

The Mooncalves Dance

by Tarpeia

When Lily falls for James Potter, the black-eyed Slytherin, Severus Snape, finds himself determined to thwart this unexpected love at any cost. Dark and spooky.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Note: Many thanks to my awesome blue artemis for the beta.

Warning: spooky atmosphere, dark!Snape, explicit sexual content, dub-con, non-con.

Old trees want to hurt you. It doesn't matter if you're snow-shoeing, cross-country skiing, or just taking a walk in the woods. Old trees want to hurt you, and I think they'd kill you if they could.

The Mist by Stephen King

Cokeworth is a dull, colorless town. It is highly disputable whether spring succeeds in bringing a breath of life to the fragile trees set far apart in the Central Park beyond the river. But in Cannock Chase, greenery flourishes. The trees are tall and majestic, the flowers abound, the air is savory and filled with sunlight and the songs of hundreds of little creatures. It is there her grandparents have moved twelve years ago, having acquired a house by the edge of the wood. Her parents, Petunia and she visit them on public holidays, and the family spends their time hiking and picnicking in the nature.

Muggles are unaware of the myriad of fantastic beasts that live in the forest. Mokes, Bowtruckles, Doxys and Augureys frolic in the branches, concealed from sight yet ever-present. They lend the woods their charm a charm that people, vaguely suspicious of its source, convey in legends of werewolves, pixies and ominous canids. Even though this place cannot compare to Dartmoor or the Dark Forest adorning the hills of Hogsmeade, it holds an extraordinary concentration of magic. And no wonder, considering that at its other end lies Godric's Hollow. James and she are all but neighbors; they always have been. They dismiss it as a delightful coincidence, but in truth, neither doubts it is yet another sign of their fate.

Lily nimbly strides down a trodden path, impatient to reach the clearing she returns to every day. James is already there, waiting. With a smile, she contemplates him as he leans against a short forked tree, his gaze on the cloudy sky. As soon as she steps out, he turns toward her. His eyes sparkle when they meet hers; they are so full of emotions it makes her wish to never look away. They share a kiss and an embrace and then settle on the fresh grass. Her head rests on his shoulder while his arm, securely wrapped around her waist, slides back and forth in an unconscious stroking motion. They spend hours sitting under a lush oak tree, simply talking.

She could stay there with him for eternity and it would still feel like a fleeting instant to her. They speak about everything: spells and potions, books and classes, their friends, their families, the careers they would like to pursue, their future wedding. It fascinates her to discover his thoughts and views that are bright like no one else's, to explore his enthusiastic perception of the world. They have so much in common. And although she sometimes cannot help but doubt she deserves him, she instinctively knows they belong with each other.

Rustling noise resounds from aside, and they both leap to their feet. Lily listens carefully.

"It's Petunia," she whispers.

In a heartbeat, James transforms. The branches part to reveal a frowning blonde girl clad in blue. But instead of an amorous couple, Petunia finds Lily caressing a magnificent stag.

"Who are you talking to?" she asks, eyeing the Animagus with bewilderment. She is tottering slightly as though afraid of getting her shoes muddy from the damp earth.

"Prongs," Lily says truthfully.

The answer only vexes her sister, who reckons she is being mocked.

"I heard a male voice."

More noise arises, and Mr. Evans emerges at Petunia's side. His eyes widen at the unlikely sight before him.

"Lily?"

"It's all right," she assures him. "You can come closer."

He takes two small, wary steps forward, his expression one of wonder. "You have power over animals? Can you control them with magic?"

"No." She smiles, stroking the side of the Animagus's sleek neck. "This is the only one that isn't afraid of us."

The hard lines on Mr. Evans's face soften in an almost imperceptible smile of endearment. Petunia remains motionless on her spot, her lips pale and pursed.

It only lasts for a while, as her father soon retreats.

"Come now," he tells them with one last glimpse at the stag. "Dinner will be served in a half an hour."

Lily nods, and he walks away, followed by a stiff Petunia. Once they are out of sight, James assumes his true form. They beam at each other, suppressing a giggle at their innocent ruse.

It is time to separate again. Their embrace is even more ardent than before, for they will have to spend long hours without seeing each other. But the promise of their next rendezvous is there, unwavering.

Lily is halfway back to the house when she hears a distinct crunching of the leaves and fern behind her. She throws a surprised glance over her shoulder, but there is nothing. The sound evaporates from her mind like a misty dream.

It is little past midnight when the tapping begins. Lily is alone in the tiny attic room, reading by the light of a table lamp. Something is pounding at her window the sharp beak of an owl. She comes closer to discover a large screech owl perched on the cornice. In spite of the murk, she can tell the bird carries no letter. And indeed, as soon as she opens the window, the owl takes off into the night sky without waiting for her response or indicating the reason for its nocturnal visit. She leans out in puzzlement, her hair streaming in the breeze. The next moment, all her questions are answered: James is slowly pacing outside the garden.

She slips into her shoes and drapes a cloak over her nightgown before quietly descending the stairs. A rush of wind blows into her face at the doorstep; the air is fresh and cool, and it penetrates through her thin clothes. She barely pays it attention, though. Her slender feet cross the garden in a few strides, and she pushes the fence gate open.

James spins abruptly. He embraces her tight while she winds her arms around his neck, feeling him inhale the scent of her hair. At last, she looks up and moves her hand to caress his cheek.

"What is it, James?"

His hazel eyes gaze at her with both concentration and alarm; however, he hesitates before confessing.

"I heard awful news," he says gravely. "A Muggle family from Hednesford the Mustows has just been discovered dead in their house. It was a couple with three children, the most likeable sort. All of them are dead, although the bodies bear no marks of violence. When the Muggle police broke in, there was the Dark Mark above the place."

Lily's blood turns to ice. The Death Eaters have attacked again. They murdered a family, an innocent couple with their children.

Hednesford... The small town is not even ten miles away.

"I'm worried, Lily," James whispers. "I'm afraid they might find out you're staying here. Maybe you shouldn't come to Cannock Chase any more until they are caught. It's turning dangerous. Your entire family would be safer in Cokeworth."

She tries to banish the horror from her features, adopting what she hopes is a comforting tone. "This is terrible. I'm so sorry for this family. Even with the Aurors patrolling around, people still... But James, trust me, there is no need to worry about us. The house is protected with concealment charms and should be invisible to any intruders. The Death Eaters won't be able to get in without breaking through the wards, which should delay them long enough. Besides, we're going home tomorrow. I'll be back at Hogwarts in two days."

James casts an appraising look at the house, his eyes slightly narrowed. Then his expression smooths out.

"Will you walk with me?"

She nods, and he takes her hand to lead the way. He heads toward the forest.

The well-trodden path brings them to a round entrance to the woods. It is there the Muggle lamps stop radiating light; what follows is wild and obscure. The entrance appears like a black gaping hole, a huge mouth waiting to swallow anyone who ventures near at night. James does not pause, he merely takes out his wand to cast Lumos. In her haste, she has left hers in her room.

They walk in silence. The circle of light from the tip of James's wand scarcely allows them to watch their step. Stones and fern emerge from the dark, only to be once again absorbed by the night. The woods are by no means asleep: they rustle and swish, the sound alternating from utter stillness to savage howling, then back to gentle rattling: one would believe the trees to be conversing between themselves. Lily cannot help shuddering at the wind that finds its way through the openings of her cloak and gnaws at her skin. She steals glances at James's inscrutable profile, wondering at his composure. The news must have shaken him more than he is willing to admit, and she increasingly suspects he has chosen to withhold a part of the story out of a desire to protect her. She gives his hand an affectionate squeeze, to which he responds with an almost bruising pressure.

They finally reach their meeting point a small clearing dominated by a mighty oak tree, the one they love to lean against whenever they chatter together. James does not as much as look at it; he keeps his pace steady and quick. Lily starts to feel confusion.

"Where are we going?"

"There is a little meadow I'd like to show you. It's by a stream not far from here."

As they progress, the forest grows quieter and quieter. Though the wind remains chilly, the trees emit no noise: not a leaf flutters, not a twig is out of place. Their steps are the only sound in the sea of darkness surrounding them. It is so unnatural that a shiver of apprehension runs down Lily's spine. Not that the woods appear dead—it is more as if they are watching, listening closely, ready to strike the instant their victim lets their guard down. She is ashamed of this absurd sentiment, yet it does not leave her.

It takes a while to find the glade—a narrow, mildly sloping meadow, barren at present, but studded with flowers in early summertime. A rill runs through the grass, a net of thick rivulets slithering down the soft soil. The sky is veiled with a drift of clouds, and she senses rather than sees them flow.

James lays his wand into the grass to provide a semblance of light, then takes off his cloak and spreads it on the ground. A non-verbal spell, and the cloak becomes pleasantly warm as to protect them from the coolness of the earth. They settle down. Taking Lily in his arms, James begins to rub her back and shoulders in an attempt to warm her up. She seeks out his eyes in the dark.

"They haven't attacked anyone from Godric's Hollow, have they?"

"No. All their recent attacks have been aimed at Muggles."

"Cowards," she declares in revulsion.

He does not reply. His hands, still massaging her arms, glide up her shoulders to rest on her neck. He considers her thoughtfully as he leans closer.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

His kiss is intense like never before: his lips literally burn against hers. Seconds go by, stretching into minutes. His fingers wander through her locks, and he seems unable to get his fill of her. When he finally lets go of her hair, allowing her to draw a gulp of air, he does not fully withdraw. His lips descend upon her neck to cover it with kisses. Then she feels his tongue flick over a sensitive spot on her throat, and a ripple of alarm courses through her, along with a wave of something peculiar and deeply troubling in her loins.

"James...", she whispers apologetically, trying to pull away. "I thought we would wait a little longer."

"Whatever for?" he murmurs into her skin.

"Our wedding. I want to wait until our wedding night to go any further."

He straightens up and stares at her. It is difficult to decipher his expression in this faint, thin light.

"Aren't we already married in almost all the ways that count? Aren't we certain we belong together?" He brings her hand to his mouth and puts a kiss on her fingers. "I love you so much, Lily. That news—I can't imagine anything bad happening to you. It will take weeks, maybe months, to arrange the wedding and placate our families. I can't wait any more. I want you so much."

Why here? Why now?

She keeps her voice as conciliatory as she can. "I want you, too, James. But I don't want it to happen like this. It... doesn't feel right."

James brushes her cheek with a slightly rough thumb. At first, she breathes out in relief, convinced he has yielded to her request. A split second later, however, her thought is submerged in a fog of blankness. There is a confusing sensation rolling in her abdomen, utterly independent of her will. As badly as it frightens her, it is not entirely uncomfortable. Her mind gradually clears, and she realizes she has sunk to the ground, right onto the warmed-up cloak. To her astonishment, her most private parts feel sensitive and... *moist*?

Never before has her reason been smothered by a surge of extraneous emotions, let alone physical desire. It resembles magic—magic of the Darkest kind. But before this conclusion can cross her lips, Lily silently chides herself. James would never curse her. Voicing such an appalling suspicion would be equal to insulting him.

Cautious, she watches him lower himself to her side and kiss her on the navel. Her trembling increases.

"James, I..."

"Don't be afraid," he says, his eyes penetrating hers. "I won't hurt you. On the contrary, I'll make it enjoyable for you."

"But"

"Let us give it a try. I promise I'll stop as soon as you ask me to."

He slowly unfastens her cloak, parts it to reveal her nightgown. Now she shivers with both cold and fear, even though her anxiety makes unexpected beads of sweat form over her skin. His face is striking in the shadows: the concentration, the unblinking gaze, the tight-pressed mouth, the determination pulsing through him, all these traits lend his features a beauty of a singular eeriness. It might as well be an illusion. She wishes the moon and the stars were visible tonight.

His lips find hers again, though at present they take their time, tasting and exploring. Lily's heart is frantically pounding in her chest; little by little, however, she wills the tension out of her body. James immediately takes notice, and his hand rises to run over her torso. His eyes are hypnotizing—now that he has removed his glasses, they seem to glitter.

"You are so beautiful," he whispers, looking at her as if fascinated.

Lily nearly turns pink; everything about tonight is so puzzling. "James..."

But he does not let her finish. His mouth cuts off her words, and a moment later, she does not even remember what she meant to say. His kiss becomes more urgent, more possessive. Swiftly, he fumbles at the buttons of his shirt, undoes them and then slips out of the piece of clothing. She can only admire how handsome and well-sculpted he is before his hands sneak under her nightgown and make her jump in alarm.

"Shhh," he soothes, pulling the nightgown over her head.

The following instant, the wind grazes her bare skin with such intensity that she begins to shake in earnest. While she covers herself with her arms as best she can, James wastes no time tugging her knickers down in one dexterous motion. She is nude in front of him and feels more vulnerable and self-conscious than she has ever done in her life. It does not help that his eyes positively darken at the sight of her bosom. Without another word, he presses his lips against her shoulder, then slides lower, leaving a trail of kisses on his way down.

Her breath hitches in her throat as he focuses on her breasts. His touch is tender; the fingers caress and stimulate her with utmost care. The sensation is so new, so amazingly strong and sweet that she all but arches into his hands, modesty briefly forgotten. His mouth is on her peaked nipples, and she sighs when she feels warm

wetness envelop them, sending electric jolts to her groin.

"Oh, James," she pants, her hands lost in his unruly hair.

But surprisingly, he stills at her exclamation. He remains immobile for the space of a minute before getting, with a foreboding slowness, into sitting position. Even in this absence of light, his glare is blazing, and she is shocked by the violence in his eyes. She has not the vaguest idea why he is angry with her.

"What's wrong?" she asks gently.

James keeps staring at her, but shakes his head as to dismiss her concern. He does not resume his caresses, though. Instead, he firmly grips her hips and draws her to him. Panic swells inside her in a single insane flare. He is kneeling between her open legs, which he is holding in place, clad in nothing but his trousers and shoes. Lily's breath escalates into shallow little gasps, her muscles suddenly becoming tense like cords ready to snap she would run away in a flash if she could.

"Relax," James instructs.

It only exacerbates her distress. She hyperventilates feverishly. His hold on her rebellious thighs tightens.

"Relax."

It takes her entire self-control to force her muscles to obey, to let her rigid legs go slack in his arms. She has to close her eyes, for her vision has gone so giddy from fright and precipitated breathing that she is on the verge of fainting. She is acutely aware of his waist between her knees and his crotch that is so directly near hers.

Next there is the touch of a hand upon her stomach. The fingers crawl across her navel, trace a ticklish line toward her pubes and come to a stop, delicately cupping her private parts. She fixes her gaze on the black sky and the barely distinguishable outline of the clouds, fisting the cloak beneath her. His thumb sets into motion. It starts to stroke a spot in her center, to circle and pet it. Her legs give one more twitch, but she brings them to loosen once again. Soon she realizes his touch is far from causing her discomfort: in truth, it is a voluptuous caress, and it produces prickles of pleasure in her loins. Yet as nice as it feels, she still is exposed and numb with cold. She is so afraid.

"Lily," James says softly, "you need to relax. You won't be able to enjoy this if you don't let yourself go completely."

"I can't. I just... can't."

The words are out of her lips before she can stop them. But the damage is done, and against her better judgment, there is an edge of relief in her voice, though her eyes are filling with tears.

"Please, stop."

He takes a searching look at her face, blinks. Then he releases her. Rising from the ground, he turns on the spot and walks a few steps away. There, on the border of the clearing, he stands still, looking off to the distance.

Lily gathers the warm cloak around her to cover herself. A deep sadness washes over her as she looks at his dark silhouette, pressing her knees to her chest.

What happened? How has it come to this?

She cannot comprehend it. A mere hour ago, she was confident James and she had been made for each other, that they were two parts of the same entity, similar to two halves of an apple. The understanding between them would not have been more complete if they resorted to Legilimency. And now, there is an unseeable barrier between them, solidified by the murky atmosphere of this old forest.

James's attitude perplexes her. He is so unlike himself. The James she knows breathes with emotions; he is charmingly spontaneous and enthusiastic, a perfect embodiment of the Gryffindor spirit. This new James is cold and remote. The way he gazes at her or touches her makes her think of a prey animal: it is hungry and self-centered and insidious.

Unless... Could she be deluding herself? Perhaps this is how most males react when seized with desire. Could his unprecedented demeanor be caused by frustration with her lack of response, and even the upsetting news he told her earlier?

Her eyes are attached to his figure; he is slipping a tiny object into his pocket, maybe a vial. His back appears strong and muscular even in the gloom. She loves him more than she can express, and she knows her desire mirrors his own. Does she really have to be so proud? The concept of preserving her innocence until the wedding night has always been important to her, but it is no longer a priority. She would give anything to win her old James back, to dissipate his coldness. He is right it is not a sacrifice to give herself to her fiancé; it is simply a token of love that will bind them to each other irreversibly.

She quietly calls him back.

He glances at her and returns. Lily flips the cloak off her shoulders, unfolding it on the grass so he can sit beside her. Her trembling never recedes, but she is determined not to falter any more tonight.

"I'm sorry," she tells him. "I was frightened. But I do want to try, I really do. We just need to make sure I won't get pregnant."

"Lily..."

He reaches and pulls her in his arms. His face buried in her hair, he murmurs an endearment. It is a warm and familiar gesture, and her body slowly becomes loose, molding into his chest. It feels unusual to embrace him with no layer of clothes between them. His hands roam over her back and bottom in a way that is more comforting than intimate. In the end, he delves into the pocket of his trousers and takes out a blue vial.

"The Contraceptive Potion."

Her hand quivers, but she uncorks the small bottle and drinks the sweetish potion without a second thought. The act leaves her slightly stunned as though she has consummated their relationship by drinking this liquid alone.

James puts his arms round her again, strokes her shoulders and back. His lips brush against her neck.

"Let's try again, shall we?"

At this phrase, Lily freezes in consternation. James never speaks in this manner. Slytherins do. Particularly one of them, someone she does not want to think of here.

His mouth recaptures hers, and his kiss is even more eager than it was before. When it breaks, he has to bend her in his arms to gain full access to her skin. She still is on her knees, her chest inclined backward, and her hair is flowing to the grass like a fiery waterfall. She stares at the sky the moon has momentarily broken through a blanket of clouds. It looks enormous, like a large silver coin with subtle dark spots, distantly suggestive of a child's face. He arches her a little further. The position, although wearisome, excites her or perhaps it is the way he kisses her nipples, suckling on them with ravishment.

At last, she is lowered onto the cloak. The moon has disappeared.

"Touch me," James whispers.

The shaking hands rise, fondle the smooth skin of his chest, rub his nipples with a timid curiosity. He moans in delight. When he pulls back, it is to undo his trousers, and Lily loses him from sight. Her heart starts beating faster at the sound of the discarded fabric. His next move catches her off guard: his mouth is on her center, and it strokes exactly the same spot his fingers did. It is the strangest feeling she has ever been exposed to: invasive yet enjoyable, embarrassing yet tender. He begins to pet her thighs and the interior of her legs; his lips and tongue are unrelenting. It goes on for very long. However, even though she finds herself able to enjoy his ministrations, there is no climax to her pleasure, no release to the uniform sensation. She wonders with a mild disappointment if she is one of the girls who will never experience it.

His hands suddenly change their course: one hand settles on her hip while the other ventures down. A finger gently probes her entrance. Still absorbed in James's passionate attentions, Lily cannot bring herself to care, to resist. The finger enters her, sliding in and out at an entrancing rhythm. It takes her only seconds to grow accustomed to this queer penetration. But to her surprise, the finger withdraws the instant she does. Then she hears him shift. Her mouth goes dry. She knows what is coming, and there is nothing she can do about it. She closes her eyes, intent on not crying out.

The tip of his member is against her. It slips in, and she is abashed at her own wetness that allows him to drive deeper into her. He only progresses two inches before she registers a tremendous pressure. Hastily, she turns her face aside so he cannot see her pained frown. Nothing can prepare her for his brusque reaction: as quick as a flash, he breaks through her barrier, burying himself inside her. Her back lifts from the ground in shock, and hot tears spill from her eyes. True to her inner promise, though, she clamps her mouth shut, and not a sound escapes her. She can hear him inhale sharply as he starts moving. The way his member fills her, impaling her entire body, is so painful and wrong it gives her the urge to throw up. Deep in her mind, she is astounded at his lack of patience and consideration. How can she ever forget this disaster?

But all is over almost at once, for James stiffens and spills into her with a low cry. There is warm, sticky fluid between her thighs, the pale semen mingling with her blood and causing more tears of dejection to trickle down her cheeks. She barely takes heed of the kiss he places on her forehead or the affectionate words he utters in her ear. His wand lies alight in the grass. As soon as his breathing slows to its natural pace, he disengages himself and grasps it. The brilliant ball of light at its extremity blinds Lily for a second; then it is lowered to her abdomen, and a chant-like incantation resounds through the dark. The ache in her womb vanishes. With a slightly indecent sucking noise, the seed and the blood are magicked out of her. No traces remain.

Yet the absence of pain does not halt the jets of tears that dribble obstinately from her large eyes. This is not what she has imagined her first night with James to be like; it is as far from the night full of love and adoration she was dreaming of as it can possibly be.

Neither is she able to hold back a faint flicker of disillusion at the brevity and brutality of the act.*Is this it?* she muses uneasily.

"Lily."

James takes her hands in his and pulls her up. He wipes her tears before cradling her in his arms.

"Come now, love."

He shows no sign of tiredness whatsoever. If anything, he is even bolder and more demanding. As she leans with resignation into a new kiss, she becomes aware of the rustling in the woods. The trees ring with the force of the wind; the grass swings as though tiny creatures were running through it. Somewhere in the treetops, a chorus of owls hoots, and one by one, lights appear in the branches, minuscule spots of gold and green gleaming in the dark like precious stones. His hands travel all over her body. His lips only release hers to further explore her skin, seemingly memorizing every inch. The moon peers from behind the clouds once again. And then something catches her attention, something white by a remote row of trees. A short beast is swaying on thin hind legs with immense flat feet. Its bulging eyes are a vivid red and turned upon the sky. It is dancing.

"A Mooncalf," she whispers.

"I know."

A second shiny creature emerges to join its mate in its graceful ritual. They glow between the trees like ethereal beings.

Although Lily cannot view them clearly, she senses their beauty, their shy and humble nature. Their aspect lulls her, soothing her fear and sadness and filling her with meditative languor. The forest now seems peaceful to her, for how can it be dangerous if it shelters such pure creatures? Even the wind is singing rather than wailing in the foliage, occasionally blending with the vigorous buzz of pixies.

It is not as frightening any more to touch James, and she does not recoil even when he raises one of her hands to wrap it around his member. It is warm and moist and as hard as stone, yet so sensitive to any sort of contact. It fascinates her to discover how much pleasure her lightest caress can give him. And for the first time, she feels desire: a mysterious, powerful pull in her groin.

They fall onto the cloak, their hands united, their lips interlocked. He enters her gently but avidly, and though the penetration remains uncomfortable, it no longer hurts. A moan builds in her bosom, startling her. Her unbidden response turns her hot with shame; however, she cannot force herself to stop and what good would it do at this point? If this were meant to be, she can at least make it enjoyable for James.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lily scans the trees but cannot glimpse the Mooncalves. The fireflies are still bright in the distance, though, and so is the moon amidst the ribbon-like clouds. She is oblivious to the cool wind as they move smoothly, gasping with anticipation. James is fighting his own climax, she can tell; with a perceptible effort, he eases his pace. A spasm runs through his body. It is not violent, not enough to make him pause. He takes deep breaths. Lily finds herself unwittingly curious whether he'll be able to hold himself back.

And then, all of a sudden, her wrists are roughly pinned to the ground. It happens so swiftly she fails to notice the motion until she is trapped. Unsettled, she glances down at his arm, which is trembling imperceptibly. The solid muscles shrink as if his limb were transforming before her eyes. And indeed it is. The hand clutching her wrist is pallid, with long fingers that are distinctively not James's. A black pattern stands out on his forearm. It glares and twists like a long, deadly snake.

Both her body and her mind go limp.*No. This cannot be. This cannot be.* She looks up, afraid to know, afraid to see. A heartbeat later, a petrifying scream is stolen from her, carrying through the forest. It is not James's face that gazes back at her. His hazel eyes have turned utterly black, his dark hair has grown longer, and a smirk is playing on his thin lips, no less sinister than the wild glint in his eye.

All Lily needs to awake from her stupor is a fragment of a second: she pushes against his arms, desperate to shove him away. It is futile: not only are their bodies joined in the most intimate of ways, but there is nothing she can use to shift his weight off her. The more she writhes underneath him, the more her torso rubs against his chest while her crotch inadvertently meets his pounding hips. She is so close, *so close*, and her dismay does nothing to dispel the desire within her loins quite the opposite. Horror grips her with renewed intensity at the ominous tension in her womb *this cannot happen, must not happen* before the unthinkable occurs. She lets out an endless sigh that is absorbed by his now different lips, and her body clenches and clenches around him, leaving her in an overwhelming haze of anxiety and bliss. She hardly perceives his own shudder, his strangled groan. And once again, her sore center is tainted with his white juices.

He collapses atop her, and she is too weak to dislocate him. His face is right besides hers, his hot breath tickling her ear. He is struggling for air like a hunter who has run miles chasing prey.

But not for long. As soon as the heaving of his breast subsides, he lifts his head and raises himself on one arm. This casual gesture terrifies Lily more than she would have believed possible. Wary and exhausted, she hears him lean in and whisper a single word into her ear, "*Imperio*."

The Great Hall resonates with an intricate weave of voices. Laughter blends with anger, interest with fatigue. Students linger at their regular seats around the tables, talking excitedly or eating under the golden sunlight of the Enchanted Ceiling. The professors, until now immersed in silent conversations, have started to leave, one by

one.

Lily listens restlessly to her fellow Gryffindors, who are discussing the N.E.W.T.s with subdued yet increasing panic. James's hand lands on hers and squeezes tenderly.

"I'll score twenty times today, only for you," he promises with a carefree smile. "A couple more trainings, and we'll beat Ravenclaw flat. See you in no time at all, sweetie. It won't take long."

There is a sinking feeling in her stomach as she watches him leave with Sirius, his crimson Quidditch robes billowing behind him.

Because it *will* take long. It will take *much* too long.

Slowly, she turns her gaze toward the Slytherin table. Severus is observing her. His eyes are inscrutable as he idly strokes the base on his goblet, but the hint of glee in their black depths cannot be mistaken; it is a sneer that does not reach his lips yet seems to illuminate his entire face. Lily swallows, feeling his purring command echo in her mind. She cannot endure it any longer. She needs to break free, to put an end to his control over her will, or she will go insane. Those hours she is forced to spend alone with him are the purest torture there is.

Her fingers grasp at the edge of the table as if refusing to let go, and she braces her feet against the stone floor. Her eyes close in concentration. At this moment, she is strongly reminiscent of a statue of a Metamorphmagus attempting to change every aspect of her appearance in a single spurt of magic. Droplets of sweat break out on her forehead as she fights, for the countless time, to surmount the horrid curse he has laid upon her. Contradictory voices murmur in her head, clashing and intertwining until they inflate into a vicious argument. And then the pain strikes her. With her breath held in, Lily compels her body to stay immobile, to ignore his orders instructing her to leave the Hall. The twinge in her chest becomes agony. Her knuckles go as white as the milk. The tension in her muscles is unbearable, and her legs burn as though filled to the brim with acid. A reluctant intake of breath... and a whimper escapes through her clamped mouth. She has no choice but surrender lest the pain tear every fiber of her skin and muscles and bones into shreds. The second she allows herself to move as required, a deceptive rush of relief flows through her limbs.

She casts one last glare at Severus, who has not taken his eyes off her for the entire lunchtime. He does not smirk, but she almost wishes he did, for his calm smugness is worse, so much worse. In a nonchalant motion, he raises his goblet and takes a sip, chuckling under his breath. Despite her loathing and despair, there is nothing she can do but turn and silently exit the Hall. The moving stairs part and conjoin around her, lifting her up and up toward the towers. And in the recesses of the seventh floor, there is a glimpse of the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy that guards the Room of Requirement.

Note: The idea for this story was born at Shoppenhangers Road, Maidenhead, UK. It was meant to be a one-shot, but I'm considering turning it into a longer fic. If I do, the events of the following chapters will be situated at Hogwarts.