishing them from statues. Lily calmly gazed back.

"Welcome. It is gracious of you to honor us with your presence. My faithful Death Eaters and I have been longing to make your acquaintance."

Severus could not tell for certain whether she had grasped the Dark Lord's irony or detected the imperceptible widening of his colleagues' predatory smiles. Lucius' stony mask did not falter. Bellatrix's face, however, seemed to shrink and crumple in distaste as if she had tasted pure lemon juice.

The Dark Lord waved his hand in a majestic gesture. "Allow me to introduce you more properly to our allies, for even though they've heard much of your skill, they are still regrettably ignorant of your achievements."

No one laughed at his words. They knew what was going to happen; the air was vibrating with thrill and anticipation.

Lily approached gingerly while the imperious voice resumed its susurrus, "To those of you who do not know, Miss Lily Evans is one of Hogwarts' finest graduates in the last decade. She has shown a prodigious ability in the art of Charms, Transfiguration and Potion making, and has since then honored the name of witch as well as her... family." The chalky lip curled, shaping the heavily connoted word, and sparse yet undisguised snickers broke out among his followers. "Thanks to Severus, Miss Evans has become aware of our mission: a dignified society consisting of pure and worthy witches and wizards, purged of all that can endanger it. She accepted it for her own, despite and in defiance of the so-called Order of the Phoenix, which she has rightfully abandoned." Lily's hand twitched as the last word echoed through the spacious hall. The Dark Lord's pause was a second longer than necessary. "She consented to join us for tonight's festivities. Hopefully, it is the first night of many more to come."

This time, the ominous implication of the phrase did not escape her notice. Severus watched the rosy blush that had formed upon her cheeks at the mention of the Order fade, leaving her skin as white as alabaster. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a movement amidst the cloaked figures and turned his head toward the disturber. Pettigrew. The Animagus had shifted a little, his agitation obvious in his tense posture and his too-tight grip on his mask. He stared at Lily as though she were a phantom. *So he did not approve of her joining the Dark Lord.* Severus all but sneered.

His master was presently walking around his "guest" in small circles.

"Would you agree to tell us exactly why you decided to seek my guidance, Miss Evans?"

Lily swallowed, and he knew she wished she could look at him for comfort or reassurance. Naturally, she did no such thing. When she spoke, her voice floated in the hall like a strange melody.

"You are the greatest wizard the world has ever borne. Your power is boundless, and so is your wisdom; you have seen every aspect of our world and discovered its imperfections. It took me time to perceive your vision in all its richness and depth, but now I do, and I truly share it—it is my ambition to allow the witches and wizards to reclaim their due place in the society after the dark centuries of their hiding. I promise I have both the skill and the determination to make the change happen."

Her voice wavered at this point, and she drew a ragged breath, her body contracted with revulsion for her own speech, even though she had not composed it. Still, she had done rather well. The Dark Lord's eyes assessed her with a detached intensity.

"And are you fully aware of the magnitude of your commitment? Do you realize that once you have placed your life in my hands, nothing but death will release you from your vow?"

"Yes," she whispered.

His gaze was boring into hers, but it was devoid of its habitual force. He did not want her to summon her mental defenses, although he had already appraised her predisposition for Occlumency and justly concluded it was insignificant.

"Are you willing to do anything for our cause?" he asked softly, rounding her once more.

"Yes."

"Would you risk your life at my command?"

"I would."

"Would you suffer torture at my command?"

"I would."

"Would you sacrifice your life at my command?"

"I would."

She had started to shiver, though. Severus was sure droplets of sweat had broken out on her brow.

"Would you kill at my command?"

Her trembling intensified, but there was no hesitation in her answer, which rang out clear and assertive. "No."

Slowly, the Dark Lord came to stand in front of her. His glacial expression was frightening to behold. After a few seconds of silence, Lily exhaled, declaring, "I'm not willing to hurt, injure or kill anyone, even for the cause. It would ruin the whole point of the 'better society.' And even if it didn't, I couldn't bring myself to do it."

The hall erupted into thundering laughter. Jeers rained from every side, making the flush return to her cheeks. Lucius contented himself with a disdainful smirk, as did old Nott. One other person did not scoff, however. Severus narrowed his eyes at Pettigrew's uncommonly wan face. He wondered for how long the rat would manage to stay in the Dark Lord's good graces before his gutlessness and blatant lack of enthusiasm tired their master out. Probably for as long as they would need a spy in the Order, he snorted inwardly. This would not take long.

The Dark Lord did not join in the general amusement, and he never tore his eyes from Lily's.

"What *can* you bring yourself to do?" he asked quietly as soon as the clamor died down. The menace in his tone was nearly material; there was no mistaking it.

"I can serve any magical or non-magical task you would require," she assured him. "I can brew potions and perform many spells. But I can't use Dark magic. It's the only exception."

He considered her. His icy gaze shifted beyond her head and focused on the black crowd, switching from one follower to another as though he were setting his mind. At last, he gave a subtle nod.

Rabastan attacked as promptly as an eagle. A stream of silver light darted from his wand, hitting Lily in the back and sending her flying over ten yards further. In spite of her shock and pain, she recovered with a stunning agility, heaving herself up on aching, unsteady feet in only a few seconds, her wand drawn. She easily deflected Rabastan's next spell and cast a protective shield around herself.

Curses shot at her without respite. The fifth of them succeeded in breaking through her defense. No sooner had her magic barrier dissipated that a fiery explosion boomed through the air, the force of Rabastan's Blasting Curse causing the floor to crack open between them. Lily was able to evade it before it had reached her, and in the remnants of the smoke produced by the detonation, she conjured a thick jet of red light, which Rabastan instantly blocked with a wave of his hand. His next spell took the form of a fuming black serpent, sinister in its smooth slither above the ground. She resorted to a simple charm to brighten the apparition up until it burst.

Severus absently ran his fingers up and down the hilt of his wand. His colleagues had orders to test her abilities and endurance without harming her too severely; at this point, however, it was difficult for any wizard to control the extent of his power. Should she be in danger, it would be up to him, not the Dark Lord, to prevent permanent damage. But he doubted it would come to this so soon. A hint of pride made his mouth curve in a smile.

Meanwhile, beams of orange light soared across the hall, spreading in all directions. Nimble like a cat, Lily threw herself aside to dodge them, the incantation for the Tentaciflors Jinx ready on her lips. Rabastan drove it off as one would brush away a fly, and it bolted toward the nearby standing group of Death Eaters, who only had a second to part. Crabbe was not quick enough; the spell crashed into his face with full force. At the sight of his head transforming into a tentacle, a fit of laughter broke out among the men, and it took them more than a moment to move and release him. With a discreet chuckle, Severus transferred his attention back to the red-headed beauty.

An unmistakable rustling noise was filling their ears. The entire assembly stiffened, a collective, eager intake of breath escaping their chests. He watched as Lily froze in her tracks and fixed a distrustful gaze on her adversary, who was muttering a spell, a wicked smirk on his lips. A gigantic flame sputtered out of the tip of his wand, endless, deadly. It unfolded in the air, its shape that of an immense chimaera. The roar that ensued made the mansion's foundations quiver. The monster's heads were rising higher and higher to contemplate their victim, the snake-like tail hissing and undulating, the horrible nostrils spitting flames and smoke.

Amazed, Lily stared up at the beast for a dozen seconds, not collecting herself until a pair of fiery jaws snapped alarmingly close to her body. She had never been confronted with Fiendfyre before, this much was certain. The spectacle promised to be entertaining. Backing away, she swiftly flicked her wand, producing a stream of water she flung in vain at the approaching creature. The lion head only roared more furiously. She was now running away, striving to avoid the Dark flames, but there was nowhere to hide. The black figures would not let her slip out of the circle they had formed around the dueling couple, and Rabastan's will kept the chimaera from pouncing on them, inciting it to concentrate its murderous compulsion on Lily alone. The girl dove to the ground, protecting her head from another massive billow of fire. Just as the hideous muzzle came nearer and Severus gripped his wand, prepared to intervene, she cast a new spell. It was a Cascading Jinx, such a potent one that it impelled the beast to pull away and turn on the spot. It mutated within the wink of an eye.

In the chimaera's place was now hovering a flaming vulture. It spread out its wings the size of flying carpets and emitted a blood-curdling screech. The distraction gave Lily several precious seconds to scramble to her feet. A glimmer of hope, however, seemed to pass across her features when she saw the magical bird. Her eyes alighted with confidence; she raised her wand and mumbled a soundless formula. At once, a rope of turquoise sparks sprouted from the floor to twine around the vulture, spiraling up, but never tightening itself around the fire. Then all of a sudden, the creature's talons sank into the ground. It battered its wings in rage, ejected shrieks and flames, but the blue beams did not give way; they held it in place as securely as any cage.

A variation of the Orbis Jinx, powerful Earth magic; Severus thought, impressed and more than a little unsettled. Judging from the gasps and whispers he could hear in the crowd, he was not the only one caught off guard. His eyes wandered to the Dark Lord, who observed the duel off to his side. The crimson gaze was utterly void of emotion.

The stone floor was splitting beneath the bird, which contorted in its trap, unable to free itself. Rabastan's cloaked frame flashed in their visual field, his wand pointed at the body of Fiendfyre. The mass of magic took a whole minute to fade into nothing, and simultaneously, the blue sparks went out. From the last tongues of flame, Evan Rosier stepped out, his wand hand outstretched.

The first part of Lily's test was over she had been forced to display her talent for charms and jinxes, and it had proven to be more considerable than any of them had expected. At present, she was going to be subjected to mind-affecting spells dark, perilous magic. The kind the Death Eaters valued the most.

Severus cleared his thoughts and set his attention on Lily's feelings, relaxing his body, loosening everything but the lucidity of his consciousness. He did not truly intend to invade her mind and further exhaust her when she needed all her strength to protect herself, but he deemed it useful to establish a one-sided Legilimency bond between them to better understand her way of reasoning. He was positive the Dark Lord would do the same.

Rosier's spell produced no light, though the instant the incantation left his lips, the tell-tale signs of the Cheering Charm expanded in Lily's spirit. Carefreeness and gaiety were clouding her vigilance, chaining it, lulling it. Her inner struggle was extraordinary to witness. She brusquely shook herself out of the perfidious reverie before it could engulf her, repressing the urge to smile an effort that took most of her self-control. For a short while, the hand holding her wand dropped slightly, the wrist gone slack. It was only the Death Eaters' mocking laughter that caused her to wake from this malignant stupor. Once more, she collected herself, ready to fire a Disarming Charm at Rosier, which he blocked lazily, responding with a Dark spell.

The new sensation was as uncomfortable as the previous one had been pleasant. A dreadful realization was creeping into her mind, tormenting her like a half-forgotten memory: she could not remember why she was fighting. She recalled having come to the Manor to join the Dark Lord, yet here she stood, pitted against one of the most loyal Death Eaters with no notion of what had triggered their confrontation.

The Confundus Charm was a pearl among spells, Severus mused contentedly. It was simple to perform, hard to detect, and impossible to surmount. His Lily was no more resistant in this respect than most of their victims.

Rosier maintained the charm long enough to make her lose her wary posture and elicit a fresh burst of chuckles from the circle of men, then let it off as abruptly as he had cast it. The young Gryffindor turned scarlet with anger at the jibes at her expense. She adopted a defensive stance again, but did not hex him back. She appeared to be even more annoyed with herself than with her opponent.

Severus suspected what curse was coming next, and he closed his eyes to savor the contradictory emotions that were about to submerge her. He sensed Evan's whisper more than he heard it. *Imperio.*

Her head was swimming with euphoria again. Sweet satisfaction, harmony, and peace had taken possession of her. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, a feeble voice

was cajoling her into dropping to her knees and bowing to the Dark Lord. Rosier's astuteness was admirable, for he had chosen a subtle curse, one that did not instruct her to do anything outrageous or harmful nothing she would not be expected to do under the circumstances. But Lily did not rise to the bait. She distinctly felt that the idea was unnatural, extraneous, even degrading. She could not obey this impulse.

She had to, the irresistible voice insisted.

Absolutely not.

Just a bow, nothing more. It wasn't too hard, was it?

No, no, and no.

NOW!

Rosier's eyes gleamed as he poured all his will and vigor into the command, and Lily sank to the floor like a cut-down tree, her breathing shallow, her lips clamped together to muffle her whimper of pain. He sneered and nonchalantly twirled his wand in his hand, relishing her humiliation.

A face suddenly flickered through her mind: the Gryffindor colors, untidy black hair, a pair of hazel eyes framed by circular glasses. It was a memory, a powerfully happy one. He was looking at her, his gaze full of laughter and uncontainable feelings. They were in a teashop in Hogsmeade; the room's narrow windows were blurred with rain. Steam was rising from their mugs, but they paid no heed to their drinks. Their hands lay joined on the table.

Severus' eyes flew open. Frozen on the spot, he was dimly aware of the Legilimency connection between Lily and himself shattering while his concentration slipped away. A second later, a great silver shape of an animal a doe emerged from Lily's wand and darted at Rosier. The discountenanced Death Eater staggered, regaining his balance at the last moment not without losing his wand. The dazzling magical animal circled around him once before disintegrating in thin air.

Unblinking, Severus stared at Lily's worn out form on the floor. His hand had clenched into a fist, and he pressed his wand between his fingers so hard that the slim piece of wood was threatening to snap. He knew exactly which charm she had used and what a tremendous amount of resolve was required to cast it successfully. Although he had never been able to produce one himself none of his colleagues had ever been, not even the Dark Lord he had read all about the shapes it could take. The Patronus was a magical condensation of one's most positive energy. And *this* was the memory she relived whenever she wished to feel joy. *This* was what she believed to be a 'happy' memory. Moreover, her Patronus assumed the form of a doe the female antipode to a *stag*.

Very well.

It took all his willpower to subdue his rage. The Dark Lord had glimpsed the memory as well; Severus could feel the cold red eyes shifting on his face, scanning it for any sign of sentimentality. He inhaled deeply, then exhaled, uncurling his fingers. It would not help to make a fool of himself in front of his Lord, not to mention that in his twinge of jealousy, he had almost broken his wand. This was between him and Lily. He would deal with her soon enough.

Rosier's withdrawal back into the circle brought the redhead no relief, for another black figure stepped out: Dolohov, ever-forbidding and grim. Lily clutched her wand tighter but made no attempt to lift herself from the floor, her weariness so great that she could barely stir. Dolohov, however, held his wand down. He walked straight toward her, his features unfathomable.

For the first time, fright welled up in her eyes. Without hesitation, she sent a Revulsion Jinx in his direction, looking desolate when he deflected it fluently. The spells she fired next succeeded one another at a feverish rhythm, reflecting her panic: the Disarming Charm, the Stunning Spell, Incarcerous, even Ventus a jinx that shot a blast of air against him, still to no avail. The closer he approached, the more frantic she grew. She eventually applied the Backfiring Jinx to him, only to realize that he had cast no spell that could backfire, but which was strong enough to propel her own body onto her back. And then he stood no more than five steps from her. Helpless and defeated, she shut her eyes, squeezing her wand in her palm.

Lily's greatest weakness had finally been uncovered: she was incapable of attacking. Brilliant at countering curses, she was determined never to use them on her own, not even against the people she feared and despised. This trait rendered her practically useless in the duels and raids to come. Just as Severus had hoped.

With an inaudible Expelliarmus, Dolohov disarmed her and tossed her wand away. Hovering over her broken frame, his own wand aiming at her chest, he looked up at the Dark Lord. The crimson eyes flashed in response.

In a heartbeat, Lily was screaming in pain. She writhed and twisted, desperate to avoid the invisible blades and fire on her skin.

The breathing in the hall had sped up. Severus caught a sight of Bellatrix literally bouncing at Lucius' side, her nostrils dilated, her breasts rising and falling precipitously in her corseted cleavage. He rolled his eyes. Pettigrew, he noticed, was far from enjoying the torture. His cheeks had turned sickly gray, and yet he seemed unable to tear his eyes off Lily. It was difficult to tell if he was becoming faint-hearted or if he entertained a secret affection for her. One day, Severus promised himself earnestly, he would Crucio him to death.

The men gave him curious glances that transformed into ones of approval when he did not as much as tense up. Lucius' expression made him pause, though. The blond wizard had hardly quitted his haughty posture during all evening, but the keen, sadistic glint in his silvery orbs was more than eloquent. Both smirked as their gazes met. For once, the understanding between them was absolute.

By the time Dolohov released Lily from the curse, she had nearly screamed her voice away. Rosier gave her no room for recovery: his Cruciatius was as quick and vicious as his predecessor's. Her cries of agony reverberated off the walls. In her fruitless wriggling, she had let her robes and skirt slide up, unconsciously uncovering her creamy flesh. It attracted Severus' eyes like a large magnet. He found himself gazing fixedly at the soft skin shining against the dark cloth, and a wave of arousal pervaded his senses. The anguish, the tears, none of those distressed him any more. He had learned to cope with them a long time ago before he had rebelled against his father's brute tyranny and paid him back. Slowly and painfully.

Rabastan made short work of his victim. With her voice gone and her muscles as rigid as stone, it was all Lily could do to twitch under the curse. Her eyes were no longer conscious; they resembled bottomless pits of pain, inhuman in their misery. Her endurance was at its limit. Mere minutes away from the thin barrier beyond which suffering and insanity became one, the Dark Lord gave a new, more pronounced nod. The red light of a Stunning Spell flared throughout the hall, passing through the girl's chest. It expelled the last remnants of energy from her pale body and left it limp on the floor in a tangle of black fabric and auburn curls.

The Dark Lord moved from his spot, heading for his throne-like chair in front of the assembly. Unhurriedly, he sat down, his look set on the Gryffindor. The silence was complete as he gazed down at her, his blazing eyes remarkably lively on his adamant face.

After an indefinite number of minutes, he raised them. The high-pitched voice spoke out a single word in a soft whisper, "Severus."

All the heads turned toward him. He straightened up and looked his master in the eye to let him know he was listening closely.

"Am I correct to assume that the Mudblood has volunteered to join me only to drive you away from my side?"

"Indeed, my Lord," he replied. "It is exactly what I've seen in her mind since she forsook the Order. She seems to blame herself for my allegiance to you and believes that she can gradually persuade me to betray our cause and return to 'the side of Light.'"

Muffled chortles resounded here and there, but no one was bold enough to laugh out loud. The conversation was much too serious.

"And," the voice went on silkily, "have you ever considered following the Mudblood's advice?"

The words of denial were ready on Severus' lips, but after a new glance at the snaky visage, he thought better of them. The Dark Lord was used to submission and humility; the banal reassuring phrases would not convince him nearly as well as a witty confession. In any case, it was better to be punished for insolence than disloyalty.

"I have considered it very carefully, my Lord," he declared with a shadow of a smile. "To my regret, the Order has proved rather... disappointing in its choice of members. They are reluctant to accept Dark wizards for followers."

Rookwood and Avery smiled at his audacious joke. The Dark Lord looked displeased, but not furious, which was a promising sign.

"I see," he hissed. "So you are unhappy with the Order's choice of wizards. Their selection of witches doesn't repel you, though, does it, Severus? Or you would have realized there are far worthier candidates for your carnal needs than this piece of Muggle filth."

For the second time in the night, the dark figures laughed in unison. Severus bent his head in deference.

"Nevertheless," the peevish expression had not left their master's features, "I am pleased you lured her from the Order. Mudblood though she is, undeserving to bear the name of witch, she might have caused unnecessary trouble under that old fool Dumbledore's orders. Her dubious talents should be put to a better use."

The excitement was mounting again; it was tangible around him. Bellatrix's demeanor radiated nervousness and jealousy not that he would have expected any rationality from the deranged woman. He had not missed the way Pettigrew's shoulders had slumped as if in exasperation when Lily's true motives had been revealed.

"Do not get me wrong," his Lord noted menacingly. "She will never receive the Dark Mark. But as long as she may be used against the Order" the red eyes drilled into the broken body "she *will* be used."

This was no surprise to any of them. The idea of Lily wearing the Dark Mark was as ludicrous as presuming that Lucius would someday donate his fortune to a Muggle orphanage.

Severus had made his decision. This was the right moment to voice his request, the moment he had been waiting for for so long.

"If you wish to utilize the Mudblood's abilities, my Lord," he said, drawing all the attention to himself, "it might be convenient to brand her with a particular mark, that of subservience. It would give you full control over her actions without any risk. She would be unable to use magic except to serve you and you only." He paused to give them more room for reflection, picturing in his imagination the small, snake-like tattoo he was referring to. "Once it leaks out that she is working for us, the Order will be devastated, especially Dumbledore and her precious Marauders she is the last person they would have expected to switch sides. It will be an irremediable blow to their morale, as much as to her own. She thinks she can fool us and drive us apart. In reality, all she will gain is scorn and rejection on both sides."

The silence persisted as his suggestion was being digested. The Dark Lord watched him impassively. It was Rodolphus who reacted first.

"She is a Gryffindor." His nose wrinkled slightly at the word. "How can you be certain she won't choose to die rather than play along?"

"We won't allow her this luxury. There are curses that can prevent her from harming herself. Besides, she won't give up hope on my conversion so easily it will be only too simple for me to manipulate her into obedience." Severus turned his look back to the chalky face. "If you see it fit, my Lord, let me keep the Mudblood. I will see that she carries out every single one of your orders and helps our cause in all respects. I will keep her pliant... and give her everything she deserves." The dark inflection of his voice made it crystal clear as to what he thought she merited.

The glowing eyes narrowed. He felt them dig into his, penetrate him to the core. He did not resist; on the contrary, he summoned his memories, liberated his strictly controlled emotions. He showed everything: the pain he had endured during his childhood, the humiliation he had struggled to avoid at school, his hatred of the Marauders, his tenderness for Lily, which had rapidly escalated into longing, then obsession, then hurt, then resentment, then a cold, vengeful desire and an all-consuming lust. Also the understanding and fulfillment he had found with his colleagues, and his devotion to their master. Last but not least, the countless things he intended to do to Lily once she was his.

The Dark Lord pulled out of his mind, and they locked gazes. It was as though their surroundings had vanished around them while they measured each other up, all the barriers between them gone. In the end, the lipless mouth curled in a malevolent sneer, and Severus knew he had won.

"If I were to grant your wish," his master enunciated slowly, "if I were to mark her as my servant, it would be essential that she willingly submit herself to the ritual. It will be your task to entice her to walk into the trap."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Very well." The Dark Lord shifted in his chair, his voice suddenly turning frosty. "She is under no circumstances to ever contact the Order. If indeed you want to take responsibility for her, you will keep her under constant supervision. The consequences, should you disobey or lose control, will be... everlasting."

"I won't fail you, my Lord," Severus promised unblinkingly.

The pallid creature nodded once, then directed its leer sideways.

"Wormtail!"

The Animagus started and hastily tried to recompose his miserable expression into a more neutral one.

"As soon as the Mudblood is branded, you will inform the Order of her betrayal. You will say precisely what I'll tell you."

Pettigrew gave a nod.

"Avery and Mulciber will make sure you forget none of my instructions."

The two Death Eaters flashed malicious grins at the ex-Marauder, who nodded again, looking more miserable than before.

His law laid, the Dark Lord cast a Reviving Spell upon Lily. In the first seconds, she did not budge, content to suck in large gulps of air. Then she attempted to raise her sore limbs, and a tortured whimper gathered in her throat. Severus approached to help her rise to her feet. She all but collapsed against him.

"You did well, Miss Evans," the Dark Lord said dispassionately. "I will be most pleased to welcome you as the newest member of my trusted circle if you decide to join me. You have one week to settle on your future."

He swept the hall with one last glare, concluding the meeting. "Selwyn, introduce our guest to her new friends and colleagues. See that she is accommodated and made comfortable and refreshed."

The master of the house acquiesced and moved to comply. Voices and murmurs erupted, the crowd beginning to thicken around them. The Dark Lord Disappeared.

With an encouraging embrace and a kiss on her forehead, Severus released the red-headed girl so that Selwyn could shake her hand while showering her with the conventional courtesies. He retreated from the cluster of black cloaks and watched as they engulfed her. She still swayed slightly, looking only half-conscious and more than dazed by the introductions that rained at her.

"Congratulations," Lucius' voice drawled from behind him.

The blond pure-blood had reached him, positioning himself at his right. His gloved fingers were clenched tight around the silver top of his walking stick.

Severus acknowledged him with a nod.

"You've wanted this for long, haven't you?"

"Mmm."

Lily was being presented to Alecto and Bellatrix, the latter of whom was utterly unsuccessful at hiding her venom as cleverly as her fellow.

"I'm sure she'll make a pleasant pet," Lucius commented.

His gray eyes turned obliquely toward the black-haired wizard.

"That's what she is to you, isn't it? You do not intend to go further. Refuse a proper marriage for her sake, or make her the mother of your heirs."

Naturally. Lucius would not be Lucius if he did not preach his elitist principles now and then.

"I will if I choose to," Severus answered evenly.

From the blond man's countenance, it was plain that the retort had been expected. The fair eyebrows arched.

"And have you actually given a thought to your children's future? Have you any idea what their prospect of social status and career would be if they had a Mudblood for a mother? When the Dark Lord takes over the Ministry, do you know how delicate..."

He really was in no mood for this.

"Thank you, Lucius," he interrupted, his gaze lingering on Lily.

"You know best, of course," the pure-blood snapped in a hiss, and his robes swished in the air as he stalked away.

It was presently time to enter the adjacent dining room, where meals and beverages were awaiting them. Selwyn offered his arm to Lily, skillfully masking his contempt. The dark figures followed behind. Severus caught up with Mulciber and Amycus, who strode at the very end of the line.

"Well, aren't we lucky?" Mulciber remarked with feigned envy, solely for his and Carrow's benefit. "She is delicious. May I have a go?"

"No."

"And in a week?"

"No."

"And in a month?"

"No."

"Hairy-hearted miser."

Severus snorted, mildly amused.

The vast dining hall was filled with a multitude of round tables enchanted to rotate every quarter of an hour, which permitted the guests to feast on various dishes without having to move a single inch. Multi-colored fairies were flying beneath the ceiling, carrying miniature lanterns. The air was saturated with the scent of flowers.

Stupefied to the point of numbness, Lily barely noticed the glass of champagne Selwyn shoved into her hand as he stole away, leaving her to face the Death Eaters on her own. She was instantly surrounded by four men, who started proposing equivocal, sinister-sounding toasts.

Severus took a glance around him. There was one person he needed to speak to. He spotted him in one of the darker corners, motionless in a halo of smoke. The man's amber eyes shone out like Galleons on his pasty face half-concealed by strings of oily brown hair. His pinstripe wizarding suit and clean robe clashed strangely with his sleazy aspect.

Augustus Rookwood gave Severus a piercing look and calmly knocked ashes off his cigarette while his colleague came closer. Neither said a word for a minute. Side by side, they observed the other black silhouettes disperse around the room.

The Unspeakable broke the silence first. "What's her happy memory?"

"*Potter.*" It was a challenge not to spit the name out like a particularly offensive swearword.

Rookwood exhaled another swirl of smoke.

"Does she love you?"

"Well enough to have abandoned her friends at my request."

"It might as well be the feeling of guilt. *Orcompassion.* They're different things. You know how adept Gryffindors are at them."

Severus crushed a piece of pumpkin bread in his hand, feeling it pulverize between his fingers. How gratifying it would be to do the same to his rival's bones. However, there was no point in denying the obvious, no matter how badly it infuriated him.

"If she doesn't love me now, she will eventually," he stated coldly.

Rookwood considered this and nodded.

"Does she enjoy sleeping with you?"

Though the questions provoked an unbearable burning sensation in Severus' chest, he knew better than to evade them. Augustus' shrewdness and lucidity were rare qualities even among the Death Eaters. None else of them could be spoken to so directly.

"Yes. But I have restrained myself so far."

The man threw him a puzzled glance that could almost be mistaken for one of sympathy, but said nothing. Unlike their fellows, he neither condemned Severus' preferences nor tried to dissuade him from pursuing Lily; he understood exactly what attracted the younger Death Eater to the green-eyed witch, aside from her beauty.

Kind, gentle and loving to the last fiber of her being an ethereal soul par excellence she was the complete opposite to everything they stood for. Her grace was just one of the many reflections of her inner purity. And this was what Severus longed to possess. Since the day he had subconsciously perceived the girl's innocence as a child, he had felt an irresistible pull toward her, unable to smother the numerous emotions she awakened in him: enchantment, elevation, and most disturbingly, shame. If this pull had not diminished with the years, it had taken on an angry, embittered new edge: the wish to subdue. He wanted to torture her to the ultimate point where she would be forced to descend from her pedestal and seek him out as her only solace. He wanted to punish her for all the pain she had caused him when she had offered her love to another man. And if his vindictive passion destroyed her in the process, he would at least be free.

"She is the right one for you," Rookwood commented, eyeing the slim Gryffindor. "Even a blind man could tell. The question is: is it true the other way around?"

"You philosophize too much, Augustus," Severus grumbled through clenched teeth.

The other pulled deeply on his cigarette and expelled the smoke with a sigh of boredom, eyelids closed. Then, despite the indifference he displayed, a sly grin made its way up to his features.

He let the stub vanish between his dirty-nailed fingers and turned to leave.

"By the way," he added smoothly, "I would watch out for the rodent if I were you."

Both looked at Pettigrew, who was shuffling a few tables from Lily, his glower betraying his determination to talk to her.

"Do me a favor and invite him for a strip poker session," Severus suggested darkly. "And do not let him go until you've stripped him out of his spotty skin."

Rookwood strode away with a chuckle. It was common knowledge that he never lost at games.

As Severus moved toward Lily, he fixed his gaze on Pettigrew's beady eyes, which stared back at him with an expression of utmost outrage. Strong with the Dark Lord's promise, he sneered, sending all his triumph and glee right into the man's mind. And he was rewarded when the pathetic spy spun on his heels and swept from the hall.

Lily's hand was stiff around her untouched flute. Setting her champagne on the table, he embraced her. She slumped in his arms like a lifeless mass, her relief so intense that he suspected she might burst into tears at any instant.

"You were incredible, my love," he whispered, cuddling her close. "So brave, so ingenious. I'm so proud of you. It's now over. I promise you'll never have to go through it again."

She gave no sign of having heard him.

Over her head, he glimpsed the back of Rookwood's robes in the adjoining chamber. The brunet was in the middle of an improvised handball match with the Lestrage brothers. A sobbing nude Muggle girl was being roughly tossed between them instead of the said ball.

Perhaps it was better to take Lily home, to Spinner's End, where she would have a rest. She did not need to witness this side of the Death Eater meetings. Not yet.

Snowflakes were whirling in the frosty air. Dusk was settling, but there would be no gloom tonight. The dense coat of snow upon the roofs of the neighboring houses would illuminate the silent street long after the last glimmers of light would have died away.

She was standing at the window, seemingly immersed in the charm of the snowy waltz. From his place at the door, he was free to contemplate the gentle curves of her body, her striking mane of hair spilled across her back. The beauty of her hair fascinated him. It fell in heavy waves below her shoulders, similar to a turbulent sea of lava. Its color, however, was darker than lava or fire; it was a deep, luxurious shade of auburn he had seen nowhere else. He longed to slide his fingers through this flaming cascade, to plunge his face into this fragrant mass. But he needed to be patient. Her tranquil demeanor did not dupe him.

He clenched a freshly prepared cup of tea in his hand as he approached her. Feeling a light touch on her arm, she glanced up and offered him a small, half-hearted smile. It melted into the faintest frown of anxiety when he placed a kiss on her temple.

"I don't know if I can do it, Sev," she whispered, pressing the cup against her chest in an unconscious attempt to absorb its heat. "I'm afraid I'm not strong enough."

"I'll help you," he murmured. His lips brushed her ear in another kiss.

"I'll never be one of them," she confessed. "I can't perform Dark Magic, and even if I could... they'd still only see me as a Muggle-born."

"The Dark Lord wishes for you to become one of his followers, and so do they. They already respect you. Anyone who fails to treat you with consideration will have to deal with me."

She did not reply. He watched her raise the cup to her mouth and take a sip. The droplet of the green Calming Potion he had slipped into her tea minutes earlier had dissolved and was no longer perceptible. It had been barely larger than a tear, but it would be enough to relieve her. Pacify her. As he looked at her lips, at the curve of her pale neck, an all too familiar desire surged through his veins: the desire to fling her onto the mattress and fuck her until the bed broke underneath them, until she sobbed his name in an excruciating mixture of pleasure and pain, until her soft complexion was speckled with bruises and marks. He chased the idea away. *LATER*, he mentally growled at himself, clearing his mind. There was only one more week to wait. Then she would realize there was no way back, that there had never been a way back since she had crossed the doorstep of his house. It would not matter any more whether she did or did not believe she had been made for him; there would be no question of leaving him. And he would finally indulge in all his fantasies. He was not going to spoil his pleasure by rushing his actions at a whim.

With his arms wrapped around her waist and his chin propped against her shoulder, he gazed out of the window, waiting for her to finish her tea. Soon, she did, and he levitated the empty cup on the table without a single word or move. She remained pensive. He gave her one more moment to compose herself the potion was slowly taking effect before he bent his head to the base of her porcelain throat, where her neck met her shoulder. He began to run teasing kisses over the bare space of skin. To free himself from the violent craving that was still haunting him, he let his thoughts wander to another fantasy of his: the equally pleasant idea of ensnaring her senses with magic and voluptuousness, submitting her to his lust, making her his captive forever.

At first, Lily stiffened. It was only after he cupped her arms to massage them tenderly that her tense muscles relaxed ever so little. She turned and embraced him; yet the gesture was much more one of gratitude than desire. Severus could not but recall Rookwood's assumption, and he felt something rise inside him, thrashing and snarling in his chest. A most peculiar thought occurred to him: maybe he would not have this obsessive need to hurt her if only she loved him as much as he loved her. His hands twitched, and he brought himself to still and draw a shuddering breath. She did not notice. *Good*.

His features emotionless once again, he trailed his fingers up her back, letting them engulf themselves in her hair. They pulled her face closer to his, and for a brief instant, he banished all anger from his mind, reveling in the sensation of her soft, delicious lips against his own. She mirrored his caresses with a compelling shyness due, he was sure, to her unease and natural modesty rather than distaste. He started rubbing circles into her flesh through the thick fabric; he would not startle her by removing her clothes too hastily, oh, no in fact, he would go no further until she asked him to. He knew she would eventually comply, if not out of desire, then out of her ridiculous Gryffindorish concept of guilt. His long fingers glided over her skin, fondling her in carefully chosen spots. His lips slid down her neck and shoulders and returned promptly to her mouth, which he recaptured with ravishment.

Long minutes had elapsed before he felt her ready to take off her robe. The time was propitious to lead her to the bed. She did not try to resist as he walked her backwards to the large four-poster, pausing for only the space of a heartbeat to imitate a respectful hesitation. He lowered her onto the sheets and settled beside her, heedless of his urge to cover her lean frame with his. In other circumstances, he would discard their clothes with a simple Vanishing Spell. For this time, however, he found it fitting to

dispose of them by hand. It irked him to delay, to treat her like some sort of an eternal virgin no matter how pure and chaste her soul was but he intuited it would serve his purpose. Pacify her.

In truth, he loved resorting to magic during their intimacies. Levitation allowed creating extraordinary positions in mid-air while spells and potions induced convenient stimulation... or torpor. Then there were myriads of mind-affecting charms, some of which he himself had designed. He always cast them when she looked away, unguarded and unaware of his ruse. And though the presence of his Dark magic never eluded her notice, it was impossible for her to prove he was the cause of her discomfort. He would smile innocently at her probing pout and kiss her more passionately than before.

Her body was beyond lovely. He could not imagine he would ever need another one or fail to invent new ways to use it, if it came to that. The ivory breasts heaved in a slightly uneven rhythm, the nipples hard and enticing. His finger traced a line between them, venturing up to contour each of the two delicate buds of flesh before he stooped down to titillate them with his tongue. She responded at once, her hands grazing at his shoulders in a light stroking motion. This incentive alone was enough to undermine his self-control, and frenzied with lust, he braced himself atop her, devouring her lips without any more restraint. He had resolved not to coax her into a new position tonight. The only spell he would apply would be Imperius, a subtle hint of it. Faint enough not to be recognized as one, it would nonetheless impel her to pleasure him with her sweet mouth. The vague veil of euphoria that invariably accompanied the curse would only do her good. He knew she would give him the favor freely if he voiced his desire, but he wanted her to believe the idea had arisen in her own mind.

Lily did not disappoint. Halfway through their kiss, she softly pushed at his chest, making him turn onto his back. Her hair tickled his sides while she kissed her way down his abdomen. And suddenly a vision, as clear as sunlight, sprang before his hooded eyes: her bare figure chained to a wall in his cellar. A moan escaped his throat, leaving his spirit on edge and his body in fever. Her slender fingers brushed against his member, soon followed by her lips. He was aroused to the point of giddiness as he let the fantasy flow. She was on her knees on the damp floor with her hands tied behind her back. Her eyes were enormous with terror, and they leaked abundant tears, which felt warm and itchy on his pubes. He slammed into her whimpering mouth, his hand steely in her hair. Each thrust drew a muffled cry from the bloodless lips, and the sound fueled his excitation, making his lust explode in powerful waves of heat and ecstasy. Her beautiful face twisted in a burst of sobs she suffocated, but he would not loosen his hold until she licked him clean. They both were acutely aware that it was merely a beginning.

A stifled lament, far too real to be a part of his phantasm, jolted Severus into alertness. He squinted down his torso through eyelids heavy with bliss. Lily's face lay buried in his lap; he was clutching her head in a viselike grip, impaling her on his still-inflated erection. She clenched her fists and groaned quietly under the pressure, for she could not disengage herself without hurting him. He had gotten carried away. *The fool.* In seconds, he had her released and was cradling her in his arms. The look on her face almost caused him to curse his imprudence aloud.

After he had carefully laid her on the pillow, he proceeded to kiss her hands and cheeks, whispering humble apologies: he had acted like a selfish bastard, he would never do this again, he was so sorry.

"It's nothing." Her weak smile only drove him to double his attentions. "You know," she said quickly, "it means I can make you lose control. Who else can say as much?"

He resumed his caresses with a grateful kiss on her palm, but inside, he was seething *Plain brilliant.* He had frightened her. Not that she would show her true emotions, not that she would blame him she was too Gryffindorish, too self-sacrificing, too *good* for her own good. But his oversights were not forgivable. The Dark Lord had made it unambiguously clear that she was to join him of her own free will. All would be in vain if he marred her judgment in the slightest. And mar it he would if he couldn't keep his desires under control for a damn week.

There would be no more slips, he swore to himself, deadly calm. *None at all.*

The brilliant green gaze met his own. It did not take Legilimency to discern the poorly concealed hurt and fear in its depths. He knew what to do. Cautiously, he leaned forward until his lips touched her pale forehead. The moment she felt his fond kiss, devoid of its usual hunger, some of the tension in her body subsided. He closed his eyes and focused on her memory of his very last climax, on the pleasure she had given him without even realizing she had been forced to. Magic coursed through his limbs, tremendous yet supple. Now was the time.

Obliviate.

There was one tiny sigh, and her apprehensive features became smooth. She was touching him again. He looked in her warm, caring eyes, and unexpectedly, his lips pulled in a shadow of a smirk. With another lingering kiss on her mouth, he plunged into her. It was as delectable as he had anticipated. This time, he did not allow himself to lose his wits in pointless imaginings. He kept his gaze locked on her large orbs, so lucid yet mysterious, and concentrated on the softness of her hands caressing his back, the delightful firmness of her nipples beneath his chest, the silkiness of her skin against his. They came at the same instant and collapsed into one another's arms as the sweet exhaustion overwhelmed them.

The snow was falling densely. Shadows flashed upon Lily's white torso, her thoughtful face. She was facing him; her look, however, was aimed at something far beyond his form, and she did not seem to notice that he was studying her intently, taking in every detail: the way her lashes fluttered, the lonely strand of hair crawling across her neck. A rapid flick of Legilimency would suffice to unveil her thoughts without disturbing her reverie. He pushed into her mind, discreet and slithery.

She was thinking of the Order. The majority of her fellow Gryffindors had joined Dumbledore to fight the Dark Lord. She recalled the former students she had once been so attached to and wondered how different her life would be had she chosen to stay with them rather than follow Severus. Had she accepted Potter's proposal.

Potter. If the rumors reported by Pettigrew could be trusted, Lily's rejection had left him heartbroken, though by no means discouraged. *Oh, well.* The arrogant prick had not yet been made aware that his beloved Lily, now his nemesis's lover, would shortly swear allegiance to the Dark Lord. And if this did not deter him, Severus would be happy to pay him a visit with three or four of his colleagues. They would bring Pettigrew to tell them the exact location of Potter's domicile, and they would leave a lush and shiny Dark Mark above the indicated house. If Black or the werewolf happened to be present, all the better.

"Why did you join them?"

His eyes shot to hers, and he hesitated for a second before grasping the meaning of her question. She was preparing to attack. He repressed a smile, setting his features into hard, solemn lines.

"I belong with them."

She gazed at him without a word.

"Why did *you* join them?" he inquired gently.

"To be with you." She reached up and timidly squeezed his hand.

He pulled her in an embrace. Her hair spilled across his arm, and he stroked it, watching her engaging face that lay inches from his.

"But it's hard," she whispered.

"I know."

She buried her head in the crook of his neck. A few more minutes passed in silence.

"Do you really share their beliefs?" The words were muffled but distinct.

"For the large part. It's not all about the ideology, though. There is more to them than the pure-bloods' propaganda and the Dark Arts."

"Boundless magic, and power, and wisdom," she mumbled.

"Exactly."

"I understand."

He wanted to chuckle.

"But don't you sometimes get the impression that you might be happier if you weren't a part of their group?" Her voice sounded softer than usual. He supposed it was the closest she would ever come to manipulation.

"I can't imagine being happier than I am now." He pressed her tight against his chest to emphasize his statement.

She only sighed in response. "You know, I could be content with just your love. I don't need anything else to make me happy."

"If we lived in a different world, I would claim the same," he assured her.

It was a lie, of course. Dark magic was so deeply embedded in his personality that he would not consider leaving his Lord or abandoning his Death Eater role no matter the social climate. Lily and the Dark Arts were precisely what he needed for a satisfactory life. Never mind that they were absolute opposites.

He went on nonetheless. "But at a time like this, we can't isolate ourselves from the wizarding world without being forced into hiding. War is coming, and everyone will have to choose their side. We would always be prosecuted by one of the two parties. Besides, isn't it our duty to support those we believe to be right?"

She argued no more. The conversation had led to a dead end, and to transcend it, she would have to admit how precarious if not non-existent her faith in the Death Eaters' cause was. A while later, she fell asleep, lulled by his touch and still under the influence of his Calming Draught.

Severus played with a strand of her hair, listening to her serene breathing. He knew she would try again the next day, and the following day, and the day after the following day. He was going to enjoy her sweet attempts at persuasion. She would soon realize they were utterly futile and that she had badly miscalculated when she had renounced the Order's protection. But it would be too late. She would never be able to escape him.

A dark smile curved his lips as he gently smoothed her locks.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 2

Determined to drive Severus away from the Dark side, Lily feigns to join him in his service to the Dark Lord. She cannot imagine that her reputation is the least of the things she will lose. Very dark.

Note: Many thanks to blue artemis for the beta.

A smile, gentle like the kiss of dawn upon a snowdrop. A twinkle of laughter deep in the forest green eyes. A playful toss of the flaming curls. Then she was gone again.

The lump in his throat was suffocating him. He wished to look away, yet found himself gazing at the window glass with more tenacity than before. Would he get another glimpse of the sweet face that haunted him? He both craved and dreaded the translucent vision on the pane, even though it was a mere phantom of his imagination. The peaceful life flourishing behind his window was no longer of interest to him: the wizards and witches strolling down the snow-covered alley, the children playing in the snow, the occasional owls circling above the lanterns, none of them could offer him comfort.

The illusion came again, fleeting like a dream. She was looking up through thick lashes, a blush on her cheeks. Her hair was twisted in a simple bun he longed to untie, just to feel her locks spilling between his fingers. He had only done so once.

Blinking, he turned away. Lily's magical picture smiled at him from the mantelpiece. Sirius had once suggested removing it; the idea had earned him a mutinous glare, after which he had never voiced it again. Secretly, however, James felt grateful for his friend's concern. Seeing this picture caused him so much pain.

Lily's face had been ashen pale the evening she had left; gone had been her cheeriness and vivacity he loved so dearly. With a quiet *m sorry*, she had handed him back the engagement ring he had given her shortly before their graduation. Then, in a few lifeless flicks of her wand, she had packed her belongings while he watched, unable to comprehend what was happening, unwilling to accept it. It was only when she had paused to give him one last glance that he had gasped out the words swollen in his throat, "You don't have to do this."

But she had sadly shaken her head and stepped out into the fog, disappearing on the spot. His shock had been so great he had remained in the hall, his eyes fixed on the evening alley through the door she had left agape. It was as though a Dementor had enfolded him, compressing his heart with its chilling claws; the feeling of emptiness in his chest could not have been more complete. Nothing had horrified him more than the despair in her eyes, though...not her silence, not even her leaving. The day before, she had been laughing merrily, kissing him with genuine passion and love. Whatever had brought the change in her demeanor had made her suffer. And he hated himself for not having prevented her from going away. He should have caught her arm, taken her home and begged her to stay, for if she loved him, what else mattered? What could be more important for either of them? But he had been frozen to his core, incapable of a single thought.

The ring was burning his skin through the fabric of his pocket, just like the unshed tears were burning his eyes. He longed to know where she now stayed and whether she was happy. But he had no right to pursue her any more. Not unless she chose to return.

Suddenly, the tension in the air mounted, similar to the moment of silence before a lightning strike. A second later, a figure materialized before the house. It was a slightly plump man in a dark cloak, with brown hair glittering with snow. Peter. James watched him approach the entrance door, still immersed in his despondent musing; the sound of knocking had the effect of a Reviving Spell upon him. He quickly banished the traces of grief from his face, fully aware that no amount of pretense would deceive his friends. He had almost descended the stairs when the door slid open: Sirius, who stopped by every day in an attempt to comfort him, had let Peter in.

As the latter rid himself of his cloak, his fatigued expression came into focus. The circles beneath his eyes were heavy and striking, and there was a frown line on his

forehead James had never noticed before. The beady eyes exuded wariness and, most disturbingly, *resignation*. Peter presently looked much older than his age.

Their gazes locked. Something important, something terrible had happened, James could tell this at once.

The guest's enunciation was uncharacteristically distinct and somber. "We need to talk."

With a nod, James turned on his heels and led the way to the living room, where he and Sirius lowered themselves into armchairs, leaving the sofa to the newcomer.

"It's about Lily."

The name sent a jolt through James's body, and he instinctively straightened up in his seat. Even in his distress, it seemed to him those two syllables lightened the air around them like a beam of sunlight.

"Have you seen her?" The question had slipped from his lips before he had even registered it.

"No, but I know where she is. Brace yourself, this will hurt. She is with Snape. *And* she is in serious danger."

There was a short silence, followed by Sirius's exclamation of disbelief. "Snape? He is a Death Eater!"

"Yes," Peter snorted grimly.

James had gone rigid with consternation. *Snape*. His wild imagination instantly pictured to him the sallow face and the inscrutable black eyes, along with all they represented. He loathed the skanky git, yet his hatred was *nothing* compared to the hatred the said git entertained toward him. Irrespective of his blood status, the man had been the perfect incarnation of the elitist Dark wizard since his very childhood: calculating, unscrupulous, self-serving, and fascinated by the Dark Arts. Lily had never seen him for who he truly was, even though he had hurt her dozens of times. But James had come to know his nature, and the way Snape would observe Lily had not escaped his attention. He had been a fool not to have realized immediately who the cause of his misfortune was.

"Did he harm her?" he heard himself snarl.

"I think he did, in a way. I don't know what he told her to make her believe him...maybe he put her under a curse...but he convinced her it was her fault he had joined the Dark... You-Know-Who. And that if she really wanted to right her wrongs and save him from the Dark side, she had to stay with him."

James trembled with rage, his face crimson and hot. At his side, Sirius scanned Peter with a piercing look, utterly bemused.

"But this is not the worst of it," Peter continued. "He plans to do more than just seduce her. Apparently, he proposed that You-Know-Who should use her against us...you know, by turning her into one of his 'servants.'"

His companions gaped at him.

"This doesn't make sense," James objected. "Lily would never join You-Know-Who."

Peter arched an eyebrow. "Not even to save someone from a tragic fate? Someone she thinks she made miserable?"

His mouth went dry. The idea was inhumane. How could Snivellus have planted such a belief in her mind? How could *he* tell her such a thing...her of all people?

"That's right," Peter stated drearily, gauging James's reaction. "He knew she would fall for his story. He is manipulating her into joining his master. Once she is at their mercy, they'll use her as a puppet against Dumbledore."

A thousand delirious questions whirled in James's mind, filling him with anger and apprehension. But he knew this: he would save Lily from their clutches, just before killing Snivellus with his bare hands.

"How do you know this?" Sirius inquired.

"I saw him." Peter's eyes became distant, glassy, as did his voice. "Snape. Heard him talk to the Death Eaters."

"When?"

"Yesterday night at Knockturn Alley." He shook his head as if to clear it. "I was spending the evening in Flourish and Blotts, looking for books on counter-curses. When it grew late, I went to the Leaky Cauldron for dinner; it was quite deserted at that hour. As I was talking to Tom, I saw a black figure sneak to the courtyard and tap the bricks. I suspected right away it was Snape: he had exactly the same bearing, the same gait, the same greasy hair. He set out to Diagon Alley, and on impulse, I came after him. I didn't give it much thought...it just felt like a golden opportunity to find out more about him, maybe about the whole bunch of them...and with no one around, I decided to try."

"The street was dark and it was snowing again, but I cast a Disillusionment Charm on myself just the same, in case more of them arrived. Eventually, he turned into Knockturn Alley and walked up to a shabby little shop called the Spiny Serpent. After he entered, I peeked into the window. There were people inside, all dressed in black and seated around a table; it definitely gave the impression of a meeting. I used the Unlocking Charm to open the window a few inches, which allowed me to make out about the half of their conversation. This is what I heard."

"According to Snape, Lily trusts she can drive him from the Dark side and persuade him to join the Order. She now lives in his house, and he keeps her under supervision, making sure she doesn't spy for us. He means to trick her into swearing allegiance to You-Know-Who."

"Are you saying they consider giving *Lily* the Dark Mark?" Sirius asked incredulously.

"No, not the Dark Mark. That would be too much honor. I understand there is a specific complex of spells for those He chooses to enslave; it must be loosely based on the magic inflicted on house-elves. The brand in question is a tattoo shaped as a little snake on a person's wrist."

Peter threw a cautious glance at James's livid face.

"If Lily is subjected to those spells, she won't be able to use magic without You-Know-Who's permission. They'll make her work for him...presumably brew potions...to both mentally destroy her and present her as a traitor to the Order. Snape will keep her under control; he had a word with You-Know-Who, who agreed to let him have her as a sort of... reward. I don't reckon we can reasonably save her after this ritual is performed."

James could not take another word. Blood was drumming in his temples, and fury was slowly clouding his vision.

"When does this ritual take place?" he ground out.

Peter lowered his eyes. "Tomorrow."

This was not happening. James exchanged a look of dismay with Sirius.

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow evening. I'm sorry, I came as quickly as I could."

James stood up and walked over to the window, propping himself against the ledge. His eyes shifted from one house to the next without taking in anything. Sirius's grave voice broke the silence.

"Where does Snape live?"

"Somewhere in Cokeworth," James said hatefully. "Not far from Lily's family. It should be easy enough to find him."

"I don't think it's a good idea," Peter objected, much to their surprise. "I understood the ritual would be held in the Lestranges' house. It's quite possible they'd gather there today to get ready. Besides, it would be difficult to break through Snape's wards; Dark magic has always been his specialty."

"What about the Lestranges' wards?" James riposted, struggling to stifle his rising temper. "Does it sound easier to enter an old pure-blood mansion than breach Snivellus's enchantments?"

Peter chewed on his lip as he contemplated this.

"It's not easier," he conceded. "However, I'm pretty certain going to Cokeworth will do us no good. It will be a waste of time."

"You said it was *quite possible* they'd be spending the day in the Lestranges' house," Sirius pointed out. "Now you're *pretty certain*?"

"It's much more plausible. Cokeworth is Lily's native town, and she could find a way to escape at the last minute if she changed her mind," Peter explained patiently. "And despite their number, the location actually plays in our favor. Snape knows we're Animagi...I've no doubt he set wards to prevent us from coming anywhere near his house, especially now that he's keeping Lily captive. The Lestranges might still not know, or they might not have bothered extending their protection."

James turned, his eyes feverish.

"You suggest that we transform to slip into the house?"

"Exactly. If we're lucky, we'll steal in without trouble. You know Hogwarts isn't secured against the intrusion of Animagi; let's hope the Lestranges are no more creative in their magic."

Sirius pondered this, a frown of concentration on his brows.

"What about Moony?"

"He doesn't have to go," James said distractedly.

Sirius shook his head. "He'll want to, Prongs. He'd never accept to be left behind. Moreover, our chances will be better if he comes along."

As true as this was, the knowledge his friends would be accompanying him to this nest of snakes left James with the sensation of a lead weight setting below his heart. He had no right to ask such a sacrifice of them... nor did he have the choice.

His eyes sought out Peter, who was listening impassively.

"In Moony's case," the latter started, "the only way to get him past the wards would probably be to transfigure him into a beast."

He raised his gaze to find both James and Sirius speechless and sighed.

"I know, but what else? We have no time to get the Polyjuice Potion, and your Invisibility Cloak won't be sufficient. Also, we don't want to alert them by attempting to destroy their wards."

"On second thought," Sirius reflected with a shadow of a smile, "Moony might prefer to stay behind after all."

James forced the corners of his lips upwards. Then his face sobered.

"I've heard enough. I'm leaving. I don't ask any of you to come with me."

Sirius flashed him a condescending smirk and sprang to his feet. Peter followed suit, fumbling in his pockets.

"I have to make a stop home before we go. Give me half an hour; I'll be back by the time Moony joins us."

He granted them a faint smile...a smile belied by the anxious way he was wringing his hands. James almost drew a breath to object, then halted. He owed Peter more than he could ever repay. Besides, they were right: it was indispensable to wait for Remus.

Sirius, however, did not appear to share his understanding. He was scrutinizing the guest, his gray eyes pausing, for the space of several heartbeats, on the forearm Peter was kneading restlessly.

"What is it you need to go home for? Prongs might already have it."

"I need to check a few spells," Peter assured. "I won't take long."

With a nod to them both, he strode out to the entry hall and threw his cloak across his shoulders, waving off James's solicitudes.

A snap of the door, a soft *pop*, and he was gone.

Swiftly, James walked back into the living room, where Sirius was pacing up and down, a shadow of unease on his face.

"I don't like this, Prongs," he declared earnestly. "I don't like this one bit."

James knew he was not referring to Lily's capture.

"Did you notice how twitchy he became by the end?" Sirius scowled. "Have you ever heard anything comparable? From *Wormtail*?"

Unsettled by the turn the conversation was taking, James listened quietly.

"We've known him for eight years, Prongs. Personally, I can't remember the last time he did a thing on his own. And now, on a simple *impulse*, he followed Snape to Knockturn Alley, eavesdropped on a Death Eater meeting, and presented us with a plan he would never be able to improvise on the spot. How likely is it?"

"Are you implying he lied about Lily?"

"Maybe not. But I don't feel we can trust his story."

James heaved a breath of distress and frustration, running a hand through his hair. It cost him a great effort to form his next words.

"You were looking at his arm."

Sirius's chiseled features paled imperceptibly, but his voice did not waver. "Yes."

Peter was conversant with the Death Eaters' intentions. He was informed of their customs and could even provide a precise idea of the magic Voldemort had recourse to in order to subjugate his victims. When Sirius had put him a direct question, he had taken flight like a spooked hare. And unless it had been an auditory illusion, he had nearly called Voldemort the Dark Lord...a title favored by the wizard's followers.

Dread closed on James's chest like a vice.

"Suppose this *appalling accusation* is true and he is one of them. Isn't he staking his life by revealing their secrets?"

"Then he should have told us earlier, not at the last minute." It was Sirius's turn to hesitate. "It could be a trap."

"Perhaps. But if it isn't..." It was unnecessary to complete the sentence. If Peter had spoken the truth and the Death Eaters enslaved Lily, he would not survive the pain. "No matter what happens, I have to go. If Lily is there, I'll save her. I won't let Snivellus hurt her any more."

Unsurprised, Sirius fixed him with a long look and nodded.

"I'll come with you. But let's call Moony. We'll need his help."

James turned toward the window and closed his eyes. Memories of Lily's beautiful smiling face enveloped his mind, filled his entire being.

"*Expecto Patronum*," he cried out, raising his wand. A dazzling silver stag blossomed in the air and dashed through the window into the snow-covered alley.

The Lestranges' mansion loomed in the snowstorm like an immense, blurry shadow with a multitude of sharp angles and turret-like chimneys. The heavy, rectangular windows were black on all the floors. Protected by their strongest Disillusionment Charm, James, Sirius, and Remus strode toward the front gate, crouching against the wind, yet grateful for the violent tempest, for it perfected their camouflage.

Peter had not returned. An owl had arrived in his stead, bringing them a piece of parchment which contained a seventeen-syllable-long incantation and Peter's apologies. According to this succinct note, he was being delayed and they ought to proceed without him. James and Sirius had shared a dark glance, but there was no turning back. They had taken the risk, cast the incantation and penetrated through the protective wards as easily as though those were mist. The simple part ended there.

The gate swung open at their approach. Shaking snow off his hair and coat, James retrieved his Invisibility Cloak and motioned to Remus, ending the enchantment. Sirius transformed. Since they could no longer hide under the Cloak together without letting their feet protrude from the hem, Sirius, the tallest of the three, preferred to assume his animal form and run by his companions' side, concealed by a Disillusionment Charm. Aside from an effective disguise, this ruse presented a precious advantage: when transformed, Padfoot possessed the extraordinary olfactory senses of a dog.

The entrance hall was deserted. It was vast and cold; the fire on the grand hearth, topped by the macabre skull of a horned dragon, was extinguished. Carefully, they stepped into an assembly room. The windows were so tall they immersed the chamber in a ghostly shine, although not a flame flickered in the chandelier or the fireplace. The Marauders bypassed the long table with its countless chairs, eyeing mistrustfully the vigilant portraits and tapestries on the walls.

A gloomy corridor stretched before them, lined with even more paintings. While Padfoot sniffed at their surroundings to show the way, James pulled out his wand and murmured, "*Homenum Revelio*." The sensation of a presence swooping upon him confirmed his hopes: they were not alone. He nodded at Remus.

Chambers and hallways succeeded each other, chilly and lifeless. The furniture was rather heavy than elegant, though there could be no denying the residence had been decorated with both taste and luxury. Every door they walked through caused James's heart to plummet deeper in his chest, as the silence around them presaged no good. Despite Peter's claims, the mansion did not seem to be hosting an army of Death Eaters preparing for a ritual; it was empty and much more likely to constitute the trap Sirius had suspected. But he refused to admit Peter might have lied to them. There were people in this manor, and he had to find them. They would know where Lily was staying.

After crossing a series of rooms, they reached the staircase to the next floor. Padfoot mounted it without hesitation. At the top of the stairs, he hastened his pace and bristled up. James's breath caught in his throat in anticipation; he gripped his wand more tightly, and so did Remus. They were in a rectangular hallway that led to six closed doors, three on each side. At Padfoot's sign, they marched to the first one on their left, and he instantly smelled the doorstep, growling softly.

"He's in there, isn't he?" Remus said.

Sirius adopted his human form and freed himself of the Disillusionment Charm. The snarl he gave was not unworthy of his Animagus self. "Yes."

"Is Lily with him?" James asked at once.

Sirius shook his head. "No, but he's got company."

An oblong keyhole was visible below the elaborate door handle. Digging into his pocket, James produced an oval piece of blue glass, slipped out of the Cloak and dropped to his knees, placing the object against the narrow hole. It magnified the image tenfold, allowing him to inspect the room without great obstacle. The chamber was spacious, richly decorated. He discerned two figures seated at a chess table and gesticulating dramatically as though in argument...Rookwood and Macnair, he was positive. Off to their side, Lucius Malfoy was reclining on a couch, his icy eyes attached to the players with a mild interest. And there, by the window, two men stood in deep conversation. Hatred swelled in James's chest as he recognized Snape's tall black silhouette, his statue-like posture, his repugnant oily hair. The other person was one of the Lestrangle brothers...Rodolphus, considering his slim frame.

"He's in there with Malfoy, Macnair, Rookwood, and Rodolphus Lestrangle." He scanned the contents of the chamber. "But there is a door at the back of the room. There might be more of them inside."

"Perhaps they keep Lily elsewhere in the house," Remus said, discarding the Cloak so they could hear him. "If we could find her and leave before they notice..."

It was, indeed, the most sensible option.

"What if we don't find her?" James's eyes drilled into the loathsome black silhouette. "What if she is in this back room?"

"We'll attack," Sirius promised.

With one last look at the reflection, James pulled away to rise when his peripheral vision caught a movement in the closed room. Malfoy had turned his head toward the door. A tiny smile was playing around his lips, and he was regarding...*how could it be?*...the keyhole James was peering through, as if trying to establish eye contact. James's heart skipped a beat.

"They know we're here," he breathed, watching the blond wizard lift himself from the couch in what was clearly meant to be an elegant swish of his robes.

"Wands out, quick!"

Malfoy's hand plunged into his robes, and James jumped to his feet, backing away from the door which was certain to explode any second. Alert, Sirius and Remus waited by his side.

"Let's blast it open!" Sirius whispered. "Then Stun whomever you can."

James nodded in assent, and it was this small move that made him perceive a twitch on the wall to his right. This twitch had been caused by the bland painting of a bearded man in a gray cape. The portrait surely had a twin painting in the adjacent chamber and must have warned Malfoy about their intrusion.

"*Bombarda Maxima!*"

The stream of light from Sirius's wand blew the door into pieces, and a heartbeat later, the three of them were firing Stunning Spells through the cloud of dust and fragments of wood.

One of the scarlet shots rebounded from the wall and shattered a vase. The second charm was deflected by Malfoy, who, judging from his smug expression, had expected to be attacked. James's spell was reserved for Snape, but instead it hit Lestrage, making the man collapse to Snape's feet. Then an ear-piercing crash came from their right, where Rookwood and Macnair had sent the table flying out of their way. The four Death Eaters stationed themselves in the middle of the chamber, their wands pointing toward the entry. Snape's black eyes finally distinguished the invaders, and he sneered. James felt his blood boil in his veins. With a silent Protego on his lips, he burst into the room, followed by his friends.

"Where is she?" he growled.

"Who?" Snape retorted, his voice a concentration of malice and arrogance.

"Lily! Where is she?"

"That is none of your concern, Potter. She cares nothing for you."

The assertion was undoubtedly tailored to sting, yet it only served to fuel James's rage.

"If you don't tell me where she is, I'll curse each and every one of you, and I'll break more than your slimy face *Snivellus*."

Snape smirked and raised his wand, poisoning himself for the combat. He could not express more eloquently that he accepted the challenge.

But before either wizard could charge, Malfoy and Rookwood cast the Torture Curse. Two jets of red light passed on both sides of James, and he heard with trepidation Sirius and Remus dash aside to dodge them. There was no time to rush to their defense: a billow of black vapor was soaring toward him from the tip of Snape's wand. He blocked it, dissipating it with a charm, and fired a Disarming Spell at his enemy, who promptly Disappeared to reemerge at the opposite end of the chamber, conjuring another thick ribbon of light. He still was sneering, but the look in his eyes was changing, gaining a disturbing gleam. The moment James fended off his curse, a new stream of fire was already licking at his face.

The air vibrated with incantations and clamor. He caught a glimpse of Sirius fighting off the combined attacks of Malfoy and Macnair while Remus was dueling Rookwood. His wand hand itched to knock at least one Death Eater unconscious and help his companions, but he could not let his attention drift away for so much as a split second. He had underestimated Snape. Every curse he received was frightfully precise, and he was positive some of them had only recently been invented. With both anger and alarm, he realized he was defending his position instead of assailing his nemesis. This was no way to win.

Once again, he attempted to Stun Snape, to no avail. The Dark wizard released in response a series of Cruciatius Curses at a very short interval, forcing James to take steps back until he reached the back of the room. With a sharp flick of Snape's wand, James felt himself brutally pushed against the wall, sore and gasping. He instinctively sensed a new spell flare toward him and dove to the ground as swiftly as he could. The next instant, a stream of *green light* produced a crack in the wall where his face had just been.

He heard Sirius roar in outrage. Shaking splinters from his head, he leapt to his feet, breathless but on his guard. His heart sank: Lestrage had recovered and joined the fight.

As soon as their number was complete, the Death Eaters' tactics changed. They started retreating as though intent on staying close together, but each of the men kept focus on the Marauder he was dueling. Their coordination was uncanny: they moved like a single giant creature, not once glancing at each other for guidance. James suddenly understood how they had become this powerful.

"Now!"

The command had come from Malfoy, who brandished his wand, as did his cronies. Five jets of green light shot in the trio's direction. In the ensuing boom, James crouched to the floor, casting a charm to protect himself from the large pieces of stone that were showering on him. To his immense relief, his friends let out a cry a few feet from him, and he knew they had avoided the curses in time. From his low position, he sent the Stinging Hex at the nearest Death Eater...Macnair...and watched the robust man tumble down with a shriek.

Malfoy ignored him.

"Again!"

This time, the Killing Curses were four; the Marauders eluded them in a deafening crash of sound. Pillars of dust hovered in the air like thick swarms of midges. James peered at Sirius's face to find it pale with fury.

"Moony!" his best friend shouted. "At the next!"

They threw themselves aside, away from the deadly green beams, and once the danger passed, Remus and Sirius fired the same curse at the group of enemies, much to James's dismay. He fleetingly reflected how well Sirius knew him, how he had chosen not to ask for his assistance, aware that James would never consent to kill.

The assault did not succeed, but it had the merit of breaking the Death Eaters' compact formation and dispersing them into different directions. The duels began anew.

Lestrage and Macnair...who, in the meantime, had shaken off James's Hex...turned against Remus while Rookwood and Malfoy strived to defeat Sirius. Snape, for his part, paid heed to none but James. There was something chilling about the way his four companions kept their distance from James, as though respecting Snape's claim to kill him on his own. The black-eyed wizard's gaze and motions were literally imbued with determination.

James felt no fear or exhaustion, only the burning urge to incapacitate the monsters and find Lily. The thought filled him with strength as he blocked Snape's sinister curses, reciprocating them to his best ability. He risked a glance at Remus, who was slowly being cornered and overpowered, and this small distraction was his undoing: a shot of magic hit him in the chest with the force of an iron fist. Once again, he was sent flying against the wall. Although the collision made all before his eyes go black, he thrashed fiercely, as his momentary weakness could have the most fatal consequences.

And then he heard a cry: a short, high-pitched cry of anguish. His heart gave a throb because it was the most beautiful voice he knew. He would recognize it anywhere.

Through heavy eyelids, he saw Lily's silhouette at the door to the adjoining chamber. Her hair was wild, and her eyes glowed. Without a second's hesitation, she lunged

forward to James's defense.

Her abrupt intervention surprised the Death Eaters as much as it had the Marauders, and the streams of green light ceased on the spot. The men manifestly could not take a chance to harm her. Snape's wand hand, raised high for the ultimate curse, dropped...he had half-turned to look at her with a furious disbelief.

"Hold her!" he barked.

Macnair swooped on Lily, grabbing at her arm, but she elbowed him in the stomach with such abandon that he doubled over. Rookwood quit his duel to aid him. Thick ropes spurted out of the tip of his wand, entwining themselves around the girl's frame. He roughly pulled her to the back of the room.

James had already regained balance, and he could barely contain his rage at the sight of the yellow-eyed creep bruising Lily.

"Get your filthy hands off..."

His way, however, was obstructed by Snape, and he was forced to parry new spells.

While his colleagues dueled, Rookwood paced in the shadows like a large panther, observing them with his eerie amber eyes. Wriggling and desperate, Lily lay on the ground behind him, bound from shoulders to feet. A tiny part of James was grateful the man was at least shielding her with his body.

In the tumult of cracking and booms, another cry rose in the air. *Sirius*. From the corner of his eye, James discerned Malfoy's face, animated with a smile of pure malevolent glee. He was steadily approaching an injured, gasping Sirius, who seemed to be bleeding from his right side. Horror seized James like a nightmare come true. Summoning all the energy he could muster, he hurled a ball of fire into Snape's face and used the ensuing instant of confusion to Stun the blond pure-blood. Staggering, Sirius pointed his wand to his wound, his head thrown back in a strangled moan of pain, and an incantation on his lips. His hasty healing charm lived to its purpose, for he straightened up and rushed to Remus's help.

James felt giddy with agitation and alarm. When his attention was reclaimed by Snape, he poured his inexpressible emotions into an exchange of quick, dangerous hexes. In the end, Snape's wand flew from his hand and landed yards away. He was finally disarmed.

Right then, a thundering *Crucio!* split the chamber, and from her spot on the ground, Lily screamed in agony. It was as though James's heart had been smashed to smithereens.

"NO!"

His nemesis forgotten, he darted toward her. This was enough for Rookwood to release the girl from the curse and look up, his smug eyes shifting beyond James in a meaningful nod. White-hot pain engulfed the Marauder. Although it was not the *Cruciatus*, the sensation was nearly as dreadful and intense, causing him to collapse on the ground in a shuddering heap. He heard a burst of voices, but it took his disoriented mind a few seconds to comprehend them.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Saving your bloody life, Severus."

"Keep her out of this!"

"You'd be dead if I had."

He was scrambling to his feet. His bones hurt, his muscles hurt even more, and his breaths escaped in hissing rasps. Glancing over his shoulder, he realized the curse had been cast by Lestrage. To distract the Death Eater, Remus and Sirius were now assailing Macnair.

In the meantime, Snape had recovered his wand, and Rookwood had revived the unconscious Malfoy. Resisting despair was becoming more and more challenging. This was not going to end.

It was by sheer force of will that James continued fighting as vigorously as before, ignoring his growing fatigue and pain. Snape had noticed: he could see it in the bastard's smirk. There was no telling whether his enemy had tired as well.

Hatred rose inside James, scorching and suffocating. How he loathed him.

"*Crucio!*"

For the first time in his life, the shot of red light left his wand, and he did not regret it in the least. But Snape deflected it easily and let the magic crash into the wall, where it blasted a hole. Then he laughed.

"Potter, don't tell me you have grown up to use the Unforgivables! What an honor it is to be your *first*... target."

"*Levicorpus!*" James yelled, slightly red faced. He was not interested in trading obscene insults with anyone, especially Snivellus.

Remarkably, the black-eyed wizard went silent as he blocked this spell; a hint of anger even flashed in his gaze. He responded with the Conjunctivitis Curse, which James dodged. As he did so, the latter took note of three details that frightened him greatly: Remus was bleeding, Rookwood had gone back to fight, and Lily was gone, her ropes lying severed on the floor. Had she broken free once Rookwood had abandoned his post, or had one of the Marauders helped her? So long as she was safe, it did not matter. Before James could scan the room for a sign of auburn hair, though, a stream of blue light missed him by half an inch.

Three more hexes followed. The first one injured Snape on the shoulder. The second one burned a mark on James's thigh. The third one accidentally hit Sirius, expelling the wand from his hand. Then a curse came swishing from James's left, and a tremendous force lifted him off to project him across the chamber. He was slammed into the wall so hard his bones creaked.

For a while, there was nothing, only distant shouting and commotion in the darkness. His body ached all over. A warm trickle was running down his face, and he mused wearily what it could be. All he knew was that he still was alive, and this intrigued him. Why were they delaying...to kill him when he was fully conscious?

A sweet fragrance drifted to him, filling his nose and pervading his senses. Sea fragrance, he divined. He had always liked the scent of this perfume on her. A feeble smile lit his face.

His eyelids fluttered and let in a glimpse of red: a gorgeous mane of wavy dark red hair. She was there, and she was protecting him...shielding him with her own body. For an instant, she turned her head, and in her brief, penetrating look of anxiety and resolution, he read everything he needed to know. She loved him.

His tenderness and ecstasy were overwhelming. No one in the world could hurt him any more; he feared nothing. Ignoring the pain, he rose to his feet and tucked Lily behind him. As if intent on protecting him at any cost, she wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder. It was the sweetest minute in his last months, perhaps in his entire life.

Sirius and Remus emerged by his side, both wandless yet determined. They positioned themselves by either side of the couple, forming a defensive formation around Lily. James raised his eyes at the five Death Eaters, who were advancing, eyes gleaming, wands at the ready, and felt nothing but disgust. He would fight for Lily until he dropped dead. Since his wand was lost, it might not take long, but he did not care.

All the Death Eaters, he could see, bore traces of the struggle. They were eyeing the Marauders with the calculating expressions of prey beasts. Except for Snape. Snape was watching Lily alone, and his stare was impassive. On instinct, James drew back, anxious to protect his love.

Then, to James's amazement, Snape lowered his wand and took a step forward.

"Lily," he said, "if you leave now, the Dark Lord will kill me."

And good riddance, too, James thought savagely. *Being slain by your idol is all you wankers deserve.*

Lily jerked and straightened up. She must have peered at him from behind James's shoulder, for Snape nodded.

"That's what he told me a week ago at the meeting. Should you leave, should I lose you, he would kill me."

There was a tiny whimper, and Lily withdrew her arms from around James, who suddenly understood what Snape was trying to do.

NO! No way! Over his dead body!

As though sensing the turmoil in his mind, Sirius and Remus closed around Lily to better obstruct her way. Remus leaned to her and whispered, "Don't listen. He's lying...he just wants to get you back. You don't owe him anything. Don't let them trick you."

"As a matter of fact"...this was Malfoy's arrogant, wily drawl..."the Dark Lord won't have to bother. We'll kill him ourselves. It is our duty as the Dark Lord's most faithful followers to do the dirty work for him."

He threw a meaningful glance at his fellows, who grasped Snape at once, their wands pointing at his throat.

"You see," he went on nonchalantly, "what makes us so much more powerful than your pathetic Order is the fact that we don't suffer the faulty members of our circle to live. We take care of them the way a gardener would sever the rotten branches from a tree to keep it strong and healthy. If Severus proves himself unworthy of the Dark Lord's trust, we'll make sure he never taints our Lord with his presence again."

This was *so* transparent...Snape did not even wince when they took hold of him. They were not going to harm him, this much was obvious. But he kept gazing at Lily, willing her to take the bait.

And to James's horror, she did. He could hear her moan behind him despite Remus's relentless words of reassurance.

The hell he would allow them to recapture her.

Sneering at her misery, Malfoy waved his hand to let his men proceed.

"*Avada...*" Macnair rasped.

"Stop!"

The five Death Eaters looked expectantly at Lily.

"Leave him alone!" she demanded, and there was an edge to her voice, a distinct note of hysteria.

"Lily, listen to me," James whispered over his shoulder. "It's a trick. Don't mind their lies. Please, stay with me."

She did not seem to have heard, though. He turned back to his enemies, just in time to catch sight of Malfoy and Lestrangle flicking their wands at him. He and Sirius were brutally pushed to one side while Remus was pushed to the other, leaving an empty space for Lily to run out of their protective circle... straight into Snape's open arms. The second he embraced her, she burst into tears. The greasy bastard then smiled over her head.

James had the impression the floor was sliding beneath him, getting out of shape and out of all proportion. The single points that did not budge in his distorted vision were Snape's black eyes above Lily, who was slowly going to pieces. He came forward, his pace wobbly...he did not realize he was shaking with a rage so extreme it had made his mind go utterly blank...and all at once, four wands were pointing at his chest. Four faces were grinning at him.

Lily sobbed out a few words into Snape's shoulder: a barely intelligible *Let them go*.

"But of course," he replied with mock gentleness. "Gentlemen, we will see you safely out. You are free to go, and I suggest that you take this opportunity to heart. The rest of my colleagues are on an errand, but they will be joining us shortly. And while I'm sure they would be charmed to meet you here, the pleasure might not be quite mutual."

He stroked Lily's hair before burying his nose in her curls.

James saw red. He was going to rip Snape's throat open with his nails if this were what it took. Never mind the outcome.

When, however, he attempted to approach the Death Eater, a shot of white light darted from one of the drawn wands and propelled him several yards backward. Hands yanked at his clothes from aside: Sirius and Remus were pulling him away despite his efforts to break free, and they were talking to him, only he could hear nothing besides a peculiar drumming in his ears...not even his own voice. Was he screaming? It felt this way: his lips were moving feverishly, and his throat was on fire.

As strong arms hauled him out of the chamber, Lily swam out of his view, though the image of her frail, sobbing figure was burned into his very eyelids.

Severus stared down at Lily's sleeping form bathed in soft candlelight. Her ivory features were now serene. He had been compelled to resort to a Memory Charm, two doses of Calming Potion, and a vial of Sleeping Draught to appease her hysteria. Her sleep was currently close to coma. Once she awoke, though, she would feel refreshed and would remember nothing of the day's events. The house-elves had already restored the demolished chamber to its original state, and a group of Death Eaters had left to notify the Dark Lord of the Marauders' visit.

Pettigrew had switched sides, this was beyond doubt; none of the loyal Death Eaters would have disclosed their plans to Potter. An hour ago, Avery and Mulciber had raided the rat's house to find it deserted. They would have to endure the Dark Lord's wrath, for it had been their duty to keep the fickle spy under surveillance. Tense with apprehension, they were pacing across Lestrangle's drawing room, expecting their Dark Marks to go ablaze any instant.

The consequences of this recent battle, however, were far from unfavorable for their side. For one, Pettigrew was a virtual cadaver. Severus would not have to Crucio him to death after all: there would hardly be anything left of the rodent after the Dark Lord had finished with him. Unless, of course, the Animagus had decided to take refuge in the Order. How would he be received? Would Dumbledore believe him innocent in spite of the evidence? It was no secret Pettigrew was a spectacularly poor Occlumens.

In fact, all was going rather well. It had been most entertaining to watch Potter lose his temper as he was dragged away by his sidekicks, screaming and struggling like a male banshee. Severus would have preferred to end the trio's lives when the occasion was afforded, but it had been wiser to let them go. If Dumbledore had lost four members of his Order in such a short interval of time, he would counterattack for certain. Thus far, Lily was a lone deserter, and retrieving her would be too dangerous. All, indeed, was well. Except he could feel no satisfaction.

His folded hands were clenched into fists so tight his nails were leaving marks on his palms.

She had been ready to run off with Potter. She had all but escaped...with no regret, not so much as a glance back. His fellows had had to blackmail her with his life before she had deigned to rejoin them. *The whore.*

For a moment, he toyed with the idea of recovering her memory after the ritual was complete: she deserved to know how close she had been to evasion. Then he dismissed the whim. Too many of her memories revolved around Potter. It also was time he stopped tampering with her mind, lest the magic damage it irrevocably. Besides, there were more ways than one to make her suffer. The next night...the night succeeding her initiation...he would let her see a glimpse of his darker desires. If only she had not betrayed him, he would feel inclined to be lenient with her.

At present, what he needed most was to vent his rage. There was a Muggle village five miles away; a century of proximity with the LeStrange residence had caused it to wither, but it would suffice. Fury seemed to run in his veins in place of blood, and his combat with Potter appeared distant to him. With a few careful flicks of his wand, he set up powerful wards around the bed. It was unlikely she would wake up before twelve hours were over, but he was no longer willing to take his chances.

As he locked the door, it occurred to him he owed a bottle of firewhisky to both Lucius and Augustus for having helped him out of danger when it had mattered most.