

Trust and Betrayal: A Prequel

by starmom

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Prologue: November 1, 1981

Chapter 1 of 24

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Prologue — November 1, 1981

High Street in Hogsmeade was vibrant, alive with throngs of witches and wizards laughing, embracing and shouting, jubilant as if just awakening from a bewitched slumber, finding their voices at last after a long, enforced silence. It was evening on this chilly, November evening, but the festivities celebrating their first day of liberation from the tyranny of Lord Voldemort had not let up. The shopkeepers were delighted at the booming trade, and the pubs were lively with drink and song. The scene repeated itself in magical homes and communities throughout the country as they released a collective and joyful sigh of relief.

The exception to this buoyant frivolity was sitting inside the insistently quiet and always foreboding Hog's Head Inn. That is why, perhaps, Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, had chosen this place above the others for a moment of respite and a pint of mead. Dumbledore was tired, perhaps more tired than he had ever been in his many, many long years of life. His body felt heavy, his bones weary and his soul aggrieved. It had been a very long day.

The barman of the Hog's Head, a tall, scraggly looking man with a filthy apron, his long hair pulled back, served a glass of firewhisky to the only other customer in the bar, sitting hidden beneath his hooded robe in the corner. After wiping his hands with a dirty rag, the barman walked across the room and sat down opposite the Headmaster.

"It's done, then?"

"Yes, Aberforth, it's done," Dumbledore sighed.

"I'd think you'd be out there," the barman indicated with a toss of his head to the Main Street, "enjoying the celebration."

"Oh, I've been out there. I've been in many places today. It is a wonderful day that should be celebrated. I just needed a quiet moment before..."

"Before what?"

"Before the last of my duties are complete." Dumbledore took a drink from his mug and felt the warmth spread to his long, tapering fingers.

"The boy?" Aberforth was clearly a man of few words.

"Yes. Hagrid is bringing him. I would have done it myself, but I was asked to assist the Minister of Magic with some — unpleasant business this afternoon."

Aberforth Dumbledore shook his scraggy head. "I heard about Sirius Black. Wouldn't have thought it possible. Sure, he liked his pranks, but he didn't seem the type to — well — do what they say he did."

Albus looked at his brother with some amusement. "Do I detect some actual emotion from you, Aberforth? It's not your usual style, but I must say it pleases me."

Aberforth continued, ignoring the remark. "I got to know the lad some after he left school. Came in here fairly often. He was not the Muggle-killing sort."

Albus felt a hollow space open in his heart. "I would have agreed with you had I not just heard accounts first-hand from eyewitnesses. But each of their stories was the same: that it was Black who killed Pettigrew and — the unfortunate Muggles who just happened to be in the vicinity." Albus took off his spectacles to squeeze the space between his eyes, as if trying to erase the horrific images of devastation and death from his mind. He sighed again, put his spectacles back on and looked intently at his brother.

"Aberforth, my dear brother, I need you to do something important for me."

"Of course, Albus." Aberforth smiled. "Something to keep hidden?" He guessed that his role in the Order of the Phoenix was apparently still relevant, even with Voldemort gone.

Dumbledore returned his smile. He reached into his robe and pulled out a small phial that contained a swirling, silvery-white substance. Covering it with his hand, he pushed it towards the barman. "There may come a time when the boy will want to see it. If he asks, give it to him."

Aberforth pocketed the phial discretely and raised a curious eyebrow. "It's his? But he's just a baby."

"The memory is the truth of what happened. Aside from it being a personal and historical record, it may be important in case...." Albus knew that while the reign of Voldemort's terror had ended, it was most likely not over. "Just in case... please keep it safe."

Author's Note: This story was written over a thirteen month period and completed just before the release of **Deathly Hallows**. Updates will be frequent! Most of the events depicted in this story were referenced in the books through HBP, but JKR never really elaborated on them. I have done so and hope you find them plausible!

The cover illustration and other chapter art in this story is by the amazing anemesque.

What the Future Beholds: 1978

Chapter 2 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

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What the Future Beholds: 1978

- Three Years Earlier -

Severus Snape

It was the end of a long, dull day, and Severus was alone in Amberson's Apothecary cleaning up the phials and cauldrons and straightening up the Preventative Potions counter. As he scrubbed a particularly nasty spill that had landed on the workroom floor, Severus pondered on how he had come to be here and, more importantly, where he was going. Whatever his future beheld he knew it certainly wouldn't involve cleaning armadillo bile. He sat up and inspected the floor. It shone. He could have used his wand, of course, but Severus didn't think it would have done the same job. Besides, he didn't mind getting his hands dirty. Sometimes it was the only way.

Seamus Dayfwyd, the owner of this establishment, had approached Severus after his graduation from Hogwarts last year and begged him to take the job. Despite passing 6 out of 7 of the N.E.W.T. courses he had taken in his final year, Severus loathed all of the career paths that his Head of House, Horace Slughorn, had recommended, especially since most of them were in the Ministry of Magic. Severus believed he was destined for greatness...for something important; for the rest of the wizarding world to finally recognize and acknowledge his unique abilities. No...there was no Ministry job worthy of his talents. He knew Lord Voldemort was recruiting Death Eaters, and he had already had two...offers...to join their ranks. Despite his intrigue and fascination with the Dark Arts, the persistent encouragement and support from Lucius Malfoy, and the challenge and enjoyment in fulfilling his patron's 'Special Orders', Severus couldn't see himself being a slave to anyone...not even the greatest and most feared wizard alive. However, he knew instinctively that the time would come when he'd have to make a choice. Until then, he still had ends to meet, so Severus had grudgingly agreed to accept Seamus' offer. Besides, Severus didn't mind creating potions and elixirs in the back of the shop where he could work in solitude while Seamus dealt with the

customers. He also had the freedom to further his own experiments and develop his skills. Still, Severus felt his impatience growing alongside a certain feeling that his life was about to change. The question in his mind was whether this was a change he would make for himself or if it would be made for him.

Severus was placing the last of the clean glass phials in their cupboard when the tinkle of bells at the shop door indicated that a last-minute customer had arrived. Irritation flared in Severus. Their unwanted presence would delay his return home. He swooped down to the counter, his black robes swirling, and glared at the customer, a young woman with a child. She was young, in her mid-twenties and had long, auburn hair. He felt his irritation increase. The woman took a step backwards, clearly startled at his advance. Severus noticed she had green eyes.

"Yes?" Severus snapped, not even trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice. "We're about to close. What do you want?"

The child, a girl of about five, burst into tears. Severus smiled grimly. He often had that effect on children.

Lily Evans Potter

Sirius Black, James Potter's Best Man and best friend, held up his glass to the crowd assembled in the Potters' garden and called them to attention.

"I'd like to make a toast to the lovely bride and her less than lovely groom! James, I don't know how you actually succeeded in making her fall in love with you. I guess you must have cast some special magic, since begging and pleading for over six years was certainly ineffective...and being *my* friend was certainly no help! And, lovely Lily, we all thought you were the smartest girl in school, so I can only surmise that you must have completely lost your mind in agreeing to marry James!"

Everyone laughed, none more so than Lily and James, holding hands at their wedding feast table.

This was happiest day of Lily's life. Not even her sister Petunia, who had been forced to come and was now sitting alone in the darkest part of the garden, could ruin this moment. The ceremony had been beautiful, and she'd treasure the memory of James' tears as he spoke his vows. The summer's day had brought sunshine, casting its brilliant light on the garden filled with an explosion of roses, gardenias and, of course, lilies. Most of all, she felt grateful that she was able to share this day with all the people that she loved and cared about the most: James' parents, who were, they feared, nearing the end of their very long life. It was a blessing they were here to see their beloved, only son wed and happy. Lily's parents, yes...even her sister, her dearest friends Alice, Annette and Helene, and her mentor from the Department of Mysteries, Corran Masten. She was also pleased that her former Headmaster, Professor Dumbledore, had agreed to come. For the briefest moment, however, she felt a slight twinge as she felt the absence of one good friend who was not there.

After the toasts were complete and guests made a beeline for the wedding cake, James kissed her lightly on the forehead and asked, "D'you mind if I have a word with the gents?"

Lily raised an eyebrow. "Gents? Do we have some of those here? Oh! You mean that motley crew of yours? Well, since they did clean up rather well for today...off you go!" Lily laughed, pushing him away. "But remember your promise!" she admonished with mock seriousness.

"No pranks...I promise!" James bowed, his hand over his heart. He kissed her again and bounced over to his old school mates: Sirius, Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew.

She smiled as she watched him lope off, his attempts to keep his hair in one place having failed miserably. Lily pushed back the strands of her own auburn hair that had escaped her attempt at keep them atop her head and got up to seek out her own best friend. Alice was pouring herself punch, some of which promptly spilled as soon as Lily put her arm around her shoulder.

"How perfectly just like me," Alice grimaced, looking at the damage to her robes. "How they ever agreed to let me train as an Auror, I have no idea." She took out her wand and removed the spill with a quick motion.

"Because you're bloody clever and can keep a straight eye and wand when you put your mind to it, that's why!" The two friends sat down together. "Besides, spilling punch at a wedding must be an omen of happy times!" Lily teased. "I'm so glad your wedding is next week!"

Alice's face flushed. "Once Frank heard that you and James were tying the knot, he insisted we do the same."

Alice was the only person in the world Lily allowed to use the shortened version of her name. Her heart warmed to see her friend so happy. "You love him so much, don't you, Alice?" Lily squeezed Alice's hand as she nodded. "He's a wonderful man. He's lucky to have you!"

"Well, it took him long enough to notice me at school, didn't it?! We had to lock him in the dungeon before he'd even talk to me!" Both girls laughed at the memory of their plot to force the two of them together in their sixth year.

Alice went silent, and then suddenly grabbed both of Lily's hands, looking serious. "Lily, I was going to wait until later, but, well, I think it's important."

Lily was startled at her sudden shift in mood. "What is it, Alice? Is anything wrong?"

"Oh, no... nothing's wrong!" Alice started to rub her arm, an old habit that she fell into when faced with uncomfortable situations. "I'm sorry! I'm just not good at doing this. I told them someone else should do it, but they said that since I'm your best friend I"

"Alice! Stop rambling and tell me!"

"Sorry, Lil! Okay. Well... I know you love your new job in the Department of Mysteries, although I hate that you can't tell me what an Unspeakable does...."

"Alice! Focus!"

"Right... well." Alice took a deep breath, looked around, and then leaned forward lowering her voice. "Dumbledore has formed a special group...Frank and I are in it. He felt the Ministry wasn't doing enough...the casualties are so high...." Her voice dropped off a bit as she paused. She took a breath and continued. "So we have all sworn to fight You-Know-Who, together. It's very dangerous and very secret."

"Alice!" Lily exclaimed, feeling a bit hurt and more than a bit surprised. "How can you have been involved in something like that without telling me?! I'm your best friend!"

"Well, the whole point of a secret organisation is that you can't tell people, silly!" Alice rolled her eyes and poked at Lily. "Besides, you keep secrets from me, don't you?"

Lily couldn't argue with this. She knew her friend hated not knowing about her work. Lily didn't respond, so Alice continued.

"Anyway, at our last meeting Dumbledore and the others agreed that with your abilities at charms and potions and James' defense skills, you and James would...be how did Dumbledore put it?" Alice steepled her fingers below her chin and looked over imaginary spectacles, using her most Dumbledore-ish voice, *'invaluable to the cause!'*

Lily laughed and shook her head, slightly astonished at having this unexpected discussion on her wedding day.

"We want you to join, Lil, and I've been asked to extend the invitation!"

Lily glanced at James whom she noticed was talking with Frank Longbottom, apparently having the same conversation. James looked over to her at the same time and, in their moment of eye contact, both nodded in silent agreement. Lily turned back to Alice and smiled.

Alice started rubbing her arm again. "I'm sorry, Lily. I'm a dolt, bringing this up today...of all days!"

"Alice, it's all right!"

Alice looked dubious.

"No, really! Of course we accept!" Lily took her hand and looked directly into her dear friend's eyes. "You know that whatever needs to be done, we'll be there." Alice smiled broadly and they hugged. They stood and Lily hooked her arm into Alice's and walked towards the cake, which was now considerably smaller. "Does this 'secret group' have a name? Is there an initiation ceremony? A secret handshake? Tell me *everything!*"

Peter Pettigrew

When Peter came to, he found himself blindfolded with his hands tied tightly behind him. He was momentarily befuddled and thought he might be dreaming, except for the pain on the right side of his head. Then he remembered: he'd been on his way home from work when two masked figures had approached him; the last thing he recalled was a feeling of terror when the taller one pulled out his wand.

Peter started shaking so badly his feet gave way beneath him and he crumpled to what he felt was hard, cold dirt. He couldn't see but heard laughter...he assumed towards him. Well, he was used to people laughing at his expense, but this felt...different. He sniffed to see if he could figure out where he was. The air smelled damp, musty. The laughter echoed. He heard the distant sound of the sea. He guessed he was in a cave. But why? Why would Death Eaters (for he had recognised those masks) want him? Whatever the reason, Peter knew this was bad... very, very bad.

"Hullo?" he called out. "Why am I here? What do you want? There must be some mistake!" Peter pleaded with...well...with whoever was nearby. No one bothered to answer, but he suddenly felt himself grabbed roughly, dragged some distance and thrown to the ground.

"Leave us."

The sound of this new voice made Peter's body chill like it had been cast into a deep vat of ice. As footsteps faded, the blindfold and bindings disappeared. The space was lit so dimly, however, that Peter still found it hard to see clearly. He squinted around, rubbing his wrists.

"Pettigrew. So nice of you to join us," said the voice, gently caressing each word. "I hope you had a pleasant journey. Stand up."

He tried to move his legs, but found his lower extremities frozen with fear, as if they had become one with the earth beneath him.

"Get UP!"

An unseen hand or some terrible force...lifted him with a jolt to his feet. Peter struggled to maintain his balance while still shaking furiously. He didn't want to look at the voice, yet felt his head compelled upwards until his eyes beheld the form of a man...or something resembling a man. Although Peter had never seen him before, he knew it was Lord Voldemort.

The eyes. The eyes were both wondrous and horrible, black with flashes of red like the pit of a fire in full force.

"I have important work for you Peter. I understand you are an Animagus?"

He didn't know how he managed to get his own voice to work but Peter responded, "Yes... I am... but no one knows about...."

"I know everything, Peter. I know about you, and I think you can serve me well."

"Me?" Peter squeaked. "I'm not that special.... Sir... I'm sure you're mistaken. I...I don't think I'd be much use...." He tried to back away, but he was frozen to the spot.

"Oh, I disagree, Peter. You can, shall we say, squeeze into places undetected and you have, I assume, excellent hearing." Peter tried to avert his gaze, but was unable to avoid the glare of the eyes boring into him.

"I have found that your friends...and other old school acquaintances...have become quite a nuisance lately. I need information, and I think you'll be very helpful in providing it to me."

Peter could hardly take in the enormity of who was in front of him, let alone what he was being asked to do. And yet... here was the most feared wizard in the world, needing *his* help! Peter Pettigrew...helping Lord Voldemort!

He was uncertain how the words found themselves escaping from his mouth. "You want me to... to spy for you? But...."

Voldemort hissed. "There are no 'buts,' Peter. I don't make requests. Do you understand?"

Instinctively, Peter bowed his head. "Yes, sir. I understand." He thought he was going to be sick.

"Good!" Voldemort replied lightly. "I'm sure you won't want to disappoint me."

"No, my...Lord," Peter said, his heart beating fiercely. He tried to remember to breathe.

"You will, of course, tell no one of this. Even my Death Eaters won't know of your involvement."

Peter looked in the direction from which he had been dragged. "But what about the two that brought me here?" Peter asked. "They know about me."

Lord Voldemort laughed. It was a horrible laugh...high pitched and piercing. "Don't fret about them. They're already dead." He put his hand on Peter's head and stroked it with his long fingers. "I don't want to share you with anyone, Peter. You're mine. All mine."

Friends and Empathy: 1970 - 1972

Chapter 3 of 24

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Friends and Empathy: 1970-1972

Peter Pettigrew: 1970 First Year

Peter stopped short as the corridor dead-ended at a rusty suit of armour that was missing an arm.

"Oh, no! Not again! I know I'll be late...I *hate* being late!" Peter wailed to the unresponsive yet imposing hunk of iron. He turned on his heels in frustration to find another route to his Transfiguration class.

After his first full week at Hogwarts, Peter was still getting lost on his way to classes. As hard as he tried, he couldn't seem to tell one stairway or corridor from the next. It didn't help that the stairs moved without warning. What made it worse was that Peter had a very hard time asking for help from the other students, all of whom seemed so assured and confident and so *big*! He still wondered how on earth he'd been sorted into Gryffindor; he had never been all that brave. He'd always depended on the safety and security of his home and the protection of his mother. And while he'd been excited to start school and finally become a full-fledged wizard, Peter was having a much harder time getting used to feeling so... alone. Alone and vulnerable.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Peter never felt alone or vulnerable at home. At home, he was the apple of his mother's adoring and never-wavering eye. Brandiwine Pettigrew had married Peter's father, Eustace, just out of school. Eustace earned a fair living as an importer of magical goods from other countries, providing a wide range of wares to shops in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. Brandiwine's sole dream in life was to become a mother. Aside from caring for her husband, it was all she had ever wanted. Of course, having Eustace away travelling on business for significant periods of time made it a bit more challenging to realise that dream. And it was *her* dream; Eustace didn't seem to care much one way or another, although he thought it would be good for his wife to have something to look after when he was away. After many years spent trying to get pregnant, seeing fertility Healers at St Mungo's and trying every potion, draught and spell both sanctioned and suspect, Brandiwine finally and reluctantly began to accept that her life's dream would remain unfulfilled.

It wasn't until she was well into her forty-third year that Brandiwine, surprised and overjoyed, found out that she was, at long last, going to have her child!

Peter could hardly recall a time when his mother wasn't at his side. She even slept in his room when his father was away on business. Brandiwine made sure Peter had every comfort and took care of his every need. Since Peter was shy, she found friends for him and brought them over to play. She rushed him off to St Mungo's at the slightest cough or runny nose. She fed him all his favourite treats all the time, which, to Brandiwine's delight, put a nice, chubby body onto Peter's short frame. Brandiwine loved her son completely and Peter loved her in return.

Peter's father, however, was another story entirely. Peter adored his father and was always exceptionally well behaved on the occasions when Eustace was at home, hoping for some words of recognition or acknowledgement. However, the only words his father offered up were crumbs like, "Good morning," or, "Where's the paper?" or, "Have you seen my boots?" Eustace was not deliberately unkind to his son, it was just that he hardly gave the boy any thought at all. Peter was Brandi's to fuss over.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Peter was running down the third floor corridor to get to his class. Not being in particularly good shape, he was breathing hard, his head down, when he ran smack into a black robe and fell, sprawling on the floor. Peter looked up and, to his horror, saw a small clutch of seventh-year Slytherins looking down and laughing at him. Peter froze. He'd met them before. He began to breathe harder and sweat profusely.

"Who's the little, round runt?" one of them sneered.

"I remember him. We played with this one the other day? Don't you remember, Anton?"

Peter tried to scoot back along the floor and stand, but the one called Anton put his foot on his stomach, anchoring him to the ground.

"Oh, of course! We needed a new Quaffle, so we tried him on for size!" Anton sneered. "He didn't bounce very well, though. Most unsatisfactory!"

"Well, I'm bored," drawled another, advancing on Peter. "I have an idea! Maybe he'd like to see the view from atop the new willow tree!"

Peter tried to wriggle out from under the Slytherin's foot, but Anton only pressed down harder.

"You're hurting me!" Peter managed to squeak.

"It speaks!" the one with the white-blond hair said in mock astonishment, then leaned in close to Peter's reddening face. "Well, round one, would you like to go flying without a broomstick?"

"Well, he can't use yours anyway, since it's already stuck well up your skinny arse!"

Peter found his stomach suddenly released and saw all three Slytherins whip around, wands out, to face a small, gangly boy with a shock of dark hair and glasses, whose own wand was well in hand. To his great surprise, Peter saw that the boy defending him was James Potter, a boy his own age, standing up against three boys...no, three *Slytherins*...who were much older and bigger! James was in his House, but Peter had never spoken to him.

Realising he could finally move, Peter scrambled to his feet and sprang to James' side, pulling out his own wand.

"Oh, it's two brave, little Gryffindors we have here, boys!" said the blond one.

"That's right," said James coolly. "And these two Gryffindors observe that you seem to have lost your way. I believe there's a nasty family of foul-smelling Bundimuns down in the dungeon looking for you. They say you're related!"

Peter's heart stopped. James was insane. Brave, but insane. Surely, they were going to be dead in another minute. But as he stood next to James, Peter felt himself, well, brave too!

"Oh! That explains the horrid smell coming from Anton's foot!" Peter quipped, his wand hand shaking harder than he wanted it to. He was pleased when James shot him a nod of approval.

"Boys! Boys! Let's move along now!" The rotund Professor Horace Slughorn had rounded the corner and was advancing on them. Peter allowed himself to breathe for the first time. Cautiously, everyone stowed their wands in their robes. The seventh-years turned on their heels and, with a leer and a huff, moved off down the corridor.

Professor Slughorn made sure they were gone and then turned on Peter and James. "And you two should be in class! What are you doing out here?"

James and Peter spoke at the same time: "I got lost..." "was excused from..." "looked the same..." "have a note..." "they ganged up..." "just returning...."

"Never mind, never mind," said Slughorn, dismissing them with a wave of his hand. "Just get to class...and, for heaven's sake boys, consider your odds next time!" They noted with delight that Slughorn winked at them as he walked off.

"A family of Bundimuns?" Peter asked James, confused.

"Don't ask," James shook his head with a wry smile and held out his hand. "James Potter."

Peter took it, smiling. "Peter Pettigrew. Thanks for...."

"Don't mention it," James interrupted with a shrug as they started to walk towards their class.

"But, weren't you scared?" Peter asked, eyes wide.

"Terrified," James replied. "But I couldn't let a fellow Gryffindor be treated like that!"

"You could have been hurt, though!"

"I didn't really think about it. I suppose it was a bit stupid." James smiled sheepishly.

"It's a good thing you are! Feel free to be stupid with me any time you like!" Peter laughed.

They reached their classroom and James held the door open. "After you, O Round One!"

Laughing together as only newfound friends can, Peter and James swept into their class.

Lily Evans: 1971 Second Year

Lily and Alice had a strong grip on the base of their Cactii Draconius, and protective eye shields and gloves firmly in place, they gave the spiky plant a good shake. They stepped back and waited.

"I wonder if we shook it hard enough," Alice muttered, looking at the odd plant quizzically. "Why didn't the needles fall off?"

"Maybe you should try it again?" suggested Sirius, sitting across the table from them. He turned to his Herbology partner. "Don't you think they should try it again, James?"

James pondered the question seriously. "Oh, yes... I think Sirius is right. Give it another go!"

As Alice reached for it, Lily yelled, "NO! Alice! Don't..."

But Alice did. Lily saw the boys dive under the table just as the plant exploded in flames, soil and dozens of very sharp needles flying through the air.

The greenhouse filled with thick smoke and the sounds of gagging second-year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. They heard Professor Sprout incant, "*Combibo*" and the smoke quickly drained out of the greenhouse.

Alice appeared out of the smoke with her fringe half singed off. Both she and Lily were covered in potting soil. Everyone in the classroom, still coughing, picked off the needles that protruded from their robes and hair.

James and Sirius had stuffed fists into their mouths to keep their hysteria at bay.

Lily glared at them both.

"Miss Evans! Miss McGuiness!" Professor Sprout was clearly not pleased at this disruption. "I suggest that next time you check your watches to see that the required three minutes has elapsed before taking the cacti in hand! You've wasted a perfectly good crop of needles, and now I'll have to explain to Madam Pomfrey that she'll have to wait another month for a full supply! Ten points from Gryffindor!"

Sirius and James stopped laughing.

"For homework: a foot long essay on the result of combining gillyweed and murtlap seeds. Class dismissed."

Lily flung off her goggles and gloves and, with a jerk of her hand, grabbed her bag and Alice. "Come on!"

"Lily! Ow!" Alice tripped as Lily practically dragged her out of the greenhouse.

Lily was breathing hard, and her eyes were narrow and focussed forward as she marched with Alice in hand towards the castle. James and Sirius ran to catch them up.

"Er, we're really sorry, Alice...Lil..." stammered Sirius.

Lily stopped abruptly and turned, causing the other three to crash into each other as she pulled up short.

"DON'T call me 'Lil'! It's *Lily*, if you please, Mr. Black! That was a terrible prank to pull! We could have been badly hurt! It was mean and childish! And to make it worse, you lost us points!"

"Lily," Alice said, putting a hand on her arm, "it's okay...."

"NO! IT'S NOT OKAY!" Lily yelled, pulling her arm away roughly. Alice stepped back, a bit alarmed.

Lily's anger seemed to be overwhelming her, which in turn caused her to feel both confused and scared. She had no idea where these intense feelings were coming from...or why. She turned from the three of them suddenly and ran into the castle, stopping only when she got to the main entrance hall. Breathing hard and not wanting to see or talk to anyone, she tucked into the nearest empty classroom.

But it wasn't empty.

"Lily? Whatever is the matter?"

Lily whipped around to see Remus Lupin coming towards her, his soft brown eyes filled with concern. They looked so sad. Lily burst into tears, fell upon his shoulder and sobbed.

Remus managed to manoeuvre them both to nearby seats. Lily couldn't see the look of surprise on his face as he held her shyly, patting her on the back.

As she calmed, Lily sat up, and Remus gave her his handkerchief.

"Thanks, Remus." Lily took it from him and blew her nose. "I didn't know people still carried these."

He smiled. "My dad says that a man always needs to carry one. You never know when you'll meet a lady in distress!"

Lily laughed, relieved to be laughing. "Tell your dad he was right!"

"I don't want to interfere," Remus said a bit awkwardly, "but if you want to talk about it..."

Lily looked at him. Remus was a Gryffindor and known to be in thick with James, Sirius and Peter. But he was... different from the others. She didn't know how she knew this, but she did. He was thin with light brown hair that often fell over his eyes. Many of the boys in her year had started to grow tall, but Remus wasn't yet one of them.

Lily deflected his question. "You first, Remus! Why are you here all alone in this classroom?"

"Doing detention for McGonagall. I just finished organising her Transfiguration books." He indicated the bookshelves in front of the classroom.

"You? Detention?" Lily said skeptically. "It was Sirius' fault, wasn't it?" She looked him directly in the eye. He held her gaze and smiled.

"No one will ever know!" he demurred, his eyes twinkling, holding the secrets of his friends intact. "Okay, your turn!"

"That's just it, Remus...I DON'T KNOW!" Lily sprang to her feet and began to pace. "I'm fine one minute, and the next, these... FEELINGS take over! They come out of nowhere! And what's even stranger, it's like they're not even MY feelings! It happened last night, too! I woke up in the middle of the night, crying. I assumed it was just a dream. But then this morning, Cassie, who sleeps next to me, told me she'd had a terrible nightmare about her parents being attacked by Death Eaters. And when she told me...and I don't know how or why...it's as if I knew how she had felt."

"And what happened just now?" Remus asked.

Lily stopped pacing. She told him about Sirius and James' prank in the greenhouse, and Remus fought and failed to suppress a laugh. Lily slapped him on the arm.

"It wasn't funny! I was mad, of course, but then, when Professor Sprout laid into us for ruining her crop... it was like... well... I can't explain it properly. I completely hacked off!"

"So when she got angry, you did too?"

Lily nodded. "But, why would I do that? It doesn't make any sense!"

Remus thought for a moment. "Has something like this ever happened to you in the past?"

Lily sat down again, creasing her brow as she considered this. She thought about being at home this past summer.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It had been a lovely summer with her family. Well, with most of her family. The Evanses had gone to their lake house, same as they had every summer since Lily could remember. She loved the small cabin where she and her older sister Petunia would tell ghost stories to each other at night. They had always been close, sharing everything until Lily's eleventh birthday when she discovered that she was, in fact, a witch...and that ghosts weren't only found in stories. After that, Petunia had gone all strange and would hardly speak to Lily when she returned home after her first year at Hogwarts.

Fortunately, Lily had her 'summer mates'; other Muggle children who had been going to the lake like them for years and years.

There was one early evening when she, the twins, Brian and Stuart, and Meggie and Josephine had made a campfire by the lake and were roasting marshmallows. Lily was so excited to share her amazing new experiences at Hogwarts with her friends. She had told her family, of course, but Petunia would run off every time the words 'magic,' 'Hogwarts,' 'wand' or 'wizard' were mentioned. In the end, Petunia spent a lot of time in her room.

The summer mates were all excited to hear Lily's tales of magic. Lily sensed that they thought she was making it all up, but enjoyed hearing her tell about it just the same.

"So ey lay on oomsticks?" Brian said through a mouth full of marshmallows.

Meggie hit him with her stick. "Have you no manners, Brian? Don't speak with your mouth full."

Stuart translated. "Brain here said, 'So they play on broomsticks?' Right, Brain?"

Brian finally swallowed. "Sounds like football in the air! So cool! Can you show me?"

Lily shook her head, "Sorry, Brian. Can't do it. I'm not allowed to do magic at home."

Josephine crossed her arms. "Of course you can't," she drawled, rolling her eyes.

Stuart stood up. "C'mon, Lily! Hop up and I can be your broom!" He was a tall, fourteen year-old boy that Petunia had once had a crush on. Lily laughed, and the others egged her on, so she climbed up on Stuart's shoulders. He began to race along the lakeshore, and Lily pretended she was batting Bludgers while the others cheered them on. On one of their turns, they stopped abruptly when Petunia suddenly appeared in front of them.

Lily's laughter died as Petunia stood there silently, red-faced and fuming.

"Hey, Tune!" yelled Brian. "Where ya been? Want a marshmallow?"

Petunia ignored Brian and continued to stare at Lily, who clambered down from Stuart's shoulders. Petunia's face was nearly purple. She looked like a cobra ready to strike.

"Petunia?" Stuart asked, clearly confused. "What's up? Why are you...?"

"How can you?" Petunia hissed, glaring at Lily and ignoring Stuart. Lily stepped backwards in the face of her sister's advance.

"C...can I what?" Lily stuttered. Petunia was scaring her.

"Talk about...*that*...in front of...*normal* people!" Petunia screamed, and Lily tripped and fell on her backside. Petunia glared down at her for a moment, and Lily saw something vital in her sister's eyes retreat, as if behind a door.

Then, the door slammed shut.

Hard.

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Lily was shaking as she recalled this memory to Remus. "In that moment, I was filled with a terrible sadness, like someone had died. It was a horrible feeling. I was so

scared and confused, and then Petunia left, and the feeling went with her."

She looked at Remus. "What do you think it means? What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing is wrong with you, Miss Evans."

Lily and Remus leapt to their feet, alarmed and surprised to see their headmaster sitting at a desk behind them.

"Professor Dumbledore, sir! We didn't see you..." Remus started.

"Of course you didn't, dear boy. No matter." The headmaster stood up and walked over to the two very nervous students.

"No need to be frightened, children. Neither of you has done anything wrong. Please have a seat." They did, shifting uneasily. They had never been this close to, or had a private conversation with, their headmaster before.

Dumbledore looked at the two of them with a smile that relaxed them considerably. "Now, Miss Evans, from what I have I heard it seems that Hogwarts has an Empathic amongst its students!"

"A... a... what, Professor?" Lily asked.

"An Empathic. It's a rare and very special gift found in only a few witches or wizards in any century."

Remus looked at Lily with wide eyes and then asked, "What does an... Empathic do?"

"An Empathic is able to feel into the hearts and souls of others," Dumbledore explained as if he were describing something simple, like scrambling eggs.

Lily suddenly felt her pulse beating hard and rapid. "But...it's horrible, Professor! I don't WANT to feel into people's hearts and souls! Can't you make it go away?" Lily felt her panic grow and tears spring to her eyes. "Please, Professor! Make it stop!"

Dumbledore reached over and took Lily's hands. He pulled her eyes to his.

"It can't be stopped, I'm afraid. But I can help you," Dumbledore said softly. "This is a great gift, Lily. I know it doesn't seem that way to you now. But it is a gift that will, over time, enable you to see the truth within people. To know love more fully than most people will ever know. And yes, to know other feelings as well. But, I can reassure you that this knowledge can be controlled so that these feelings don't overwhelm you as they do now."

"You...you can help me?" Lily asked, calmer now as the headmaster held her hand and her eyes. "How?"

"Well, not to flaunt my many considerable abilities, but I myself am an Empathic." Lily and Remus were at once surprised...and not surprised...to hear this. "I shall arrange times for you to come to my office for...shall we call them 'lessons'?" Lily nodded.

"Good!" Dumbledore stood and smiled at her. "I'm very pleased! I think we shall have a very great adventure, don't you?" He started out of the classroom, but stopped. "One suggestion." Dumbledore looked back at them, putting his finger to his lips. "Let's keep this between ourselves for right now. We wouldn't want to create any unnecessary... problems. Agreed?"

Lily and Remus nodded in silent agreement. They looked at each other for just a moment, and when they turned back, Dumbledore was gone.

Severus Snape: 1972 Third Year

Severus was hunched over his homework in the Slytherin common room, carefully crafting his Defence Against the Dark Arts essay on 'The Most Effective Defensive Spells to be Used While On the Run or Trapped in Small Spaces'. He sat up to examine his work so far and sighed. *This is ridiculously easy*, he thought, reading it over. *When will we get to the advanced material?* Severus often thought that most of the assigned coursework so far was beneath his real abilities.

"Snape!"

Severus looked up to see the hulking form of Goyle, a sixth-year, whom he thought was a boor and an imbecilic troll. But he kept those thoughts to himself.

"Goyle. What is it?"

"You're the Potions genius. Help me with this assignment." This was a command, not a request.

Never one to act rashly, Severus stared at Goyle for a moment, assessing the situation. Goyle was large, mean and never hesitated to use his wand or his fists when it suited him. Besides, Severus had learned that there were benefits to accommodating those who had...or used...power and advantage.

"Of course." Severus held out his hand to take Goyle's parchment.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Severus Snape was no stranger to the abusive sort. His mother, Eileen, was a kind woman who did her best to provide her son with a modicum of love and affection. She also tried, when she could, to teach him some of what she knew about the wizarding world. His father, Tobias, however, was a bitter and angry man, a Muggle who, frustrated and indignant at his inability to advance in a financial firm, had quit his position. This proved to be a terrible mistake that left the Snape family in severely reduced financial circumstances. Those circumstances worsened as his father's relationship with alcohol increased along with his violent outbursts.

A small and scared five-year-old boy flung himself at the large hand reaching out to strike his mother, already bleeding and lying on the floor.

"Mum!" the boy screamed through his tears and grabbed hold of the outstretched hand to keep it off his mother. "No! Dad! Stop! Please! Stop!"

The large hand flung him away, like tossing off a used up, dirty rag. The boy landed in a heap, smashing his head into a closet door, gashing his forehead. "No..." he wept, tears mingling with his own blood, helplessly watching the hand continue to lash out, his mother cowering silently under repeated blows.

"Mum!"

Severus had worked long and hard to control and master the feelings of fury at his mother for being unable to stand up to his father and to protect her son. Over time, he watched as she became sickly, both in body and in mind. So the child was mostly left to his own devices, imagination and intelligence, all of which were considerable. He most often retreated into the store of his mother's books, soaking up everything he read. He even succeeded by sheer will to teach himself some rudimentary spells. Not much changed when his parents both died just before his leaving for school: his father was hit by a Muggle lorry, and his mother died from a sickness that ate her alive from the inside. Not that it mattered. He had been alone when they were alive, and he was alone now that they were gone.

Coming to Hogwarts, Severus allowed himself just a flicker of hope that his life would finally be his own, that here he would find respect and his own way in the world. But quickly, he learned that life was not much different among his own kind than it had been at home, and that small hope was quickly extinguished, for once again, Severus found himself the object of continued abuse. If he was lucky, his classmates ignored him. Or, if not, he became the object of their pranks and hurtful stunts. Severus had

come to view their horrid behaviour as a test...a challenge...one that he willingly accepted, supported by an inner belief that he was, in the end, better, stronger and more capable than any of them. So he chose to stay by himself, mind his own affairs and focus on his studies.

While encouraged by his teachers, only Albus Dumbledore seemed to pay him some extra notice. It was the headmaster who would be the one to offer a kind word, praise his work or to intervene when someone was doing something particularly cruel to him. Severus was unable to fathom why anyone would care about his well-being. Surely, he thought, the headmaster wanted something from him. What that something was, Severus didn't know. Yet.

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Before entering the Potions classroom, Severus handed Goyle back his completed homework, done in a reasonable facsimile of Goyle's own terrible scrawl.

"Better get good marks on this!" Goyle snarled, snatching the parchment.

"Don't worry," Severus sneered, affronted by the insinuation that he would do anything less than perfectly.

He found his usual seat at the one table where he could be by himself and, reaching into his bag to retrieve his book, was startled by a voice close behind him.

"Do you mind if I sit here? I just can't bear that lot anymore. They're insufferable!"

To say that Severus Snape was surprised to see Lily Evans, a Gryffindor whom he knew but had never spoken to, plop down on the seat next to his would be an understatement. However, he was careful not to let her see it.

"Sit where you like," he muttered. Keeping his head down, Severus peered through the curtain of his dark hair to the table where Lily was firing hateful glances. He noted Pettigrew, Potter and Black pointing their wands at a multitude of small spiders they had, he assumed with disdain, unleashed at their table. They were laughing as they tried to zap them all into oblivion.

"I see. Your friends won't miss you?" he inquired casually, masking his curiosity.

"I've put up with their nonsense for two years. It's enough!" Lily said with annoyance, picking out a few spiders from her hair. "I really LIKE Potions, and all their messing about gets ME into trouble! I just can't concentrate, and this year I'm not having any of it." Lily stopped to catch her breath and looked at Severus. "I'm sorry! How rude of me." Lily tossed back her long, red hair, flashed him a genuine smile and held out her hand. "Lily Evans. You're Severus Snape, aren't you?"

Severus was rarely at a loss for words, but found they had abandoned him completely for the first time in his life. The only looks he had ever received from a girl before were ones of sneering contempt and disdain. All he could manage was a curt nod as he gaped and shook her hand. He registered that her hand was small and smooth, unlike anything he'd ever touched before. Finally, he took hold of himself.

"You like Potions?" he asked, although he noted that his voice sounded a bit, well, like someone was strangling him.

"Oh, my, yes! Don't you? Well, of course you do. Everyone knows you're a whiz at Potions."

If Severus was surprised before, it was nothing compared to his reaction at seeing Lily avert her eyes from him...and blush!

Looking down, Lily continued. "Well, that's another reason why I thought it might be a good idea to team up...if you don't mind, that is!" She looked at him directly. "I thought I'd be able to really learn something if we... we could work together."

Severus tried to filter this information, to understand what she was saying. She wasn't here merely to get away from those horrid boys? He glanced over to their table with a feeling of disgust. She actually wanted to work with him? She was still looking at him. He realised that she seemed to want him to say something, even though she hadn't asked him a direct question. Severus was confused. He didn't like feeling confused.

"No... I... don't mind," he managed to say. He was transfixed by another one of Lily's beaming smiles. He really didn't like this feeling and decided it would be best to discourage her. "You may have noticed that your friends don't like me very much. Are you sure you want to be seen next to me? They can be nasty, you know. I don't think you want to be in my company."

She wrinkled her nose and tossed her hand in a dismissive wave towards the Gryffindor table. "They can sod off, as far as I'm concerned. I've seen them be terrible to you, Severus, and I don't like it. I'll never understand how people can deliberately be so mean to each other!" Lily lowered her voice a bit and leaned into him. "I mean, you are a bit aloof, but that's no reason to pour ink into your porridge, is it?" Lily grinned and her green eyes twinkled.

Severus felt so unbalanced by her words, her demeanor, her... sheer earnestness, that he nearly fell off his stool.

Lily looked at him intently as if reading his reaction. Her eyes widened with concern. "Oh, Severus! I'm so sorry! That was a completely insensitive thing to say. I've upset you. Oh, pixie dust! Severus, please forgive me!"

It took every ounce of his energy to rein in his feelings and regain composure. He sat up straight and looked at her directly.

"No need to apologise. I'm... I'm glad. You can share the table if you'd like. I saw your Shrinking Solution last week, and I agreed with Slughorn's assessment. It was quite... good."

At that moment, Slughorn himself appeared before his class and announced, "Good day, everyone! Books open to Chapter Five!"

Lily was visibly relieved, and as she took out her book, she whispered, "Thank you, Severus! You'll see!" She smiled that smile again. "We'll have tonnes of fun!"

Severus had no idea what she was talking about, but he was immediately filled with... something unfamiliar. A light sort of feeling. Someone else would have easily recognised it as happiness.

A/N: Thanks to Angel Mischa, who is wrangling this story on TPP, for saving me from my punctuation sins!

Unspoken Moments: Spring 1975 - Fifth Year

Chapter 4 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred,

laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Unspoken Moments: Spring 1975 - Fifth Year

Peter

It was late spring, and the anxiety of Hogwarts' fifth-year students worrying about their upcoming O.W.L.s was mounting. Likewise, the Gryffindor common room was filled with increasing numbers of students staying up late, revising.

Peter sat in his usual corner with Sirius, James and Remus. Each had a book in his hands, but only Remus seemed to be actually reading. Sirius yawned and stretched, knocking his book to the floor, which he didn't bother to pick up. Instead, James took out his wand and Transfigured his book into a bouquet of roses, which promptly turned brown, dying in his hands.

Peter was trying to read, but he found himself distracted every time his friends made a move. Finally, he gave up with a sigh of resignation and closed his book. He looked across the common room to see Lily Evans sitting next to the fire with her usual gaggle of girlfriends. Peter leaned into James, keeping his voice low. "Nice try, mate, but I think Evans would prefer flowers that were alive, don't you?"

Sirius laughed, and James' face turned red as he flung the dead roses at Peter. Unfortunately, the roses turned back into James' book, making direct and painful contact with Peter's forehead. This time, both Sirius and James laughed. It took just a moment before Peter joined in their laughter. He was used to being the object of their jokes. He didn't mind. He loved his friends and would do anything for them.

"Hey, Wormtail! How about a bit of Slughorn?" Sirius asked suddenly with a glint in his eye. This time even Remus looked up, curious.

Peter froze, feeling a flush of delight and a twinge of embarrassment. He'd never done his impressions before any of the other Gryffindors.

James chimed in, egging him on. "C'mon, Peter! This room needs some livening up! You're brilliant as Slughorn!"

James and Sirius put their heads together and chanted in a low voice, "Slughorn! Slughorn! Slughorn!"

Peter noticed that Remus had put his book down and was leaning back in his chair, looking hopeful and smiling.

Peter stood and put up his hand, silencing the little band of Marauders who waited with eager anticipation. He raised himself up to his full height, tucked his chin into his chest, opened his eyes as wide as they could go and put his arms behind his back. In this position, Peter waddled over to stand behind an unsuspecting second-year, who was slouching over his book.

"M'boy!" Peter-as-Slughorn boomed in full voice. "If you intend to turn yourself into a Quaffle, I'd say you've got a good start!"

The poor second-year flew out of his seat, panic in his eyes, and whipped around to where he clearly thought the Potions teacher was standing.

The entire common room erupted in laughter, applause and cheers. James and Sirius were clutching each other, laughing with tears in their eyes. Remus stood and bowed to Peter.

To Peter this was a new...and heady...experience, and with this encouragement, he pushed on. He strode across the room just as Slughorn did in class as he checked his students' potions, acutely aware that every eye was on him. Glancing at James, he stopped next to Lily, who was laughing with the others. Peter saw James' eyes grow wide.

"Lily, m'dear girl!"

"Yes, Professor?" Lily replied, playing along.

"My favourite student! The best potioneer Hogwarts has ever seen! You and Snape have become quite a team, haven't you? Concocting the most...er...*creative* potions!" Peter declaimed to the whole room.

"Why, thank you, Professor Slughorn! You are too kind!" Lily was enjoying this, but blushed all the same.

"As I hear it, you've cast quite a charm on most of the male students as well, Miss Evans! Well done! Ten points for Gryffindor!"

There were more hoots and cheers from the now much revived students. Peter noticed James was smiling, but had grown quite pale as well.

"Oh, Professor!" Lily said coyly. "You don't listen to rumours, do you?"

"Rumours, eh?" Peter-as-Slughorn leaned into Lily and, raising his eyebrows, scanned the room, making eye contact with each one of the older boys. They each turned bright red in their turn and looked away. The whole room erupted once more.

"Now, Lupin, over there," Peter-as-Slughorn said, pointing, "we all know he's been in love with you forever! Isn't that right, Lupin?"

Remus put on a love-sick face. Lily blew him kisses, which he 'caught', bringing his hands to his heart and swooning into his chair. More whistles and catcalls.

"And then, of course, there is Mr Potter!"

Lily blushed furiously and did not respond.

Peter froze when he saw James stand up and take out his wand. He was no longer laughing.

"Well, look at the time! I'd better be off to my rooms. I have a box of crystallised pineapple and a glass of sherry waiting for me before bed! Dear Lily! You should have been in my House instead of with these Gryffindor ruffians!" Peter-as-Slughorn turned on his heels, strode back to his corner, and sat down.

The students in the common room rose as one to applaud Peter's perfect performance. He flushed with happiness at the unfamiliar attention and the accolades.

Sirius and Remus walked over to Peter and shook his hand. "That was bloody brilliant, Wormtail!" said Remus. "You outdid yourself this time!" added Sirius, clapping him on the shoulder.

Peter, however, was looking cautiously at James, uncertain how to respond until he knew how James was going to react. Sirius followed Peter's gaze to see their friend

looking flustered, but trying to appear as if nothing was really bothering him. James, however, wasn't as good an actor as Peter.

"It was well done, *wasn't it*, James?" prompted Sirius.

James always listens to Sirius, Peter thought.

James squirmed for a moment under Sirius' gaze, then relaxed and laughed. "Perfect!" said James, stowing his wand, which he suddenly realised was still in his hand. "More Slughorn than Slughorn himself!"

Peter beamed.

The common room quieted once again. Peter watched James pull Sirius and Remus off to another part of the room where they stood talking and laughing together. As he sat alone, the euphoria at being at the centre of attention and winning the approval of his friends evaporated as quickly as it had come. Without understanding why, he felt a momentary twinge of anger pop into his breast.

Peter sighed.

He picked up his book, and this time, not being distracted by his friends, he was finally able to concentrate on his reading.

Lily

It was late afternoon in Gryffindor tower. Lily was in the girls' dormitory doing her Prefect duty by comforting an overwrought first-year, who was anxious over her first-ever exams. The poor girl was soaking her pillow in tears.

"I-I can't do it!" she wailed. "My parents will be so... so... so disappointed when I don't pass! *Good marks are everything to them!*" the girl wailed.

Lily looked at her watch, anxious not to be late for her Careers Advice meeting with Professor McGonagall. She sighed.

"Ingrid, dear, it will be all right! I'm sure you'll do just fine. Everyone is frightened at the end of their first year. I threw up at least half dozen times before my exams."

Ingrid looked up, surprised. She inhaled a huge, wet sniff. "*You* did? Really?"

Lily smiled at the memory. "Oh, I did, really! One time in Herbology...just before my exams...we were tending to our Abyssinian Shrivelfigs when I tossed one all over it. I still don't think Professor Sprout knew why that *particular* plant happened to grow so large." Ingrid laughed and Lily sighed with relief.

"So, get yourself up, now. You don't want to be late for class."

Ingrid got up, wiped her eyes and took her bag. "Thanks, Lily. You're the best!" Ingrid smiled as she left the dormitory.

Lily looked at her watch again, grabbed her own bag, and ran down into the common room. Hearing steps coming from the boys' dormitory, she turned to see Remus. He looked terrible. She went to him and, without a word, took him by the arm and walked him through the portrait hole into the corridor. They walked for a bit in silence.

Words weren't necessary. Lily was the first student that Remus had ever told about his terrible monthly transformations into a werewolf. That day in McGonagall's classroom, after Professor Dumbledore had told Lily she was an Empathic, Remus had looked at Lily in terror and blurted it out. Later on, he admitted that it was his fear that she'd 'sense' the wolf inside him that had compelled his confession. Of course, at first she'd been shocked, but when she had looked at small, frail, twelve-year old Remus, she was heartbroken that this poor boy had to live through such pain and horror. Every month. All alone. When he'd described how it felt, the precautions he had to take, Lily had felt Remus' deep sadness and aching self-doubt. And from his confession, in the telling of his secret, Lily became Remus' deepest friend. She would never betray him. She had also, on more than one occasion, sat for hours in the hospital wing after his episodes and helped Madam Pomfrey to care for him, to heal the self-inflicted gashes and wounds that appeared and re-appeared each month on his small, ravaged body. Lily was both relieved and grateful that he now had the company of his friends to 'look after' Remus in the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade each month, safely away from the school. Still, it was to Lily that he turned, both before and after.

"Have you had anything to eat today, Remus?" she finally said as they made their way down the stairs.

"Just some toast. Not really that hungry." Before Lily could reprimand him, Remus gently jabbed his elbow into her side. "My guess is you're going to talk to McGonagall about being a Healer, aren't you? You're annoying enough to be one," he said with a crooked smile. "You've got the nagging part down well enough!"

Lily ignored the teasing. "I have considered it, actually. I've enjoyed helping Madam Pomfrey helping you. But I suspect that it was the helping you part that I enjoyed more than the healing part."

Lily looked at Remus and was surprised to see his face turning red. She rolled her eyes and brought them both to a halt mid-corridor. "Remus. Look at me!" Lily said firmly.

Remus did. "I know! I know!" he said, his hands raised up like a shield in front of him. "Can I help it if I have no control over the blood rushing to my head? It's just..." Remus struggled to find the words. "It's still hard for me, even after all this time, to believe that someone like you can... care for me at all, knowing what I am."

Lily punched him in the arm. Hard.

"Ow! I've sustained enough damage this month without you adding to it, Miss Evans!" Remus rubbed his arm, smiling.

Lily shook her head, clearly exasperated. "Remus! Remus! You are such a GIT! How could anyone NOT care about you? When will you ever get that through your thick, wolf-like skull? I pity the poor girl who falls for you! I can just hear all the excuses you'll make about why she can't love you."

Remus started to open his mouth in protest, but Lily pushed him forward. "Let's get going. I'm definitely going to be late."

A few minutes later, Remus had dropped Lily off at McGonagall's office.

"See you in Potions!" Lily waved him off.

As she walked in, she was surprised to see, not her Head of House, but the Headmaster. Standing with him was a man she guessed was in his sixties, practically a youngster standing next to Professor Dumbledore. He was not a tall man, nor was he short. He was lean, but fit, with short, brown hair streaked with grey atop a very kind face. Lily liked him immediately.

"Lily, I'd like to introduce Mr. Corran Masten," Professor Dumbledore said with a sweep of his arm in introduction. "Corran, this is Lily Evans."

Lily extended her hand. "Very nice to make your acquaintance, sir."

"Ah, Miss Evans. Albus here has told me so much about you!" He looked at her with a kind smile and a pinch of curiosity.

Lily raised an eyebrow at Dumbledore. Somehow, she knew specifically what it was about her that he had told Mr Masten.

"Mr Masten is here at my request to assist you with your Careers Advice session. I hope you don't mind my taking the liberty in doing so, Lily, but I somehow felt that the two of you would, as they say, hit it off!"

"No, sir, I don't mind at all." Lily and Masten continued to regard each other. Lily was now the one feeling curious.

"Good! So I'll leave the two of you to talk!" Dumbledore shook hands with Masten and left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Shall we sit?" Masten gestured to two chairs in front of McGonagall's desk.

He took a seat and leaned towards her. "Miss Evans, what do you know about the Department of Mysteries?"

"Other than it's located at the Ministry of Magic, not much, sir. I suppose that's why it's so...mysterious!" Lily smiled and Masten laughed heartily.

"Right you are!" Masten winked.

"Shall I take a guess that you work there and you've come to talk with me about it?" Lily asked with a smile.

"You are as bright and quick-witted as Albus said! Yes, indeed, I do work there. Your Headmaster has suggested that I seriously consider inviting you to help us in our work. Albus thinks quite highly of you, Miss Evans, and feels you'd be quite an asset to the Department."

"You've come to recruit me?" Lily was intrigued. "To work as a..." She realised she had no idea what people who worked there were called.

"An Unspeakable, yes. I bet a smart girl like you can hazard a guess as to why we're called that?"

"Mmmm... you do something secret? That you can't talk about?"

"Right you are again!"

Lily was even more intrigued. She thought for a moment and then scrunched up her forehead, trying to make sense of this. "So... how do you talk to me about it if you can't talk about it?"

Masten nodded with a smile. "Yes, the recruitment of new staff in our Department always presents a bit of a challenge. Let me just say that we'll be able to provide you with bits of information as we go. Our recruitment process has many steps and several layers that continue on through your completion of studies at Hogwarts. Usually, the conversation we're having now doesn't even occur until your sixth year. However, given Dumbledore's recommendation, we felt that an exception in your case was warranted.

"At this point, Miss Evans, what I can tell you is that we do all sorts of research in the Department of Mysteries. We ask the questions that can hardly be formed and try to understand the answers that can't be comprehended."

Lily blinked, not knowing how to take this extremely odd bit of information. Yet something about the twinkle in Masten's eyes reminded her of Dumbledore, which reminded her in turn about their special 'lessons'. She took a deep breath and relaxed both her body and her mind and focussed on Masten... and waited. It didn't take long. Almost instantly, she sensed within Masten both deep sadness and immense joy. She sensed as well the importance of his work. Importance and... something else.

"Your work is dangerous, isn't it?" Lily said after a moment, slowly interpreting what she had sensed. "It's about secrets that, if known, could be devastating to everyone."

Masten's expression registered a flicker of surprise, but only for a moment.

"Well, Lily...may I call you that?" Lily nodded and Masten spoke quietly. "I can't answer that question right now, but I can see that Dumbledore knows his students well. I believe that you would be an excellent candidate for the Department. If you are interested, I'd like to arrange for a special test over the summer to confirm my hunch that you possess a keen ability that would prove both valuable to our work and immensely satisfying to you."

Although Lily had barely any information to go on, she was surprised at her seeming certainty. "I am very interested, sir, and honoured that you consider me worthy of this opportunity."

"I'm so pleased!" Masten leaned back in his chair to get comfortable and smiled. "Well, now, let's you and I spend a bit of time getting to know each other better, shall we?"

Lily felt a bit dazed as she left McGonagall's office. She had no earthly idea what it was she had just agreed to, yet she felt energised and oddly elated. No, she felt this couldn't possibly be a bad thing if she felt like this, and she trusted Dumbledore's instincts completely. She wondered what Alice would say about it. Lily smiled. If she had to keep her work a secret, it would drive Alice crazy.

She entered her Potions class, and everyone was mid-way through their final, pre-O.W.L. assignments. Lily started towards Slughorn. He was discussing something with Severus in the front of the room, but he waved her off.

"No need, Evans! Dumbledore has already excused your lateness. Proceed on to your assignment."

As Lily made her way to her desk, Garrett, a large and unpleasant Slytherin boy, pushed her aside roughly as he walked past, muttering something she felt certain was nasty. However, she was feeling too good to give it a second thought. She put down her books and glanced into the cauldron, bubbling with a potion-in-progress, then up to the blackboard to see what the lesson involved. Severus joined her at their desk.

"Strengthening Solution," he muttered.

"Hmmm... interesting colour," Lily noted as she took out her wand to stir the contents, which seemed to be required at this point.

"Lily! No...DON'T!" Severus yelled as he jumped back reflexively.

But she had, and in doing so the cauldron erupted violently, covering Lily with its entire contents.

Surprised, Lily saw herself covered in green goo and started to laugh at how ridiculous she looked. Mid-laugh, however, she went silent. The room began to spin, and she grabbed onto the desk.

"Severus..." she gasped. She tried to keep herself from drifting, but it all slipped away into blackness.

Severus

The Slytherin common room was quiet with the sounds of quills scratching, pages being turned or crumpled, occasional yawns and sighs that signalled revision in progress. O.W.L.s were only a few days away, and the fifth-years were struggling to stay awake, to reread, to memorise, to practice and to suppress the panic they felt under the pressure of these important exams.

Severus was no exception, other than in his tendency to take the work more seriously and intensely than most of his Slytherin House-mates. He hunched over his notes

and his books, working at a small table in a secluded part of the common room.

He heard them coming before he saw them. When he looked up, there was a small group surrounding him: Nott, Crabbe, Parkinson, Garrett and Cranford. He eyed them warily. It was never a good sign when Slytherins moved about in a group. They each pulled up a chair and sat down. Severus put down his quill and waited.

"Evening, Shape," said Cranford genially. "Surely, you're well readied for exams by now. We thought you deserved a bit of a break." He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on Severus' open book. Severus flinched at this gesture of disrespect as the dirt from the boots sullied the white of the book's parchment.

Niles Cranford was tall and lean with jet-black hair, bright, blue eyes and an air of assuredness that made for a commanding presence. He was clearly the leader of this group. Severus knew that his father was one of the Dark Lord's followers, which made Cranford... interesting. He, unlike his companions, was also smart and clever, which meant that he was also someone who could not be ignored.

"How was your Careers meeting with Slughorn?" Cranford asked casually. "Did he suggest some plummy position in the Ministry? Have just the 'right' contact for you there? Hmmm... let me guess... Portkey Office? No, better! The Misuse of Muggles Artefacts Office?" Cranford pursed his lips into a sneer, and the others sniggered. "Bet you've learned a lot about Muggles from Evans. Could be very useful there!"

Severus concentrated on keeping his breathing even, betraying nothing. He finally spoke. "The only thing I've learned from Evans is some pretty clever potion-making," he said flatly. "We don't talk about anything else."

Cranford pulled his feet down and sat up. "You don't, eh? Hard to believe after two years of being so... close!"

"C'mon, Snape!" piped in Nott. "She's a right looker! Don't blame you for wanting some!" They all snorted, leered and laughed.

Severus shot up out of his seat like a Bludger. "I don't WANT anything, you imbecile!" he shouted. "I won't..." He stopped, furious that they had gotten to him.

Garrett pounced on this opening. "You won't what, Snape? Going to defend the Mudblood's honour, are you?"

Severus sat back down, willing his anger under control. "I don't need to defend anything. Evans can take care of herself."

"Oh, can she?" Cranford said lightly, picking up a quill and twirling it between his fingers. "Sure about that, Snape? Pretty dangerous for Mudbloods these days."

"What are you implying, Cranford?" Severus practically spat out the words as he said them.

"I'm implying that you should decide, Snape, which side you're going to be on!" Cranford shot back at him. "You can't go around chatting up Gryffindors," he spat, as if the word itself tasted nasty, "especially that Mudblood, and expect to have any sort of future!"

Severus looked at him, not uncurious. "What sort of future do you mean, Cranford?" There was laughter again, only this time it was nervous laughter.

Cranford's voice dropped to a whisper as he leaned into Severus. "Don't play innocent, Snape. You know as well as I that the Dark Lord's forces and power are expanding and getting stronger. It's only a matter of time until he prevails. And when that happens, and make no mistake, it will, you will want to be on the right side." Cranford leaned back again and resumed his easy smile. "You're not untalented, Snape. I think you should put those talents to good use!"

Severus did not respond. He felt like Cranford was reading his mind, and he didn't like it. Severus knew his abilities and talents were numerous. He knew this as a fact, not as something to brag about, but important to him just the same. It was important that they be respected, that *he* be respected. Severus shifted uneasily in the knowledge that he had already thought about...imagined...how being of service to the Dark Lord might be the way to get the recognition he deserved. For now, though, he wanted to keep his options open, and he certainly didn't want Cranford to think it was his idea.

"I'm sure that, when the time does come, I'll be exactly where I'm supposed to be," Severus replied evenly.

Cranford looked at him quizzically, trying to decipher this enigmatic response. "Well, make sure you do, Snape. And put some distance between you and Evans...you wouldn't want any nasty rumours to start spreading. It wouldn't be good for your reputation, or hers!"

Without waiting for a reply, Cranford and his cronies slipped away.

Severus took a deep breath and tried to refocus on his book, but it was impossible to concentrate. As much as he didn't want to, he thought about Lily. Well, not in the way he was sure most people did. He knew that other boys his age were always falling in and out of what they called 'love'. He knew that many of them were besotted with Lily, especially that horrid Potter. Severus thought it unseemly that someone could behave in such an openly infatuated manner, although he did find it curious that Lily didn't seem to notice Potter mooning over her like a cow. She either didn't notice or didn't care. No, Severus didn't think he was besotted or obsessed or in love. He pondered over this mystery just as he would any other problem: he studied it.

He considered the way they spoke with each other and his reactions to these conversations. It felt different than the conversations he had with other students. Theirs were easy. Enjoyable, actually. She was at least as smart as he was, which of course made his studies more challenging. Severus liked and respected challenges. He definitely respected her. The fact that she was born to Muggles made no difference to Severus. He, more than most, knew that one's abilities had little to do with one's parentage. No, he admitted, she was more than smart. He could see and appreciate that she had many gifts. She was kind and non-judgmental and not swayed by the opinions of others; their first meeting was clear proof of that. And, unlike nearly everyone in Severus' life, Lily could give these things without an expectation of something back in return. Yes, this was what made him like her especially. Severus could be himself with Lily. She was a friend. A good friend. He liked her very much.

Severus froze, helpless, looking at Lily lying in a heap by her desk, covered in the green potion.

"Stand back, everyone!" Slughorn pushed through the students that had gathered around Lily Evans.

James Potter had also pushed his way through the crowd to get near Lily. "What happened? Who did this?" he cried, throwing Severus a piercing look that indicated he had already identified the culprit.

Severus ignored James and looked over at the Slytherin table and saw Garrett, Cranford and Crabbe nudging each other, sniggering. Cranford caught his eye and nodded.

Slughorn took out his wand and siphoned a sample of the potion into a small phial he had pulled from his robes and gave it to Severus. "Snape, give this to Madam Pomfrey so she can determine what has been added to the potion and prepare an antidote. Step back! *Tergeo!*" Slughorn incanted, and the remaining potion evaporated.

The students cleared the space, and Slughorn conjured a hovering stretcher and lifted Lily onto it. "Snape, please accompany Evans to the hospital wing. The rest of you, please take your seats!"

James Potter looked stricken. "Sir! I'd like to go with her!"

Slughorn dismissed him. "Snape is her Potions partner, Potter. He'll be able to provide important information to Madam Pomfrey." James glared at Severus.

"B-but, sir..."

Slughorn took James by the arm and led him away. "Don't worry, Potter. She'll be fine. Let's finish our lesson now."

Walking as rapidly as he could and guiding Lily's stretcher carefully with his wand, Severus felt shaken. Afraid. He knew precisely what had happened. He saw Garrett bump into Lily near their desk. Severus berated himself; why didn't he think to wonder what Garrett was doing over on that side of the classroom? He looked at Lily, who was ashen. Snape noted that his own heart was beating rapidly and loudly. She had to be all right. Slughorn had said she'd be all right. Whatever it was that Garrett had put into the potion had obviously reversed the spell, causing Lily to be severely weakened. But how badly? Why hadn't he noticed that the colour of the potion was wrong? Had it been meant for him? Had Lily been an accident? In any case, this was his fault. James was right to blame him.

Madam Pomfrey had, thankfully, been able to develop an antidote. Lily was still unconscious, but the matron assured him that she'd be all right and would awaken soon. Severus was profoundly relieved, but worried.

Pretty dangerous for Mudbloods these days.

He knew that Voldemort and his followers were targeting Muggle-borns, but somehow Severus had never thought of it in terms of a real person...like Lily. He looked at her lying there and suddenly felt his heart constrict. She was in danger. And he cared about her. This new thought angered Severus.

Don't be a fool, Snape.

At that moment, Lily's eyes fluttered open, and she looked at him. His heart leapt into his throat.

"Severus," she said, still groggy, trying to push herself to a sitting position. "What happened?"

He composed his features, took a breath and swallowed before speaking. "Stupid accident. My fault... put the ingredients in the wrong order. You'll be fine, although it did produce a spectacular visual display. Please forgive my blunder, Lily."

Lily looked genuinely surprised. "You put them in the wrong order? That's not possible!"

"Well, you weren't there, and you are usually the one who double-checks that sort of thing."

She smiled, bemused. "Oh, so it's really my fault, eh?"

Suddenly, the doors of the hospital wing flung open, and a full dozen people flew into the room and ran to Lily's bedside like a horde of bears targeting a hive full of honey. Severus stepped out of their way.

The first to reach Lily were Alice, Helene and Annette.

"Are you all right?" "It was terrible!" "Are you in pain?" "Can I get you anything?" "There's still a nasty bit of green in your hair!" "How did it happen?"

"That's what I'd like to know!" They all turned to see James advancing on Severus, who did not move or respond.

"What are you playing at, Snape?" James was shaking in anger. "For some stupid reason, Evans trusted you. How could you do something like this?"

"Potter!" Lily yelled, sharp. Everyone around the bed stepped back, out of her line of fire. "What are you going on about?"

James kept his eyes on Severus. Severus concentrated on keeping his breathing even and his eyes on James. He felt for his wand, certain that Potter was doing the same.

"He tried to hurt you. I've been telling you for ages to watch out for him, but you haven't listened!"

"James Potter," Lily said, her voice suddenly low and menacing. This seemed to have a startling effect on James, forcing him to turn away from Severus and face her. Severus noted Lily was shaking, very angry. He'd never seen her angry like this. This was curious. And interesting.

"But, Lily..." James started, but Lily tore into him.

"You are an idiot, Potter! It was an accident. I am fine. Severus didn't do anything, and if you and your equally juvenile friends could get your heads out of the dung heap long enough, you'd see that there's not an evil plot around every corner! And, by the way, what makes you think I need 'rescuing', anyway? I can bloody well take care of myself, and if you don't know that about me by now, I doubt you know anything at all!"

The sound of the wind blowing through the trees was very loud in the hospital wing. The rumble of a train was heard in the distance.

Severus permitted himself the tiniest bit of smile. James glared at him with more hatred than before, which Severus didn't think was possible.

"Feel better, Lily," Severus said. He returned James' glare and left the room.

As soon as he'd passed the hospital wing doors, Severus' elation at witnessing James' public humiliation was dampened at the sight of Cranford approaching from the other end of the corridor.

"How is poor Evans?" Cranford said, his voice dripping with mock sincerity.

"She's fine," Severus replied. He decided that confronting Cranford about this...episode...was a futile waste of time.

Cranford, surprisingly, raised it himself. He moved in, his face very close to Severus', and his voice dropped to a whisper. "It was actually meant for you, but even better that it happened to her. Take it as a real warning, Snape. Don't get involved in things that will hurt you in the end." He stepped back and smiled. "I say this as your friend, Snape. Listen to me. I can help you." As he started to turn, he added, "Oh, and good luck with your O.W.L.s, Snape. Although I suspect luck is something you have in abundance!"

Severus watched Cranford descend the stairs. Over his shoulder he could see Lily in her bed, laughing with her friends. Her real friends. Something he could never be. The warmth he had briefly experienced had gone. Despite the heat of the day, Severus shivered and, pulling his robes around him, walked away.

A/N:

- Thanks to Angel Mischa for wrestling with my punctuation. The independent clauses never knew what hit them.

- The character of Corran Masten appears in this chapter courtesy of his creator, Morweniris. Corran's story is told in Mor's wonderful fic, Unspeakable Truth

Lessons Learned: Spring 1975 - Fifth Year

Chapter 5 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Lessons Learned: Spring 1975 - Fifth Year

Peter

The fifth-years were bleary-eyed and head-sore from studying. On the night before their O.W.L. exams, the library was filled with the sounds of page-turning, quill-scratching and sighing, interrupted by the occasional off-hand remark.

"Is it three parts scurvy grass to one part lovage or the other way 'round?" asked James with a sigh, wearily rubbing his eyes.

"Other way around," replied Remus without looking up from his notes.

"That's for the Befuddlement Draught, right?" asked Peter checking his own notes.

"Not that you'd need it, Wormtail," said Sirius with his patented smirk. "You're a perfectly confused git without that potion!" He nudged James, who laughed. Remus kept reading.

"True enough!" Peter remarked, forcing a laugh as well.

Sirius had apparently decided it was time for a break and that tweaking Peter would be a worthy diversion. He leaned across the table.

"So, has mummy sent you any new treats to help you through exams, Wormtail?"

Peter flushed. His mother did have a terrible habit of sending him his favourite sweets on a regular basis. He tried to tell her that there was more than enough food at Hogwarts, but this didn't deter her efforts in the slightest.

"Not since that last batch of mince pies," sighed Peter. "You know, the ones you ate most of, Padfoot!"

"Mmm... Wish I had one right now!" Sirius smiled, remembering. He leaned forward again. "You should tell her to start sending you some rat pellets!"

James punched Sirius in the arm. "Shhh!" he hissed, nervously glancing around the room.

"What?" said Sirius, innocent and wide-eyed. "I haven't said anything!" He turned back to Peter.

"Going to show mummy your new trick over the summer? You're so adorable as a small, grey rodent; I'm sure she'd love to see her precious rat baby!"

Peter blanched pale at the idea of it, and Sirius brightened. "I have it! Padfoot can carry little Wormtail in his mouth, scratch at the Pettigrews' front door and drop him at his mummy's feet! James, don't you think that would be a laugh?"

James considered it and nodded. "Yes, it might be a nice homecoming present. You should do it, mate!" Peter didn't respond but felt his stomach clench.

Remus closed his books and gathered up his things. "Enough for me. I'm knackered. I either know it or I don't. G'night all!" Remus waved them off and ambled out of the library.

"He had a rough time last week," Peter remarked with concern, watching him go.

"It's a good thing we're there to look after him, though!" said James. "It's better for Moony and loads of fun for us!"

Peter brightened at the memory. "You were brilliant, Prongs! Surprising that drunken fool who'd wandered too close! I thought he'd nearly die of fright!"

"Well, jumping on his head was a nice touch, Peter," James offered with a smile. Peter laughed.

"You didn't have to chase him all the way into Hogsmeade, though!" Peter shot back.

"I hate to interrupt this lovely reminiscence," Sirius interrupted. "C'mon James. I have something I want to show you." Sirius stood up, waiting.

Peter looked at James, then back at Sirius, who moved to leave.

"Okay, Padfoot." James shrugged and packed up his bag.

"Night, Peter. Good luck tomorrow!" Sirius called out over his shoulder, steering James out of the library.

Peter frowned, uncertain how he had ended up alone. Again. He sighed and packed up his own books, scrolls and quill, shoving them roughly into his bag before slinging it over his shoulder.

"I don't know why you put up with that rotter, Pettigrew."

Peter turned around to see Reggie Black, Sirius' younger brother. Reggie was a fourth-year, a Slytherin. Most of the Blacks were Slytherins; Sirius was the notable exception.

"What do you mean?" Peter asked, confused. Reggie started walking out of the library and Peter followed him.

Reggie smirked, and Peter recognised it as the twin to Sirius'. "Famous Gryffindor loyalty? Won't speak badly about your mates, eh, Pettigrew? Even if one of them hates your guts?"

Peter felt his heart beating faster than usual. "Who? Sirius? Sirius doesn't hate me!"

"No? I've noticed he's pretty well taken control of your best friend. Not to mention he rubs your nose into the ground every chance he gets."

Peter was speechless. He replayed the scene in the library from Reggie's point of view. He could see how it looked that way.

"Oh, you know Sirius, Reg!" Peter chuckled. "He's a card! He can't help himself. It's all in good fun. That's what friends do, right?"

Reggie looked at him sideways as they made their way down the corridor. "If any of my 'friends' treated me the way Sirius treats you, they'd be hexed and cursed 'til the other side of Monday." Reggie shook his head. "Nope. He's got it in for you. If I were you, I'd watch your step."

Peter pushed down a host of confusing feelings that Reggie seemed to have suddenly invoked. No. Sirius was his *friend*. Peter stopped mid-corridor and Reggie stopped as well.

"Look, Reg. I know the two of you don't get along. I know your whole *family* thinks Sirius is some kind of traitor because he's not in Slytherin. You're just trying to turn me against him!" Peter said defiantly. *That has to be the reason why he's saying all this* Peter thought.

Reggie nodded. "It's true. I'm not overly fond of my big brother. I think he's made some bad choices. But my sib can be cruel, which I can vouch for based on personal experience. I've been watching you, Pettigrew, and I see him doing the same thing to you. Listen," said Reggie amiably, "you're an okay bloke from what I've seen, for a Gryffindor. I just thought you'd appreciate a bit of friendly advice." Reggie shrugged. "Take it or leave it; it's no matter to me." He turned and went down the stairs leading to the dungeon and the Slytherin common room.

Peter didn't move. He thought. He tried to understand what Reggie had just told him and struggled against it. Well, it was true that Sirius often made Peter the object of his jests. He really didn't mind it that much. It made him feel good to be included. Did Sirius ever have something nice to say about him, though? Peter wracked his brains.

Well, he did like my Slughorn bit!

Was he really trying to 'steal' James? No...*James is my best friend!* James was almost always nice to Peter. Reggie was just jumping to conclusions because he hated his brother. Peter shook his head as if to throw out the images the younger boy had planted there.

No, Peter thought, they were the Marauders! Faithful to the end!

He re-adjusted his pack over his shoulder and marched off to the Gryffindor common room and to bed. Exams were in the morning and he was very tired.

Lily

Lily sat down next to Alice at breakfast and put her head on the table.

"Tired?" Alice asked. "Just a guess."

"My head is so full of everything I have to remember I can't hold it up. It's too heavy."

"Mmm. Know what you mean. Here, have some toast." Alice stuck a piece of buttered toast directly into Lily's mouth. Her head still on the table, Lily took a bite.

"...anks." Lily chewed. From this angle she could see a sideways James Potter walking toward her. She jerked up her head and started to rapidly pile eggs and sausages onto her plate. "Better to sit exams with a full stomach. That's what my mum would say."

When James had reached them he called out, "Morning, Alice... Lily!" Lily grunted something incomprehensible through her mouthful of breakfast, keeping her eyes on her plate.

"Good morning, James," Alice replied.

Looking at Lily, James just sighed and moved off down the table to sit with Sirius.

Alice turned to Lily. "What is up with the two of you?"

Lily swallowed. "Nothing is 'up', Alice. I just didn't want to go another round of *'Please, please go out with me!'*

"Maybe he just wanted to chat about O.W.L.s. The world does NOT revolve around the very popular Lily Evans!"

"Alice!" Lily looked at her surprised. "Do you really feel that?" Lily paused and looked at her carefully. "You do, don't you?"

Alice turned red. "I hate when you do that, Lil! It feels like you're peeking in my head!" Alice sighed. "But, now that you ask, yes, sometimes I do. I mean, it's not anything you DO deliberately. It's just... well.... Oh! I don't know! I can't explain it properly," Alice muttered, frustrated, stabbing her eggs viciously with her fork.

"Try," Lily said, encouraging her.

"Well, James for instance!"

Lily rolled her eyes.

"See... that's what I mean! You just write him off as no good, when he's really very nice. I don't understand why you do that! I think you should give him a chance!"

"If you think so highly of him, why don't you go out with him? Oh, wait. Frank wouldn't like that, would he?" snapped Lily.

Alice turned even redder than before. "Frank hasn't asked me out yet."

"Well, I think we'll have to do something about that, don't you?" Lily said suggestively.

"Don't change the subject, Lily Evans!" Alice rounded on her best friend. "Really, I've talked with James..."

"Ah, that explains it!" Lily flung up her hands in mock exasperation. "The two of you are ganging up on me!"

Alice plowed on. "...and he is a decent guy! He's smart and funny and great at Quidditch and...."

"And you've just made yourself Head of the James Potter Fan Club!" Lily retorted, now genuinely impatient. "Listen, Alice. All of that may be true. It probably is! But James is, well, he's just too too ridiculously immature!"

This time it was Alice who rolled her eyes.

"It's true, Alice! Maybe he'll grow up in a few years, but right now he's in the thrall of Sirius' unique brand of troublemaking magic, and it does NOT appeal to me!"

As if to prove her point, there was a yell at the end of the table. The girls looked down to see Sirius and James squeezing Peter Pettigrew so tightly his eyes were bulging as he yelped in pain.

Alice sighed and shook her head. "Okay. I give up. But I don't care what you say now, Lily, I have a feeling the two of you have a future together!"

"Decided to take up a career in Divination, eh, Alice?" Lily threw a piece of toast at her. Alice picked up her cup of pumpkin juice threateningly.

"Don't even think about it, *Mrs. Longbottom!*" Lily teased with an evil laugh.

"*AHHHH!*" Alice wailed, banging her head on the table.

Two weeks later, Lily marched up to Professor Flitwick and turned in her exam scroll.

"Thank you, Miss Evans," squeaked the diminutive Charms professor. "Practical exams at three o'clock sharp!"

"Yes, Professor." Lily let out a huge sigh of relief that the last of her written exams was over, and she took off at a trot out of castle for a breath of fresh air.

"Wait up, Lily!" She turned around to see Annette, Alice and Helene running to catch up with her.

The girls walked arm-in-arm out into the open sunshine and strolled over to the edge of the lake. They collapsed as one onto the grass, allowing themselves a well-deserved moment of relaxation.

"These last two weeks have been worse than cleaning a roomful of doxies!" exclaimed Annette, flinging out her arms so that her hand plunged into the lake.

"Didn't your mum say her curtains were infested?" asked Helene. "She'll be glad to have you clean them out this summer!" Annette muttered a spell, and an arc of lake water showered Helene, who smiled and stretched her arms to the sky.

"Ahh... that feels good!" The girls all laughed. It was a hot day, so they took off their shoes and socks and, with a moan of relief, tucked their feet into the lake.

Helene nudged Alice with her elbow, flicking her head up in the direction of the beech tree perched above the lake. "Look at Potter." James was playing a catching game with a Snitch.

"Very impressive," sniffed Lily, clearly not impressed.

"Oh, I don't know," said Helene. "I've been told he's good with his hands. Don't you agree, Annette?" Annette blushed furiously.

Alice and Lily turned to Annette and stared. "Is there something you'd like to share, Annette?" Alice asked. Helene laughed maniacally.

Annette glared at Helene, as if silently hexing her. The others continued to stare. "No... I.... Well, we went out once.... Just once!"

"Go on, Annette! Spill it!" Alice prodded. "We want to know everything! Don't we, Lily?"

Lily was surprised to feel an angry knot in her stomach.

"Sure we do!" Lily forced both her reply and a smile.

"He asked me out the last Hogsmeade visit." Annette looked at Lily with some apprehension. "After you turned him down. Again."

"Yes, go on!" Lily gestured, smiling to encourage her.

"Well, we did. That's all."

"No, it's not! Go on, Annette!" Helene prompted.

"Okay! Okay! We stopped at the Three Broomsticks, had a Butterbeer, went for a walk, stopped to sit by a tree and he kissed me."

"And...?" Helene prodded.

"You are relentless! I hate you!" snapped Annette. "Fine! I kissed him back and I liked it!"

Helene was gleeful and Alice looked surprised. Lily had no idea what she herself looked like, but was saved from having to respond by the sounds of a loud commotion above them. She looked up to see Severus trying, in vain, to battle jinxes being thrown at him in rapid sequence by both James and Sirius. The last one sent him sprawling on the ground. This was, finally, too much for Lily, who stood and marched up the hill.

"*Scourgify!*" James cast a spell that caused pink soap bubbles to froth in Severus' mouth, making him choke.

Lily rounded on James, livid. "Leave him ALONE!" He had really gone too far this time.

James turned to her and smiled. "All right, Evans?" he said pleasantly.

"Leave him alone," Lily repeated, her voice dropping ominously, her face clearly angry. "What's he done to you?"

Lily saw him glance at Sirius. "Well, it's more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean...."

Sirius and Peter laughed, as did many of the onlookers. Lily didn't waver her eyes from James.

"You think you're funny," she said evenly, coldly. "But you're just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter. Leave him alone." From the corner of her eye, she saw Severus inching toward his fallen wand. Everyone's eyes were on James and Lily, and no one noticed his movement but her.

"I will if you go out with me, Evans," he said quickly. "Go on... go out with me, and I'll never lay a wand on old Snively again."

"I wouldn't go out with you if it was a choice between you and the giant squid," she said. Several onlookers snickered. Severus had reached his wand and was aiming it at James. He gave Lily an odd look she didn't understand.

"Bad luck, Prongs," said Sirius briskly, turning back to Severus. "Oi!"

There was a flash of light, and a gash appeared on the side of James' face, splattering his robes with blood. A moment later James turned and, with another flash of light, Lily saw Severus hanging upside down with his robes hanging over his head, revealing his skinny, pallid legs and a pair of graying underpants. Many cheered. It did look funny, Lily thought for the briefest moment. Then she snapped back to James. "Let him down!"

"Certainly," said James and he jerked his wand upward. Severus crashed to the ground in a crumpled heap, again eyeing Lily with that same, strange expression. He got to his feet, raised his wand, but Sirius reacted quickly.

"*Locomotor mortis!*" Severus keeled over again, rigid as a board.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!" she shouted, taking out her own wand, which James and Sirius noted warily.

"Ah, Evans, don't make me hex you," said James earnestly, muttering the counter curse which released Severus.

"There you go," he said. James turned as Severus struggled to his feet again. "You're lucky Evans was here, Snivellus..."

"I don't need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!"

Lily suddenly felt as if someone had flipped her upside down and doused her with ice cold water. She blinked. "Fine," she said coolly, belying the hurt she felt. "I won't bother in the future. And I'd wash your pants if I were you, *Snivellus*."

How could he have said such a horrid thing? To her?

"Apologise to Evans!" James roared, pointing his wand at Severus.

"I don't want you to make him apologise," Lily shouted, casting her eyes on Severus who was looking away, then rounded on James. "You're as bad as he is...."

"What!" yelled James. "I'd NEVER call you a...you-know-what!"

Her hurt and anger collided and she exploded in a fury. "Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you've just got off your broomstick, showing off with that stupid Snitch, walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can...I'm surprised your broomstick can get off the ground with that fat head on it. You make me SICK."

Lily turned quickly and hurried away, feeling tears welling up from deep inside. She didn't want them to see it.

"Evans!" James shouted after her. "Hey, EVANS!"

She didn't look back and kept walking up the hill, in shock and heartsick, her tears now flowing freely.

He was her *friend*!

Severus

A week had passed since that horrid day. Severus had suffered a host of excruciating feelings since then: the burning of his public humiliation; seething hatred for Potter and Black; confusion at the respect and accolades from his fellow Slytherins for his public slander of Lily; and worst...absolutely worst of all...was the heart-wrenching remorse and shame at having injured the only person who had ever treated him well. He had seen her face pale as it registered shock and betrayal at his words.

Remorse. This was another new feeling, and he hated it. It taunted him relentlessly. He didn't know what to do with it. He tried ignoring it, reasoning with it, even tried to banish it by placing the blame on the others. He truly loathed that despicable, self-righteous James Potter. The ire in the insult had really been meant for *him*. Lily only got in the way! It was Lily's own fault! Her defence of him in public had only made a terrible situation worse, adding to the deep shame he already felt. She'd brought it on herself!

But still....

Remorse stuck to his craw like stinksap and would not let go.

It was the day before the end of term. Most of the students were sorting out their belongings from a year's worth of accumulated clothing, books, supplies and school-year souvenirs. Severus had very little to pack: his few clothes, important books, basic supplies. It didn't take him long. There was an hour or so before the final feast and awarding of the House Cup, so he took one of his books down to the common room, thinking he'd read a bit before then. Unfortunately, when he got there, a few of the younger students including, he noted, Black's brother Regulus, were having a loud and animated discussion. He decided to try and find a quieter spot and moved to leave the common room.

"Oi! Snape!" Reggie called. Severus stopped. "That spell you threw at Potter...I heard you made it up! Is it true? It was brilliant! You must know loads of Dark spells from all those books of yours! We've been debating: which do you suppose would do the most damage without killing someone outright Sectumsepra or the Cruciatus Curse?"

"Slicing someone open and spilling their guts has got to be worse, right?" ventured Zambini.

"I've heard the Cruciatus will drive you right mad!" Flint stated confidently.

Severus wondered how on earth these idiots ever managed to grow up without killing themselves first.

He glanced at them with disdain. "You should experiment."

The boys looked at him eagerly. "How?" they asked in unison.

"There are three of you. Draw straws to decide which one of you will lead."

They were rapt at attention.

"Then cast one of each spell on the other two and see which ends up the worse off."

They looked bewildered. Severus left the common room, leaving the boys to sort it out.

As Severus passed the Great Hall, he saw a girl with long, auburn hair walking in front of him. She went through the main doors and out onto the grounds. Reaching the main doors himself, he watched Lily make her way towards the greenhouses, and then past them until she was finally out of sight. Once again, remorse shot up and bit him in the gut...hard. Without thinking too much about what he would do or say, Severus went down the steps and followed in her path.

As he rounded past the greenhouses, he looked down the hill to see Lily, alone, sitting under a tree nearby the groundskeeper's cottage, writing something. Severus looked around to make sure no one else was nearby. Assured he wouldn't be seen, he approached Lily hesitantly, keeping a bit of distance between them. Once there, no words came into his head, so he just watched her.

"If you're trying to Transfigure me into some sort of creature with a non-verbal spell, Severus, I don't think it's working," Lily said finally, without looking up. "You'll have to wait until next year to learn how to do it properly."

"I - I - just wanted to say...." he stammered. Oh, why did his brain freeze when he was around her outside of class??

"Well, come over here, at least, so I don't have to shout," she said, looking up at him at last.

Severus tried to read her expression, to get a sense of how she felt, but without success. Reminding himself to start his study of Legilimency as soon as he got home, he walked over and sat down next to her. She set aside her quill, ink and notebook and leaned back on her arms, looking out towards the Forbidden Forest.

They sat in silence for a while. Lily clearly intended to give him all the time he needed.

"Are you looking forward to going home?" he asked.

"Suppose so," she replied. "We'll go to the lake as usual and my sister will be horrid, also as usual," she sighed. "Petunia hates that I'm a witch. And you?"

"Not especially," he replied.

"Why not?"

"Not much there. Just loads of books to read over the summer."

"What about your family, Severus?"

He realised he had never mentioned his family before. He didn't like talking about them.

"I'm the only one left. Both my parents died before I started school and I'm on my own."

Lily eyes widened.

He wouldn't have her pity. Anger, hatred. Anything but pity. "Don't go feeling sorry for me, Lily. In fact, that's part of what I wanted to speak with you about."

"I don't feel sorry for you, Severus!" she protested.

"But you do feel the need to protect me?" He said this more harshly than he intended.

Lily looked wounded. This was not how he had wanted this to go.

"Listen," he started, struggling to look at her without falling into those deep, green eyes. The words felt like pebbles in his mouth, hard and difficult. "I can't tell you how how truly sorry I am for... well, for calling you that despicable name. There was no excuse for it. Under any circumstances."

"I know you do," she said softly.

"I you do?" This caught him off guard.

"Of course I do. We were all a little crazy, including...maybe especially...me. I was horribly upset afterwards, but then I thought about it. I thought about how embarrassed you must have felt, and then I had to go and make it worse, didn't I? Some stupid girl coming to the rescue? I know you are perfectly capable of defending yourself, Severus. He just makes me... makes me...." She put her head into her hands. Severus was once again, speechless.

Lily looked up at him again, sharply. "But you are right. It was a horrible thing to say, and I was hurt." She wasn't going to let him off that easily.

Severus looked away, abashed. "I'm sorry, Lily," he said again. "I hope you can forgive me. Although I would completely understand if you don't...or can't. I just want you to know...." He felt his throat closing up, and the words came out in a whisper. "You are important to me. I'd never want to hurt you."

Lily burst into tears and hugged him.

He was shocked. It was the last thing he'd ever expected her to do and was clueless how to respond. His head swung around wildly, hoping no one was looking. He patted her back awkwardly, and finally, he managed to extricate himself from her embrace.

"Of course I forgive you, you idiot," Lily sniffed, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. "You're my friend, despite the grief I get for it."

"I understand."

She looked at him knowingly and smiled. "Oh, I'm certain you do!" She sighed deeply, shaking off the outburst. "Your friendship has always been important to me, too. You're so bright and different from the other boys."

Severus grimaced. "I've observed you've had quite a number of opportunities to compare."

She rolled her eyes. "What I MEAN is that most of the boys tend to treat me like I'm brainless, that I'm something to own or show off. I hate it. You treat me like, well, like me! Not like someone's idea of who I *should* be."

He was thunderstruck. It was exactly the way he felt about her. She saw him for who he really was. And respected him. He smiled.

She noticed. "You should smile more often, Severus. Really, despite everything, the world isn't such a gloomy place."

"Now you have to promise me something, Evans."

"What would that be, Snape?"

"Promise me you won't ever come to my rescue again?"

"Even if it's to save you from destroying a potion in class?"

"Ah, well, with that one exception."

"Very well. I promise!" They shook hands to seal the agreement.

She looked down to his side. "What book is that?"

He'd completely forgotten that he'd brought it with him from his room, intending to read. Immediately relieved that they had moved onto a more comfortable...and familiar...topic, he picked it up. "It's the text for our sixth-year N.E.W.T. level Potions class; it was my mother's book. I thought I'd get a head start."

She took it from him, skimming through it with curiosity. "I can't wait to try the Draught of Living Death! D'you mind if I copy it down?" She picked up her quill.

"My father was a Muggle, you know." Severus was surprised to hear this come out of his mouth. He wasn't sure why he had said it.

"What were your parents' given names?" she asked.

"Why does it matter?"

"I just like to picture people with their names attached. I don't know why. I've always done it."

"My father was Tobias. My mother, before she married, was Eileen Prince."

Lily shrugged. "Well, there are at least twice as many mixed families as there are so-called 'pure-bloods' in my experience. I've never understood the fuss your lot in Slytherin make about it." She stopped suddenly, considering him for a moment. Then her face broke into a sly grin.

"What?" Severus asked, confused and alarmed.

Without answering, she dipped her quill in the inkpot, opened the back of his mother's book, and started to write on the end-paper.

"Lily! What are you...?" He tried to reach for the book, but she kept it out of his reach.

"No peeking!" She took a long minute, seeming to take extra care with her lettering. Blowing the ink dry, she handed it back to him with a huge smile. "Consider it an end-of-term gift!"

He took the book back and read what she had inscribed. In a near-perfect copy of his own small, cramped handwriting she had written: "*This Book is the Property of the Half-Blood Prince.*"

Severus smiled again.

A/N:

The text in Lily's section is taken, of course, from JK Rowling's **Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix**, Chapter 28: Snape's Worst Memory.

Twists and Turns: Summer/Fall 1975 - Sixth Year

Chapter 6 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Twists and Turns: Summer/Fall 1975 - Sixth Year

Lily

Lily...

Please meet me after Potions class in the common room during your free period? It is really important. Please.

~ James

"Secret admirer?"

Lily reflexively squashed the parchment in her hand and jumped in her seat, startled. She turned to her Potions partner and saw a corner of his mouth upturn slightly in tandem with a raised eyebrow.

"No, Severus. Just a... reminder I left for myself in my book. I'd forgotten it was there."

She knew he didn't believe a word of this, especially since she felt the heat in her face betray her. Thankfully, he didn't pursue it further and turned back to preparing the ingredients for their Draught of Living Death.

The first week back at Hogwarts had been filled with the wonderful and familiar rush of activity: reuniting with good friends, settling into the dormitory, scheduling Gryffindor Prefect duties with Remus, and helping the new students find their way. There was also the new experience of taking N.E.W.T.-level courses, which were increasingly more difficult and, as a result, more interesting. Having free periods between classes felt a bit strange, but Lily expected her time to be anything but free.

After this class, for instance.

James.

Lily bit her lip and picked up a sopophorous bean.

"Use the side of your knife," Severus reminded her. She nodded and began to crush the beans, but her mind kept straying from the task at hand.

She had deliberately avoided James since that awful day by the lake. More unusual was that he had avoided her as well.

How and when did he put that note in my book? She looked over to where James sat with Sirius, heads bent together. *Hmm. They're probably concocting something other than the assigned potion,* she thought dryly.

"You're quiet today."

There was usually an implied question in Severus' statements. She pulled her mind away from James and the curious note.

"Oh... just thinking about my test this summer." Severus raised both eyebrows this time. "Remember? For the position at the Department of Mysteries?"

Severus nodded. "And did it go well?"

"Yes, I think it did. At least I hope so. Corran said that I would hear from them by the end of term."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The day of her test had been an incredible experience for Lily: getting picked up by a Ministry car; seeing the Ministry of Magic for the first time; the swirling, frenetic movement of wizards and witches with places to go and work to be done; the imposing fountain and Statue of Magical Brethren; and entering the strange circular outer room with its many revolving doors.

She had always felt the magic of Hogwarts...it was present in every stone, in every particle of its air...but when Corran unlocked one of the doors in the Department of Mysteries and ushered her into the inner room, a magic she had never experienced and couldn't define infused her entire body and mind so powerfully that it nearly knocked her off her feet.

Corran had caught her elbow. "All right, Lily?" He was looking at her intently. She had a sudden thought that merely entering the room and being able to remain upright was part of the test.

She caught her breath. "Wow." *Brilliant come back, Evans.* She grimaced.

Corran merely chuckled. "You do acclimate to it, I promise."

After the feeling had ebbed, she was surprised to see that the room itself looked... ordinary. Shelves lined the walls and were filled with books, manuscripts and parchments. Low cabinets with narrow drawers sat under the shelves. Dark oak reading tables and chairs were spaced around the room. The only odd thing Lily noticed was that the room was brightly lit but without an obvious source for the light itself. She made a mental note to ask Corran about it later.

"This is the library," Corran explained. "Nothing terribly mysterious here!" he added, as if reading her mind. "There are many other rooms, but we won't be visiting them today, I'm afraid. Just the examination room. Follow me!" He strode ahead, and Lily followed in his wake down a long, unremarkable corridor.

"Here we are. After you!" Corran held the door open for her, and she walked in to see a small witch of indeterminate age coming towards her, hand outstretched.

"Welcome, Miss Evans!" the witch said effusively, shaking her hand. "We're so glad you could come. Please, sit down." There was a simple table with two chairs in the small, unadorned room. Lily sat, as instructed. The walls were white, reminding her of a physician's office she'd once gone to as a child. Again, it was brightly lit, seemingly without the benefit of lamp or torch.

"Miss Evans," Corran began, "let me introduce Esmé Wentwhistle, the Head of this division. She'll be conducting the test for today. Esmé, I'll leave Miss Evans in your capable hands. Back in an hour, eh?" Esmé nodded and Corran left the room.

"Let me get everything set. It'll just be a moment."

Lily watched as Esmé took out her wand and, in a trice, several objects appeared on the table in front of her. They each had several moving parts and emitted small pops, whirrs, beeps and something that sounded like a cat's purr. Smoke came from one and mist from another. One of them moved itself in small circles around the table. They looked like a child's dream come to life, and Lily watched their antics with delight.

Esmé cleared her throat and brought Lily to attention. "While these trinkets may be rather compelling, I'm going to ask you to attend to me and respond to my questions. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am. I understand," she said, forcing herself to focus on Esmé, who was removing a sheaf of parchment from a folder that hadn't been present a moment ago. Lily thought she'd noticed her name on a few of them and was more surprised to see several photographs of herself and her family. Clearly, the Department had done a thorough background investigation.

Lily observed Esmé as she prepared. She was small but emanated her own considerable power; her unlined face belied years of experience. Her short, dark brown hair framed a countenance that, she sensed, was inherently kind. Lily was reminded of Corran, and she wondered if these shared traits were common among Unspeakables.

Esmé looked up to meet Lily's eyes and held her gaze intently. Lily felt a jolt of energy connect and pass between them.

Yes, I believe we do.

Had Esmé spoken these words out loud?

"Are you ready to proceed, my dear?" Esmé asked with an inscrutable smile.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

"She asked me a series of questions, and the odd objects twirled and popped," Lily explained. "I think Madam Wentwhistle was 'reading' them somehow, and she took notes. That was it. I have no idea what I was being tested on, but both she and Corran seemed pleased when it was over."

Severus nodded as he listened and stirred the potion. "Interesting."

Lily watched him stir and checked her Advanced Potions book. "Severus...try stirring clockwise every seventh turn."

Severus was used to Lily's instinctual improvisations when it came to Potions. He nodded and did as she suggested. Immediately, the potion turned the pale pink colour they were looking for. Lily smiled, pleased. Severus made a notation in his book.

"Did you find out what they were studying there?" he asked casually as he wrote.

Lily shook her head. "No. And I'm afraid that once I do, I won't be permitted to talk about it at all."

Severus gave up a small smile. "That will be hard for you, I'm sure."

Lily nodded with a sigh as she thought about her experience and all she had sensed there. "I have a feeling that they are working on something incredibly powerful. Something that may be useful in the fight against Voldemort." She shook herself out of her reverie and laughed. "I'm probably just letting my imagination run away with me. I've always loved a good adventure!"

Severus just nodded and continued to stir.

Lily was delayed after class by Professor Slughorn, who had stopped to invite her to one of his social gatherings. Dubbed the 'Slug Club' by his handpicked, favourite students, Lily thought that these gatherings were a bit of an annoyance, but she felt compelled to go as a sign of respect. Besides, he did serve up some delicious food and free Butterbeer. When she was finally released from her teacher's attentions, Lily noted that James had already gone.

To the common room. To meet him.

Should she go? *Well, I'm going there anyway. No reason to change my plans on his account.*

So why was she feeling so nervous?

You're being ridiculous, Evans, she chided herself. *It's only Potter.* She slung her book bag over her shoulder and headed upstairs.

Crossing through the portrait hole, she glanced into the common room and was both surprised and relieved that it was empty of students.

*Maybe he gave up...thought I wasn't coming! Just as well....*She sighed and started towards the girls' dormitory.

"Lily?"

She jumped in surprise, and her book bag went flying across the room. James had been there after all, sitting in a chair unseen.

"Don't EVER do that again!" Lily clutched her beating heart. "You scared the ghost out of me!"

"Sorry," James said, although Lily thought he didn't sound very sorry. He did, however, pick up her bag and hand it to her. She grabbed it back.

And I was going to be all calm and cool. Well, that plan's bloody blown to bits.

Lily flung herself into the nearest chair and glared at him. "Well, what did you want to talk about, Potter?" she snapped.

James looked abashed, but did not respond to her typical display of annoyance, one that he seemed to inevitably evoke. He ran his fingers through his hair out of habit and shifted a bit on his feet. "Can I...?" He gestured to the adjoining chair.

"Sure. Sit." She continued to glare. James sat.

"Um... Lily... I... well...." He cleared his throat. "Thanks for seeing me." James was clearly gathering up his Gryffindor courage in bucketfuls. Lily noticed and forced her ire under control. He hadn't done anything to warrant it. Yet. She took in and let out a deep breath.

"It's all right, James," she said a bit more kindly. "You said it was something important?"

"I I've done a lot of thinking over the summer."

"You have? I heard Sirius has moved in with your family," she quipped. "I wouldn't have thought that would leave a lot of time for thinking."

Lily saw James wince. She immediately regretted the remark.

"I'm sorry, James. That was mean and unfair." Lily leaned over to him and touched his hand. "Please... go on."

At her touch, James practically glowed. "Um, well, Sirius did move in with us. His own family pretty well tossed him out on the street since he refused, for the last time, to follow and abide by their 'Pureblood Rules for Living in the Wizarding World.' He needed a safe place to go, and Mum and Dad love Sirius, so he's got a new home with us."

She sensed something new here, something she'd not noted before: his pride, loyalty and love for his family. She was touched.

"How awful for Sirius, James. And how wonderful of your parents to have taken him in. He's very lucky to have you as a friend."

James looked gobsmacked. "Er... thanks, Lily. That means a lot, coming from you."

"So, what were you were saying before I rudely interrupted you? Something about this past summer?"

"Right. " James shook his head as if to gather his wits and began again. "Well, I thought a lot about what you said after exams. You know...that day..."

"I remember," Lily interrupted with a grimace.

James looked down.

This is hard for him.

"You were right. About everything. I've been acting like an idiot for ages." He looked up at Lily tentatively. She was watching him with a small smile. He took a deep breath and forged on.

"It's also true that Sirius does like to stir things up, and I'm usually right in the middle of it cheering him on."

Lily allowed herself a small chuckle but didn't interrupt.

"Anyway, I wanted to tell you that I've changed." Lily raised an eyebrow at this. "Or well... I want to change. I don't want to be that idiot any more."

"Why?" she asked.

James gathered up the last bit of his courage. He leaned forward, looked her in the eye and bravely took her hands in his.

Lily didn't pull away, barely noticing that she had stopped breathing for a moment. She felt a current go through her hands as he held them. He was so close. She could feel his breath on her face.

He does have lovely eyes. Never noticed them before. Oh, right. I thought he was a prat.

She smiled.

"I know you've refused to give me the time of day, let alone go on a date with me. And I've deserved it. But...and this may be my last and only time to tell you this...I want to

earn your trust. I DO want you to go out with me, more than anything, Lily. But I won't ask you again. I promise. I'll wait until you decide that you want to be with me."

Lily couldn't shake the feeling that she was meeting this boy for the first time.

"But, James, why on earth would you want to go out with me when I've been nothing but dreadful to you?"

James gave her a wan smile, as if the answer were obvious.

"Because, my beautiful Lily Evans, I've been in love with you from the first moment I saw you at King's Cross Station. Can't explain why or how. Just is. Like the sun and the moon. And nothing has ever changed that for me."

Lily's mind went blank. She was stunned.

"James... I..."

James was leaning in, very close. "No, please don't say anything, Lily," he whispered. "Not yet. Not until you are really ready."

In one simple movement, James gently cradled the back of her head and kissed her. Slowly, lightly at first. Then, with all the feeling of his words infused into his warm lips, strongly and deliberately, making Lily's body vibrate from head to toe. Instinctively she moved to put her arms around him, but James pulled back, catching her hands and gently bringing them to his lips.

"When you're ready, Lily." James smiled and placed her hands, now fairly limp, back in her lap. He stood up. He seemed taller, Lily thought. With a little bow and a smile, he left the common room.

She never saw it coming.

Severus

His summer was nearly as uneventful as he had predicted. Nearly.

It was an unusually sweltering day in July, made worse by Severus' inability to cast a Cooling Charm in his home due to the Ministry of Magic's Restriction of Underage Sorcery regulations. Since he wasn't permitted to conjure fire or keep food cold, Severus was forced to use Muggle appliances; the cost of paying for the electricity to keep them running was only possible due to a small pension left to him after his father's death. He couldn't wait until he turned seventeen.

The house on Spinner's End was situated in the midst of a typical northern Muggle factory community, and it had belonged to his father's parents. Although small and cramped, Severus found some measure of sanctuary here, relishing the endless supply of books he had inherited from the magical side of his family. While he couldn't actually practice magic at home, he could read, absorb and learn. This year, his special summer project was the study of Legilimency and Occlumency: the art of reaching into the memories and feelings of others and blocking others' attempts to do the same. He was anxious to try these out as soon as school resumed; there were several students whose minds he was particularly keen to explore.

To compensate for the heat, Severus had opened a few windows and the front door, letting whatever drafts of wind that might rise up to move through the house. The late afternoon light poured into the room from the open door, laying down a warm path across the small sofa and writing table that was covered with books, quills and parchment. Severus had made himself a cool drink and settled himself at the table, pulling an already-open book towards him. The glass was cool in his hands; as much as he hated relying on a refrigerator-freezer, he did appreciate the ice cubes that glistened and clinked in his glass.

Just as he began to immerse himself in the text, the light that had been illuminating his book was suddenly extinguished. Looking up, he was startled to see a tall figure standing in his doorway, cast in shadows. In an instant Severus was on his feet, wand out and ready.

"Not a very gracious way to welcome a guest, Snape," the figure said in a cool drawl as he stepped fully into the room. "You can withdraw your wand now."

Severus was no less startled to see the shadowy figure turn into the person of Lucius Malfoy. Malfoy had been a seventh-year when Severus started at Hogwarts. He'd always admired Malfoy's ease and the self-assuredness that only could only come from a sense of entitlement and privilege. Until now, though, Malfoy had never deigned to offer up the time of day, let alone engage Severus in an actual conversation.

What does he want? Why is he here?

"Forgive me," Severus said warily, lowering but keeping a tight grip on his wand. "I wasn't expecting guests."

"Having an open door would seem to invite in whoever happens to be passing by, Snape. Not very wise these days." Malfoy flicked his own wand and the door shut loudly. He took in the small, inelegant room and grimaced slightly. "Do you mind if I sit?"

"Please do."

Lucius Malfoy took a seat on the small, worn sofa, looking ridiculously out of place; his elegant suit, robes and serpent-headed walking stick in sharp contrast to the dishevelled furnishings. Severus thought him way overdressed in this heat, but admired his style, nonetheless.

"Would you care for something cold to drink?" Severus asked politely.

"Thank you. I would indeed. Rather warm today." Malfoy uttered a spell, and immediately a rush of cold air filled the stuffy room.

Severus returned with the drink, handed it to Malfoy and sat himself at the writing table, watching the older man turn the glass and raise an eyebrow at the ice cubes.

"To what do I owe the honour of this visit, sir?"

Malfoy took just a small sip and, placing the glass on a side table, studied Severus for a moment.

"I've wanted to meet and talk with you for awhile, Snape. We keep our eyes on the talented students at Hogwarts, and your name has come up on several occasions."

Severus felt his heart beating just a bit faster than usual and the hairs on his arms rise. Was it nerves? Excitement? The cool air blowing through the room?

"May I ask who 'we' might be? And in what context has my name 'come up'?"

Severus saw a muscle twitch just above Malfoy's mouth. "Business... colleagues. We are always on the lookout for potential... recruits. Your skill at Potions, while you still have more to learn, has already drawn notice and could be valuable to us. I've been asked to let you know of our interest and to propose a little 'test' to see if you can be trusted and fit to join."

A rush of adrenaline coursed through him. Severus' mouth was dry. He took a sip of his own drink.

"I'm deeply flattered to be... noticed," Severus said sincerely. He paused, wondering how far to push Malfoy. "It would help, however, if you could speak more... plainly. I

think I can understand your need to establish trust, but I do need a bit more information about what it is you want from me."

Malfoy looked intently at Severus for a moment and then pulled up the arms of his robe and shirtsleeve.

"Have you ever seen this before?" A faint, pulsing outline of a skull with a serpent darting from its mouth was visible on the inside of Malfoy's right arm.

Severus shivered involuntarily, mesmerised by the image. After several moments, he forced himself to look back at Malfoy, who returned his sleeves to their normal position. "It's the Dark Mark. Voldemort's Mark."

Malfoy's eyes flashed with anger and menace. "NEVER refer to him by his name! He is the Dark Lord. Do you understand?"

Severus retreated hastily. "Yes, of course. My apologies."

In an instant, the cool and unflappable Malfoy returned. "You are still a child, Snape, but it is never too soon to consider your future. Your... options."

Severus recalled his conversation with Cranford earlier that year.

"To become a Death Eater." Severus concentrated hard not to shake as he said these words out loud.

The smallest trace of a smile appeared on Malfoy's face. "You have come to his attention, Snape, a great honour. If offered, and you choose to accept this opportunity, you have a chance to achieve greatness."

"And if I decline the offer?"

Malfoy raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Decline? Well, then you take your chances on living."

Severus thought quickly. He still had time. Malfoy wasn't asking for a commitment. Yet.

"You mentioned a 'test'?" Severus asked.

Malfoy relaxed a bit. "Yes. We've heard that one of your classmates is undergoing the recruitment process for a position in the Department of Mysteries. Before that process is complete, she'll be able to discuss what she sees and hears. The charm that will prohibit her from discussing her work won't be cast for quite a while. The Dark Lord has an... interest in what is happening there."

The excitement and intrigue Severus felt a moment ago turned to ash and bitterness in his mouth.

Lily. He is talking about Lily.

He struggled to keep his countenance blank, waiting for Malfoy to continue, not trusting the sound of his own voice.

"It's simple really. You're friends, aren't you?" Malfoy's eyes seemed to bore into him. Severus, recalling his most recent Occlumency lesson, let go of his feelings and images of Lily, shut them away to keep them safe from Malfoy's prying.

"Just keep your ears open and see what you can learn. I'll meet you in Hogsmeade on your free day this fall, and you'll pass on what you've learned to me." Malfoy permitted himself a smile, which was anything but warm. "It can be helpful having a Mudblood for a friend. Don't you agree, Snape?"

Severus swallowed. Malfoy and...his colleagues...seemed to know a great deal about him. He would have to be very careful. "Yes. I suppose it can."

"Agreed, then." Malfoy stood. The conversation was apparently over, the answer already understood.

Severus stood as well. "I'll do my best, sir."

"Excellent! Expect my owl in a few months with instructions." Malfoy made a small bow and left the house. The cold air that had filled the house a moment ago seemed to evaporate with him as Severus watched him step beyond the entry path and Apparate. The heavy, hot air returned, more oppressive than before.

September and October passed quickly. He was relieved that Lily had offered up just enough information that he could use to put off Malfoy without endangering her. Whatever happened, he knew he would try to protect her...at all costs. He was, in fact, a bit worried about Lily. She seemed more distracted than usual, jumpy even, but his inquiries were usually dismissed, brushed aside with a laugh. Yes, he'd make sure she was safe.

Severus also noted a marked reduction in the amount of verbal abuse from Black and his wretched friends. Well, no. Black hexed him just as frequently as ever. It was Potter. He'd received not even a passing wayward glance from Potter since school began. This worried Severus since it meant that he was probably planning something truly terrible.

And that Remus Lupin. There was something... odd about him. One time he'd seen Madam Pomfrey walk him outdoors, just before the students were to have returned to their common rooms. He also seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time in the hospital wing. *What could that be about?* he wondered.

On a Monday morning in November, Severus was eating breakfast in the Great Hall. The post owls began their morning deliveries, and he was surprised to see a Great Horned Owl swooping towards him to drop a letter in his lap. Severus never got mail. Ever. He looked around and saw Cranford watching him from across the table with an enigmatic smile.

"Nice to see you have a quill-friend, Snape. About time!" Cranford remarked far too lightly before turning back to his own breakfast, still smiling.

Snape tucked the letter into his robe, picked up his pack and began to make his way out of the Great Hall. Head down, he walked straight into Professor Dumbledore.

"In a hurry, Severus?" Dumbledore inquired genially as Severus stumbled backwards. "I was actually coming to see you. Could you spare me a moment?"

Severus was torn. He desperately wanted to read the letter, but was equally curious to know what in blazes the Headmaster wanted to speak to him about.

"I'm sorry, sir. Of course, sir. Now?"

"Now is always a wonderful time. Come, walk with me!" The Headmaster waved him forward.

Feeling the letter burning a hole in his pocket, Severus followed Dumbledore out of the Great Hall and pulled up alongside him as they walked down the corridor leading to the Headmaster's office.

Severus waited for Dumbledore to speak, but the man didn't seem to be in a particular hurry.

"Lemon sherbet?" he finally said, pulling out a small bag out of thin air.

"No, thank you, sir. A bit too sweet for my taste," Severus demurred.

"Well, I do find myself craving them at all hours," Dumbledore sighed and popped one in his mouth. The bag disappeared.

"So, how was your summer, Severus? Not too difficult for you out there, all on your own?"

"My summer was fine, sir. I read a great deal."

What does he want?

"Reading is a wonderful activity, Severus. But I hope you were able to get out some, enjoy your holidays."

"I enjoyed my holidays well enough, sir."

"Mmmm." Dumbledore stopped and looked at him thoughtfully, sucking on his lemon candy. "Did you have any friends drop by this summer, Severus?"

He knows. The old man always knows.

"No. No friends."

Well, this was true enough. He wouldn't call Malfoy a friend.

Dumbledore just nodded and continued on his way down the corridor with Severus in tow.

"You spend far too much time alone, Severus. I do notice."

Of course you do, he thought irritably.

"Although I am pleased at the work you and Lily Evans are doing together. Professor Slughorn thinks quite highly of you both. She can be a valuable friend, Severus." They had reached the stone gargoyle that protected the entrance to the Headmaster's office. "And it is important to choose your friends carefully. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, sir," he replied.

"Licorice Wands!" The gargoyle parted to reveal the winding, moving stair to his tower. "Very well, then, Severus. Off to class."

Severus turned to go, but Dumbledore stopped him with a gentle hand on his shoulder. He turned back to see genuine concern in the old man's eyes.

"Be careful, dear boy. There are those who will offer you choices that may seem tempting. Consider them carefully, for they may not be what they seem. And those who offer them will definitely not be your friends." The hand gave him a gentle pat and then let go as the Headmaster ascended the stairs.

Deeply discomfited by these words, Severus watched him go until the stone gargoyle returned to its guardian position.

Making sure that he was alone at last, Severus retrieved the letter from his robe. As he picked up the missive, the same chill he had felt earlier in the summer returned. He opened it to see written in elegant script:

"Next Saturday. Hogs Head Inn. 1:00 pm. L. M."

Peter

In late October, the sixth-year N.E.W.T.-level Transfiguration class was practicing their non-verbal inanimate-to-animate spells, most of which were going very badly. Their efforts to transfigure flower vases into owls were being met with varying, mostly unsuccessful results. The best of them managed to turn the vase into a walking stick (Annette), balloons (Sirius), a toad (Alice) and a particularly well-wrought portrait of Albus Dumbledore (Lily).

Professor McGonagall stood over Lily. "Nice likeness, Miss Evans, but I'm afraid it's not remotely owl-like." The portrait of Dumbledore winked at her. Lily noted that McGonagall's mouth was twitching toward a smile, which she quickly wrestled under control. "Try again." She flicked her wand, and the portrait returned to its original vase-shape. Lily sighed and re-focused her attention on the object.

Sirius had punted his balloons across the classroom and students were keeping them aloft with hands and wands, so that the classroom seemed to be filled with multi-coloured clouds. For some reason, Professor McGonagall either didn't mind or didn't notice.

Alice's toad had escaped, and the class laughed as she scampered after and tackled it just before the amphibian reached the classroom door and its freedom.

Peter was concentrating with all his might. His face was a study in furrowed brows, scrunched-up eyes and tight lips, but the vase remained serenely untransfigured on his desk. He finally sat back, dejected, accepting that his efforts were doomed to failure. He looked over to James who, he was happy to see, seemed to be equally inept in his attempts.

"Potter! I don't want to hear any muttering under your breath!" McGonagall admonished.

James scowled, flung himself back in his chair with arms crossed in frustration. A red balloon floated his way, and he flicked it back across the classroom towards Sirius.

Peter watched James and Sirius smile at each other. As if they could read each other's minds, they began a game of balloon volleyball. Peter felt something unpleasant stirring in his stomach and wondered if it was from the runny eggs he'd eaten at breakfast.

After being summarily exiled from the Black family residence, the Potters had welcomed Sirius into their home like a second son. James and Sirius had regaled Peter and Remus with stories about their oh-so-wonderful summer holiday: their trip to the shore, fixing up their rooms with new Quidditch posters and regalia, and many late-night Floo excursions to the Three Broomsticks for a pint or three. To their endless good luck, the elderly Potters were both early to bed and heavy sleepers.

Peter's summer, on the other hand, had been awful. Unable to pry himself from the grip of his mother's attentions, he had found himself dragged along to every one of Brandiwine's social events and obligations where she had compelled Peter to regale endless groups of twittering witches with stories about his scholastic accomplishments and activities. He knew he was being a good son. He loved his mother. He just hated being home with her. It was NOT fair that Padfoot got to be with Prongs all summer. And holidays. And forever. Just not fair.

Maybe I can get Mum to kick me out of the house.

Fat chance.

"For homework, I would like a foot-long essay on the principles of non-verbal Transfiguration spells," McGonagall announced, pulling Peter out of his envious reverie. "Class dismissed!"

McGonagall's dismissal was echoed by the sound of a dozen balloons popping in unison, courtesy of Sirius and James. Peter observed Lily Evans staring at James and, he noted with some surprise, she did not look annoyed.

Scurrying out of the classroom, Peter caught up with James and Sirius, who were discussing the upcoming Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw.

"I say that Matthews hasn't a hope in stopping our goals," James was saying. "He doesn't know his right hand from his bony arse."

"How many points do you think you should try to score before Watson grabs the Snitch?" Sirius asked James.

"I think Watson should take it as soon as possible," Peter chimed in, trotting along side them. James and Sirius had grown so tall that he had to run to keep up with them.

Sirius grinned. "He'd better not! I'm expecting a bracing cold day and the lovely, Isabella Smith is going to need my help to keep her warm! Prongs, tell Watson to keep the game going for at least an hour."

"Don't worry, Sirius. I'll suggest to Isabella that she wear *two* sets of robes to the game."

At the sound of Lily's voice behind them, James whipped around so fast that he nearly knocked Peter over. Sirius stopped, annoyed at the interruption.

"Well, Evans, I supposed you'd know all about being cold," Sirius sneered. "In fact, I'm feeling a bit chilled just being next to you!" Sirius and Peter laughed. Lily reddened.

"Sirius, you're a bloody prat," James said, glaring angrily. Peter kept laughing. Sirius stopped in surprise.

"Hey, Prongs, I..." Sirius started.

Lily ignored him and turned to James. "Potter, I'd like a word with you, if it's okay."

"Sure, Evans!" James' face lit up with a huge grin, and without a look back at his friends, he walked off down the corridor with her.

Peter and Sirius stood gaping, watching them go.

"What's eating his broomstick?" Sirius asked, clearly put out.

"No idea," Peter shrugged. "Maybe he's finally getting lucky with Evans."

Sirius shuddered and winced. "Oh, dear Juno, I hope not. That would ruin everything!"

Peter was secretly pleased that James had put off Sirius for once. *Now he knows what it feels like* he thought. Peter and Sirius were in the common room for their free period. Sirius was pacing and Peter was trying to read.

"Would you stop grinding a hole in the carpet, Padfoot? It won't make Prongs return any sooner!"

"I'm not waiting for James!"

Sirius only called James by his proper name when he was angry.

Peter watched Sirius carefully as he asked, "D'you suppose he's going to ask Evans to go with him to Hogsmeade this weekend?"

To Peter's amusement, Sirius' pacing intensified and his harsh laugh came out as a bark. "Ha! That's rich! How many times would that be, do you think? One hundred? One thousand? If he had any shame, he'd give it up! It's embarrassing really...."

At that moment the portrait hole opened, and Lily and James came into the common room.

Together.

Holding hands.

Peter looked rapidly at Sirius to gauge his reaction. It seemed as if he was going to choke, but Peter saw him force his face into a rigidly casual demeanour as he sunk into a chair.

"Later, then?" Lily asked James.

"Later!" James replied.

Lily squeezed his hand, and passing Sirius with a sweet smile, she ascended the stairs to the girls' dormitory. *It looks like she's levitating*, Peter thought in wonder as he watched her disappear.

For some reason, Peter's heart began beating faster as he looked between Sirius, whose face was dark and brooding, and James who, falling into a chair with a sigh, was practically glowing. They looked, literally, like night and day.

The room ricocheted with colliding emotions of joy, shock, curiosity, anger, jubilation, resentment, anticipation and wonder.

James broke the silence, speaking to himself. "Unbelievable. Bloody unbelievable. She did it. She actually did it."

"What was that, Potter?" Sirius said, biting off the words.

Potter? *This is bad*, thought Peter.

"Did she hit you over the head with a bat?" Sirius continued. Peter noticed his fists were clenched. "You look completely gobsmacked. What gives?"

James sat up and looked at them both, smiling sheepishly.

"She asked me out."

"She asked YOU out?" Peter squeaked. "Has the earth stopped revolving around the sun?"

James shot up out of the chair, propelled by his joy, as if the earth had suddenly seized in its axis. "YES! I didn't really think she'd do it. But she DID!! Sirius!" James grabbed Sirius bodily out of his chair and swung him around. Peter thought Sirius looked as if he might be sick, but James was too far-gone to notice.

"That's... that's great, Prongs!" Sirius said, pulling himself out of James' grip.

"Congratulations, mate!" Peter said brightly, going over to shake his hand.

"She's wonderful, Peter! Really!" James playfully smacked both Peter and Sirius on their shoulders. He was so wound up that Peter thought he could have spun around the room like a top.

"We're going to Hogsmeade Saturday...together! First, we have to stop at Scrivenshaft's because Lily needs some new quills, then to Zonko's, Honeydukes, then the Three Broomsticks!"

"You sound like an old married couple already, Prongs," Sirius said weakly, lowering himself back into the chair. James blushed.

"Well, it's just a first date, but someday...." James smiled.

Peter grimaced inwardly, but he said, "And when that day comes, mate, we'll be there. Won't we, Sirius?" Sirius did not respond. "Right, Sirius?" Peter prodded.

"Er... right. Be there," was all he could summon.

James was oblivious to Sirius' foul mood and laughed. "We've got a few years 'til then anyway." He grinned, looking at his watch.

"Got to meet Remus in the library. He's promised to help me with my Charms essay." James brightened. "Oh, WAIT 'til he hears this news!" James practically flew out of the common room.

Peter sat down next to Sirius.

"You all right, Padfoot?"

"I'm peachy, Wormtail."

"I think it's rotten too."

Sirius looked at him in surprise. "You do?"

"Well," Peter said carefully, "it's nice for James and all, but...we're the *Marauders*! What'll happen to us if James goes off with Lily?"

"Exactly!" Sirius said, pounding his fist on the arm of the chair so hard that dust flew out of it. "It's it's just wrong!" Sirius dropped his head into his hands.

Peter licked his lips, which suddenly felt dry. He gave a little laugh.

"I hope nothing goes wrong to mess up their first date. Poor James. I bet Lily would be furious."

Peter held his breath.

It was so completely quiet in the room that Peter thought he could hear the dust mites move. After a very long minute, Sirius picked up his head and smiled. Peter recognised a familiar...and dangerous...glint in the other boy's eyes.

"Wormtail... I've got an idea. I think it's time we helped Miss Evans realise that she might be in over her head. After all, I'm sure it's Miss Perfectly Popular's life-long dream to be Head Girl next year. Wouldn't want to mix with blokes who could ruin it for her, would she?"

Peter exhaled and widened his eyes in an attempt to be horrified. "Sirius! You're not really thinking of pulling something on Saturday, are you?"

Sirius sat back in his chair, looking more like his usual, confident self. "You'll help, won't you, mate? The Marauders forever! Right?"

Peter smiled, gleeful at how easy it had been. He smiled. "Right you are, Padfoot! Right you are!"

A/N: Thanks to celtmama who makes punctuation look so easy and helps me to pick better words!

Corran Masten appears in this chapter courtesy of his creator, Morweniris. Corran's story is told in Mor's wonderful fic, Unspeakable Truth.

Crossing Paths: Autumn 1975 - Sixth Year

Chapter 7 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Crossing Paths: Autumn 1975 - Sixth Year

Lily

"You're certain that your pumpkin juice wasn't spiked with an illegal dose of Love Potion? The culprit can be caught and severely punished, you know."

Lily laughed, enjoying Remus' combined looks of incredulity and scepticism. "I'm certain, Remus. I'm in full control of all my senses!"

It was a cool and blustery November morning, the sky's grey clouds sitting just atop the trees in the Forbidden Forest, and Remus and Lily were walking down the hill against the wind towards their next class. Remus hitched his scarf around his neck more snugly.

"Well, I was astounded when James told me that you'd asked him to go with you to Hogsmeade tomorrow. He was making such a fuss that I had to drag him out of the library before Madam Pince could decapitate him to stop the noise." Remus paused. "So, when did you have this sudden change of heart?"

Lily looked at him, bemused. "You sound disappointed, Remus! I thought you'd be glad I'd finally come around. Or happy for James at least."

"I am happy. Surprised and confused. But happy."

Lily wasn't sure he was being entirely truthful, but was unable to explore it further because they'd arrived at Professor Kettleburn's class. Care of Magical Creatures was conducted in a large outdoor space adjacent to the Forest, enclosed by a wooden fence. Along the perimeter of the enclosure were animal pens of various sizes and shapes, as well as a large shed containing a well-stocked variety of feeding, grooming and protective equipment. As they entered the class space, they saw several cages already set on top of one of the long, rough-hewn wooden worktables. Professor Kettleburn was distributing long-armed protective gloves to the small group of N.E.W.T.-level students. The only other Gryffindor in the class was Peter Pettigrew.

Lily looked inside one of the cages and saw a small, blue-speckled bird staring back at her, apparently equally curious about the pair of green eyes looking at it.

"But, Professor, they're so tiny! Why the heavy-duty gloves?" she asked when handed her pair. Lily blinked at the bird. The bird blinked back.

"They probably have giant teeth," muttered Peter.

Professor Kettleburn was an old wizard. Not nearly as old as Albus Dumbledore perhaps, but his students could tell he'd lived a long life; he had the scars to prove it. His several missing fingers also spoke of an interesting and event-filled history with the animals he used to teach his students. Kettleburn was a small man, clean-shaven, with long, grey hair tied in the back. His students thought he always looked tired, due to the prominent, dark circles under his equally dark, brown eyes. Despite the visual impression of age, Professor Kettleburn moved about with strength and purpose, both useful qualities when it came time to reign in some of the larger and more dangerous of the Magical Creatures under his care. And, unlike most of the teachers, he did not wear robes to class, but dressed instead in a chambray shirt (in warm weather) or a bright blue jumper (in cool weather) and heavy, grey, wool trousers covered by a long, weathered, leather apron. Completing the uniform, his feet were shod in knee-high leather boots. Practical and efficient. That was both his style and his class motto.

"Mr. Pettigrew is correct. Five points for Gryffindor," stated Professor Kettleburn. "While most avian creatures do not have teeth, these do. Which you will see demonstrated shortly."

Peter looked surprised; he almost never won points for the House. Lily gave him a thumbs-up and a smile. Peter smiled back and reddened.

"These creatures are Jobberknolls," the Professor continued. "Found in Northern Europe and North America. Small but strong."

"Sort of like Kettleburn," murmured Johnny Macmillan under his breath.

"Also correct, Macmillan."

The Professor also had prodigiously perfect hearing.

"Jobberknoll feathers are used in making Memory Potions and Truth Serums. They eat insects, which we use to distract them when they're being de-feathered, our task for this morning. Work in pairs. Get a basket for the feathers and a cupful of fire ants. Better use your wands to scoop those up."

The students scurried to the shed to get their supplies, all wondering how many feathers could possibly be taken from such a small bird before it went completely bald.

"The Jobberknoll's feathers grow back instantly, so you should gather enough to fill each of your baskets."

The Professor could also, apparently, read their minds.

"Right. Everyone ready?"

The students nodded.

"Good. One of you open the cage and pull out the Jobberknoll...make sure you hold them a full arm's length away from your body. They'll peck and bite your arm, so make sure those gloves are on tight. With your other arm, use your wand to feed them ants a bit at a time. That should keep them still. Your partner will start plucking feathers. The ones along the back are the best. Don't bother with the fuzzier ones around the neck; they just muck up the potion. Proceed."

Once the Jobberknoll pruning began, Lily picked up her conversation with Remus from where it had left off.

"So if you're happy for James, why get all tetchy that I've asked him out?" Lily asked, carefully plucking off the tiny blue feathers.

Remus was distracted as he tried to feed the fire ants to the wildly squirming bird. "How can anything this small be so hard to hold onto?" he grunted, sweating in spite of the cold wind.

"For heaven's sake. I'll hold, you pluck." Lily took the bird from Remus with her right hand and, holding it out in front of her, stared at the little blue creature. "Now hold still, would you? It doesn't hurt and you know it." Lily could have sworn it looked back at her with disdain, but it did seem to calm down and take its breakfast with less of a struggle.

"I'm not tetchy, Evans. I'm just..."

"Hmmm?" said Lily, keeping her eyes on the bird.

Remus sighed. "I don't know. Hurt, I guess. That I didn't know your feelings had changed. That you didn't tell me."

Lily looked at Remus, who was focussed on his feathered task. She was surprised and touched, realising that she sometimes forgot how deeply Remus felt about her...about their friendship.

"I'm sorry, Remus," she said softly. "Truly." He looked up at her and shrugged in that oh-it-doesn't-really-matter sort of way. "I didn't mean to leave you out of it. I only just realised myself that James might be worth getting to know better."

"Well, I could have told you that ages ago!" Remus smirked. "So what happened?"

"He told me he was going to change...to take himself a bit more seriously. And I think he has!"

Remus grinned and shook his head in disbelief. "James? More serious? Not possible. Our very best ideas have sprung from James' deranged mind!"

It was Lily's turn to look sceptical. "With Sirius making them go from bad to worse."

Remus nodded in agreement. "Well, naturally! But let's stay with James' contributions for now, shall we?" Remus started ticking off his fingers. "Levitating Angus Boot over the Giant Squid until he confessed that Sirius was the most handsome boy at Hogwarts."

Lily laughed, remembering this. "Oh, poor Angus! He wouldn't go near the lake for a year!"

Remus continued. "Charming Beaters' bats to block the entrance to the Hufflepuff girls' bathroom by swatting anyone who got too close." Remus closed his eyes as if picturing the scene. "Several near accidents as I recall. And let's see... ah, yes. Transfiguring tadpoles into bits of Slughorn's crystallised pineapple that reverted back as soon as he popped one into his mouth."

Lily was having a really hard time holding on to the Jobberknoll, unable to stop laughing as tears filled her eyes.

"And of course..."

"No, Remus! Stop!" Lily had to push the bird back into its cage because of the sudden, urgent need to grab hold of a serious stitch in her side.

"And of course, most infamously, the time he... um... 'found' some Veritaserum and managed to put a few drops into Professor McGonagall's pumpkin juice at breakfast. When Professor Dumbledore asked her how she was feeling that morning, she admitted to him that she had always..."

At that moment a terrible scream erupted from Peter's end of the table. They all jumped to see Peter dropping his bird in horror; the tiny creature lay inert but continued to make the loudest, most terrible, unending, incomprehensible noise.

Professor Kettleburn marched over to examine the stricken Jobberknoll while the students held their hands over their ears and Peter, visibly pale, shook with fear. "Seems you've strangled it, Pettigrew. Got to be careful how you hold these creatures, class. Don't want to kill them. That's the other important thing to know about Jobberknolls. The only time they make a sound is at the moment of its death, when it regurgitates every sound it's ever heard. Backwards."

Saturday morning broke as bleak as it had the day before. Lily awoke to see grey skies outside the window across from her bed and hoped that the rain would hold. She turned to look at her small bedside clock and was startled to see it was ten o'clock. They were leaving for Hogsmeade in less than an hour! She leapt out of bed and pulled out at least a dozen different shirts, jumpers, and trousers and laid them on her bed, trying to decide what to wear.

Annette came into the bedroom munching on the toast she'd cadged at breakfast and sat on her bed, watching Lily with amusement.

"Since when do you fuss over your clothes, Evans? Trying to impress someone?"

Clothes started flying around Lily. "Of course not! I'm just so... bored with everything I own!" she said with some frustration.

Chewing, Annette prodded, "Potter got your feathers in a ruff, Evans?"

Lily stopped, closed her eyes and shuddered. "Please don't mention feathers, Annette."

Annette looked confused.

"Never mind. No...well, yes," Lily admitted, sitting down next to Annette and, tearing off a piece of her friend's toast, popped it into her mouth.

Annette smiled. "It's good to see you flustered for a change, Lily! And James is lovely...you'll have a great time."

Lily looked at her sideways with a toast-filled smirk. "Well, you seemed to have had a great time with him last Hogsmeade visit, so I guess you should know!"

Annette coughed, nearly choking, her eyes tearing. Lily pounded her on the back.

"You know he only did it to make you jealous, Lily," Annette said, wiping her eyes. "Can I help it if I decided to not care and enjoy it anyway? It WAS fun! James is a yummy kisser!"

Lily got up quickly and, going back to her own bed, focussed on the pile of clothes, hoping Annette wouldn't notice her furious blush.

She did, of course.

"Evans!" Annette squealed. "You've been holding out on us!" She leapt across the space between their beds and landed in a heap in front of Lily. "Details! Details! When? Where? For how long? Where were his hands?"

"Not now, Annette!" Lily laughed, in spite of her embarrassment. "Look, help me put together something decent to wear and I'll give you a complete, detailed account of everything that's happened later this evening, okay?"

"Deal!" Annette grinned and hopped off the bed. "All right then. Let's get started!"

"You don't have to carry all of them!" Lily exclaimed while James struggled to balance several packages in his hands. "Give me one of them, at least!"

"Here. Take this one." He handed her the smallest bag from Scrivenshaft's, which didn't make much of a difference.

"You're being silly, James!" Lily pulled half the packages out of his arms and into her own. "I think you emptied out half of Zonko's! What are you going to do with all of this stuff, anyway?"

"Figure out how they work," James replied as they continued walking down the High Street. "I think I'd like to be an inventor some day. Make useful things. Or things to make people laugh, which is the same thing, really!"

The weather may have been dark and foreboding, but Lily hardly noticed, especially when James continued to say astonishing things like this. Despite the cold, she felt warmed by him as they walked next to each other. His laughter was like sunshine that illuminated the space they shared. And then there were those shivers that ran up her spine every time his hand brushed against hers. She was having a wonderful afternoon.

"An inventor?"

"Sure! Why not? My great-grandfather, Ernest Potter, was an inventor. You know those Nose-Biting Teacups?"

Lily was speechless.

"Yep! Great-granddad himself! The source of the Potter family fortune!"

Lily looked at him, trying to see if he was kidding. He wasn't.

"Well, the real money came from the Helpful Hedge Clippers. Same principle as the teacups, though: they bite hedges instead of noses. See? Funny and useful!"

Lily and James decided to put off Honeydukes in favour of the Three Broomsticks, to give their arms a rest and their bodies a chance to warm up. As they moved on, Lily noticed someone walking against the crowd, moving in their direction, like a solitary dark cloud. James noticed it too.

"Surprised to see Snape here," James remarked idly. "Never seen him on a Hogsmeade day. Looks like he's having his usual jolly good, snarky time."

Lily glared at him.

James hung his head. "Sorry. Old habits. Die hard."

Severus had stopped in the middle of the street, just as Lily and James drew up with him. James took that moment to grab hold of her hand, in a protective...or possessive...gesture.

Lily saw Severus glance rapidly between her and James and felt an intense cold sweep through her. It might have been the wind, but she didn't think so.

"Hello, Severus!" said Lily in a cheery voice she knew sounded false. She'd never felt awkward like this and didn't know exactly why she did now.

"Lily. Potter." Severus practically spat out their names.

"Well, got to go now!" James said quickly, pulling Lily past the other boy. "Have fun... doing... whatever it is you do to have fun!"

Lily didn't say anything, but she looked back over her shoulder to see Severus standing stock still in the middle of the street, glaring.

James scowled. "I know he's your 'friend,' Lily, although for the life of me I don't understand how or why. At his best he's just... creepy."

Lily sighed. "I can't explain it to you, James, but with me he's... different."

"Well, that's because he's probably in love with you!"

Lily pulled her hand out of his with a sharp jerk. Her voice was dangerously low. "James Potter. Severus is my friend. I will not hear a bad word about him from you. Think whatever you want, but keep it to yourself. Do you understand?"

James blanched, swallowed hard and dropped to one knee, strewing their packages about the street without a thought. He placed one hand over his heart. "I swear by Great Granddad Ernest that I will never utter a peep about Snivel... er... Snape to you for as long as I live."

Lily couldn't help but laugh. He was just too... well... earnest. "Get up, James, you're blocking the door!"

He looked behind him to see a crowd had gathered in the doorway of the Three Broomsticks, unable to get past James. Madam Rosmerta, the proprietor, pushed through the crowd to see what the hold up was all about.

"Unless you are injured, Mr. Potter, please remove yourself from my doorstep immediately!"

"Sorry!" James was up in a flash, packages retrieved, and stepped aside as the grumbling patrons walked past.

The Three Broomsticks was, as usual on Hogsmeade visit days, filled with students from Hogwarts, mingling with an assortment of local residents. James and Lily found a table in the corner and piled their packages up out of the way before removing cloaks, hats and gloves.

"Oh! I almost forgot!" James pulled a small jar out of his cloak.

"What is it?" Lily asked, squinting at the jar. There was no label on it.

"Don't know," James shrugged. "One of the first-years gave it to me. He said that Dumbledore had prepared it for Rosmerta and asked if I would deliver it. I'll be right back."

Lily watched James go round the wall to the edge of the bar where she guessed Rosmerta was standing. James was, indeed, right back.

"Whatchoo both having?" A young girl about their age stood over them, wiping her hands on her apron and chewing gum.

James rumpled his hair and flashed a smile. "Haven't seen you here before!"

"I'm Esmeralda. Rosmerta's me auntie. Needed extra hands 'cause you lot are here. So whatchoo want?"

Lily smiled sweetly and kicked James under the table.

"OW!" James yelped. "What was that for?"

"Not too nice to fancy on one girl while with another, is it?" said Esmeralda, blowing and popping a big, pink bubble.

"No, it isn't," agreed Lily.

"So you two going to have something or not?" Esmeralda looked around the room and sighed impatiently. "Butterbeer...like the other kids?"

James wrinkled his nose. "I hate Butterbeer. Gillywater, I think. Lily?"

"Yes, I'll have the same. With a splash of rum punch, please."

"Right." Esmeralda turned. "Students..." she muttered under her breath as she walked off to get their drinks.

As Lily and James turned back to face each other, they didn't notice that a few of the patrons around them had started to scratch themselves. Furiously.

Severus

"Next Saturday. Hog's Head Inn. 1:00 pm. L.M."

At breakfast in the nearly empty Great Hall, Severus sipped his tea with one hand and stared at the parchment held in the other, as if looking at it hard enough would reveal more of its intention. The message was brief and terse, an expectation of obedience. The signature of a self-assured man with a sense of style and flair for the dramatic.

Severus crumpled the parchment and cast a small spark with his wand to its edge. The missive was instantly consumed in a sudden, bright flash of flame; its blackened remnants floated around him like a travesty of snowflakes.

Interesting. To be whole and tangible in one moment and obliterated in the next. It took so little to destroy it. Just a little spark. Gone.

Remembering where he was, Severus quickly glanced up to the staff table to see if anyone had noticed this sudden bit of arson. Only Professor McGonagall was there, taking tea herself and immersed in a book. She didn't look up. Relieved, Severus brushed the charred pieces of parchment off his robes and stood to leave.

Severus' favourite days were those Saturdays when most of the students went off to Hogsmeade. Since he was one of the few older students who chose to remain at Hogwarts, these were among the rare times Severus felt he could let down his guard a bit without worrying that someone was around the next corner with another hex, curse or insult.

Today, to his surprise and chagrin, seemed to be the exception.

Black.

And his little sycophant, Pettigrew. Walking down the corridor in his direction.

Pulling his guard back up quickly, Severus made sure his wand was firmly in hand. He strode ahead and held his breath as Black and Pettigrew drew closer. Black, much taller, was leaning over to speak to the shorter Pettigrew, who was nodding in some agreement. As they passed him, Severus was surprised that Black only cast him the merest of sneers and grunted.

As they bounded up the staircase, Severus mused with some irony that this was probably the shortest encounter with Black he'd had in the whole of his time as a student at Hogwarts.

What are they doing here? Why aren't they in Hogsmeade?

Severus started down the stairs to the dungeon and the Slytherin common room.

Must be plotting another of their mindless pranks.

Imbeciles.

Severus sat on his bed, holding his cloak in his hands, trying to decide whether meeting Malfoy was a good idea or not. Actually, he knew that being forced into a meeting with a known Death Eater couldn't possibly be a *good* idea. Bunching up his cloak into a ball, Severus frowned. He didn't like being backed into corners like this, forced into responding whether he liked it or not. But...

But...

Malfoy wanted to meet with *him*. He'd been noticed...by the Dark Lord.

Talked about.

Selected.

Thinking about it this way, Severus felt a sudden rush of heat to his face. To be singled out for any reason was both embarrassing and unfamiliar. And yet, it made him feel, for a moment, more alive than anything else had. Ever.

"Just keep your ears open and see what you can learn. It can be helpful having a Mudblood for a friend. Don't you agree, Snape?"

Severus stood and put on his worn, wool cloak, made worse for wear by the intense wrinkling he'd just inflicted upon it.

I can give him just a bit. Enough to make him happy. Lily will be all right.

The early afternoon had darkened with thick clouds that promised rain. Severus walked rapidly to compensate for the wind-whipped chill that permeated his lean body, passing through his not-warm-enough cloak. He concentrated on his feet and the marks they made in the hard dust road that led towards Hogsmeade, to see if he could distract himself from the cold and to control the beating of his heart that seemed to quicken in his chest the closer he came to the village. As he was about to round the bend into the Hogsmeade High Street, his focus was so intent he almost didn't hear someone calling his name.

"Oi! Snape! Snape!"

His breathing was laboured as he stopped in his tracks and lifted his head to see Regulus Black with a woman that Snape did not know, standing off to his left beside a rickety fence.

Reggie was waving him over, and Severus cursed. It was damned cold and he wanted to get to the Hog's Head, not to stop for a friendly chat! He didn't want to be late for his meeting with Malfoy and he really wanted to warm up. Then Severus noticed the woman looking at him curiously, and roughly calculating the situation, he sensed this was someone he shouldn't ignore.

"Reggie," Severus acknowledged through chattering teeth.

Reggie seemed very happy...beaming actually...and tucked his arm affectionately through the arm of the woman standing beside him.

She was, Severus guessed, in her mid-twenties. She wore an elegant, expensive black cloak, lined with green satin and clasped at her throat by a gold snake brooch, encrusted with emeralds. Her jet black hair was pinned back from her face, which featured a pair of dark, hooded eyes. Severus guessed she'd prove dangerous to any man who dared to look into them too deeply.

"Snape! I'd like you to meet my Auntie Bella...Bellatrix Black. Actually, she's my cousin, but I've always call her 'Auntie!'"

Black. The Slytherin Blacks.

"Very nice to make your acquaintance, madam," Severus replied politely, extending his hand to her, which she touched. Just briefly.

"Auntie Bella, this is Severus Snape. He's in my House. A sixth-year."

Bellatrix cocked her head slightly to one side, as if she could see him better that way. Then she nodded and smiled knowingly.

"Ah. Mr. Snape. My pleasure."

"I was just showing Auntie Bella the Shrieking Shack! Have you heard the noises that come from there, Snape? Auntie Bella said she doesn't believe it's haunted, and that it was a perfectly ordinary house when she went to school!"

Bellatrix ignored Reggie and kept her gaze on Severus.

"You've been spoken of highly, Mr. Snape. Are you on your way to see Lucius?"

Reggie looked between his Aunt and Severus with some surprise.

"Are you, Snape? I've just met him myself! Auntie Bella introduced me and told him that I'd be perfect for..."

"Regulus, dear," she interrupted a bit harshly, squeezing his hand. "It's bad manners to brag...especially in public." She was smiling, but Severus saw Reggie wince in pain.

This exchange triggered many thoughts and questions, but Severus didn't have time to consider them at the moment.

"Yes, I am," he replied to Bellatrix. He thought his feet had already died in the cold. "In fact, I have to excuse myself, as he's expecting me."

"It's quite all right. I'm delighted to have met you, Mr. Snape." She put her hand on his arm and looked at him directly with another enigmatic smile. "I'm sure we'll have the opportunity to meet again." She turned back to Reggie. "Shall we go?" Keeping her arm locked with his and turning quickly, she nearly knocked Reggie off his feet as she marched him down the road that led back to the school.

Severus almost felt sorry for the boy, although he wasn't sure why. He shrugged and stamped his feet to force the blood back into them.

Moving as quickly as he could, Severus thought he'd make it on time until he saw them coming his way. His body stopped cold in the middle of the street as if he'd forgotten how to walk.

Lily.

With James.

Worries about the cold evaporated as a wave of heat suddenly flashed through his body. His breathing became thin and his throat burned as he expelled the air from his lungs. His thoughts became entangled, and he struggled to sort them out into something coherent. As they came closer he willed his body to move away, but it refused. Lily. With James. Bile rose in his throat as the images of James torturing him over the years...and laughing...flashed through his mind, one after another. Severus forced himself to swallow.

"Hello, Severus!" said Lily in a voice he'd never heard her use before. She sounded like an imitation of herself. For some reason, this infuriated him. Lily had never been false to him...until now.

"Lily. Potter." Severus wasn't sure how he'd found his voice, but there it was. Normal sounds formed into words, but his mouth felt as dry as dead leaves. Inside his head, he heard screaming. The way he was holding on to her, James looked like he'd just won a prize. Presumptuous and pompous egotist! Was he planning to put her on a shelf and display her like a school trophy?

"Well, got to go now!" James said, pulling Lily roughly forward. "Have fun... doing... whatever it is you do to have fun!"

Severus watched as they moved down the street and saw Lily turn her head, looking back at him over her shoulder. Or someone who used to be Lily. He didn't know who that girl was.

He wasn't sure how he'd finally arrived inside the Hog's Head Inn, but the warmth of the room and the strong smell of spirits jogged his brain into some semblance of coherence. Severus looked around at the dilapidated room and the odd assortment of unsavoury patrons. The place was filthy; Severus tried to imagine the elegant Lucius Malfoy in this establishment and failed utterly.

"Lookin' for someone?"

Severus, already shaken, jumped in startled response. Behind him was a tall, thin man with a dirty apron. Probably the barkeep. "What?"

"I asked if you was lookin' for someone."

Severus tried to force his rapidly beating heart down out of his throat. "Yes. Mr. Malfoy. But I don't see...."

"Back there." The man shrugged and pointed to the back wall. Severus looked, but didn't see anything except a painting of a man and a horse. The man was picking his teeth and the horse was laying down to rest, chewing on some painted grass.

"Lift the painting," the barkeep said and walked back to his bar, muttering. "Must be visitin' day."

Severus walked up to the painting and looked at it. The man in the scene spat on the ground and looked at him.

"Well? Just going to stand there? I haven't got all day!" the painted man said gruffly.

"What else have you got to do?" asked Severus. Speaking with the painting was helping to calm his nerves. "With that horse it doesn't look like you're going anywhere soon." The horse snorted. The man started yelling, indignant.

"Insolent backside scratcher! Youngsters with no respect for the elders! Why, if I ever spoke like that...."

Severus silenced the painting's diatribe by lifting it up from the bottom, revealing an entrance that hadn't been there a moment ago. He went inside.

This room was as different from the bar as it could possibly be. It was spare, but clean and efficiently appointed. Wood panels lined the walls and two leather couches leaned against them facing each other. On the wall across from the entrance a warm fire was burning, and in the centre of the room was a large, round wooden table with several chairs surrounding it, as if ready for a crowd...a meeting, perhaps, or a game of cards.

Lucius was sitting at the table with a glass in his hands. He didn't look up as Severus appeared.

"You're late," Lucius said dryly and tossed back the remainder of the drink. "Rot gut," he grimaced. "Dobby!"

There was a *crack!* and a house-elf appeared.

"Yes, Master Malfoy?" the elf asked, cringing as if waiting for some blow to fall.

"Bring me a bottle of the 1898 Elderwine!" he ordered with a harsh bark. He looked at Severus. "And a proper cloak for Mr. Snape."

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

"Sit down, Snape, and stop gawking." Severus took a seat opposite Malfoy. "I'll have to remember to lay in a stock of my own whisky," he muttered to himself.

Malfoy sat back and watched Severus closely. Severus' eyes darted about the room, unwilling to hold eye contact with the older man for long.

"Nice room, isn't it?" said Malfoy with a sniff. "I commissioned it for personal use when I have business in Hogsmeade. I find it... convenient. And private."

Another *crack!* and the house-elf reappeared. He set the bottle on the table and, with a snap of his long, tapered fingers, the bottle opened and two glasses filled with wine. Dobby set the cape on the sofa and, without another word, disappeared just as quickly as he'd come. Malfoy kept his eyes on Severus, lifted the glass to his mouth and sipped. He allowed himself a small smile, approving the vintage.

"Go on," Malfoy gestured to the other glass. "Drink it up. You look half frozen."

Severus drank. The warmth of the wine began to crack and thaw the ice in his chest. The potency of the wine went right to his head.

Careful, Severus, he cautioned himself.

Malfoy sighed deeply and rubbed his eyes. "It's already been a long day, Snape, so let's get to it, shall we? What has your Mudblood friend told you? Lily Evans."

Hearing her name come from Malfoy's lips sent a spasm through him, and the wine choked in his throat.

At this Malfoy did smile. "This wine is a bit stronger than Butterbeer. Take it slowly, Snape!"

To buy himself another moment, Severus allowed himself a slow, deliberate drink of wine. Lily and James. He closed his eyes, but the vision of them together wouldn't vanish. It was burned there like some permanent brand.

How ironic. My own mental Dark Mark.

"Yes. I have information," Severus said with a bitter grin as he opened his eyes. In that moment, something like a wall went up around his heart. He felt suddenly calm.

Malfoy leaned back in his chair. "Delightful. Let's have it."

And, in a dispassionate voice, Severus told Malfoy everything that Lily had said about her initial interview and test at the Ministry over the summer. He left nothing out.

"Working on a weapon to use against the Dark Lord?" Malfoy asked with mild interest. He didn't seem particularly concerned with this bit of information, Severus noted.

"She doesn't know it as a certainty, sir, but she does get these 'feelings' about things that often seem to be true in the end."

"Well done, my boy!" Malfoy said with a genuine smile. "I think you've done splendidly, Snape!"

Severus wasn't sure what he had done that was splendid, but he was relieved that Malfoy seemed pleased. Happy, even.

Malfoy leaned across the table in companionable gesture. "You know, Snape, I like you. You're unique. I like things...and people...that are unique."

Severus shifted uneasily in his seat, grateful to have his glass of wine to hold onto. As if on cue, Lucius refilled it and continued. "You're a serious student. You aren't foolish, like some other young men of your age." Malfoy shuddered. The image of Reggie Black popped into Severus' mind.

Malfoy continued. "You have talent, but you're modest." Malfoy considered him as he might a particular piece of art he was thinking of buying. "Yes. You have a lot of promise." Malfoy tapped his fingers on the table. "I'm a direct man, Snape, so please don't be offended by some misplaced sense of honour or propriety. I know you have limited...means. I'd like to be your sponsor."

Severus blinked. "Sponsor? I don't know what..."

"A guide, a mentor. I'd like to introduce you to people who could be useful to you. Teach you about the finer things in life and of a bright future that could easily be yours." He looked Severus up and down. "Improve your wardrobe."

Severus was speechless, not quite able to follow what Malfoy was talking about. Or trusting it. "Sir, I'm flattered and appreciate your offer, but I couldn't possibly..."

Malfoy waved his objections away with a toss of his hand. "Nonsense. Of course you can! And no time like the present to begin!" Lucius pushed his chair back from the table and stood. Severus followed.

"I'm getting married in the New Year, and Narcissa and I have planned a combined engagement/holiday party at Malfoy Manor. I'd like you to be our guest during the winter break." Malfoy picked up the cloak Dobby had brought earlier and draped it around Snape's shoulders, clasping it closed. It was heavy and warm.

"But sir..."

"It will be an excellent opportunity for you to meet my colleagues and for you and I to get to know each other better!" Malfoy steered Severus out of his private room and whispered softly in his ear. "Oh, and let's continue to be friendly with Lily, shall we? I'm looking forward to learning more about her when I see you next!"

In an instant, Severus was standing inside the Hog's Head bar, staring at the portrait of the man and the horse. Malfoy was gone.

"You still here?" snarled the man in the portrait.

Severus turned, uncertain as to what had just transpired, or what he'd agreed to do. As he walked out of the bar and into the High Street, the rain had made good on its earlier threat. The skies had opened up and there were rumbles of thunder in the distance. Severus pulled the hood of his new cloak over his head like a protective shield.

"Let's continue to be friendly with Lily, shall we?"

His mind reached out, tentatively touching the newly constructed wall around his heart to test its firmness. Yes. He thought it would hold.

Peter

"Any problem getting the jam?"

Sirius and Peter had tucked into an empty classroom down from the Great Hall after breakfast. They were both a little nervous and oddly, feeling a bit awkward. They had never pulled a caper without James and, because Lily would be there, they had decided that this one was best done without involving Remus.

"No. Easy enough to beg a jar of Dumbledore's favourite raspberry from the kitchen, isn't it?" Peter replied with a grin. "Removed the label, scratched off a note from the Headmaster and passed it on to a first-year to give to James first thing this morning."

Sirius opened his pack and rummaged through it. "Are you sure James believed it was from Dumbledore?"

"Are you implying my forgeries are less than perfect, Padfoot?"

Sirius pulled out a small bottle and, bringing it up to the light to look at it closely, he nodded with satisfaction. "Just making certain, Wormtail." He handed the phial to Peter.

Testing that the stopper was on securely, Peter stowed it in his robes. "How did you get this past Slughorn?"

Sirius flopped onto a chair and put his feet up on the adjacent table. He tossed his head back and pushed his hair out of his eyes in that easy, make-the-girls-swoon gesture that Peter was so jealous of. That it was totally unconscious on Sirius' part made it even worse, Peter thought.

"Oh, the usual Slughorn recipe: a dollop of helpful assistance after class, a dash of diversion, and a huge measure of flattery," said Sirius with a wry smile.

"Right," Peter sighed and felt in his robe pockets. "Map. Cloak. Phial. I think that's everything."

Sirius was staring off at no place in particular, playing with his hair.

Sirius never plays with his hair.

"Worried about something?" Peter asked tentatively.

Sirius' feet hit the ground with a thud and he stood up. "Nope! It'll be perfect. Let's go." He strode out of the classroom and Peter followed.

As they headed down the corridor, Peter noticed Snape emerging from the Great Hall. He also saw that familiar Snape-baiting snarl appear on Sirius' face.

Not now, Sirius!

Peter quickly drew up level with him, aiming for a distraction. "How will you know when it's time?"

Sirius leaned over to whisper to Peter. "When I see them running out, screaming like banshees!" He laughed and, as they passed by Snape and turned up the stairs, Sirius sneered and grunted as if to say *'I'll let you off this time, you lucky bugger!'*

Under James' Invisibility Cloak, Peter and Sirius were able to follow James' and Lily's progress around Hogsmeade fairly easily.

"Ugh. It's pathetic the way he's making himself a fool around her," Sirius muttered after watching James tickling Lily under her chin with a quill in Scrivenshaft's. "You'd think after being around me all these years he'd at least have picked up some better moves! Doesn't he know girls like it better when you're more...."

"Dismissive? Insulting? Obnoxious? Insufferable?" Peter suggested.

"Exactly!" Sirius nodded. "It's always works for me, hasn't it?"

As planned, when Lily and James entered Zonko's, the boys made their way to the Three Broomsticks, and Sirius withdrew himself out from under the cloak.

"I'll be just around the side. Good luck, mate!"

When Peter turned around, Sirius was gone.

Peter slipped into the pub in the wake of a customer leaving. Moving carefully through the crowd so as not to jostle anyone, Peter made his way to the far side of the bar and flattened himself in the corner of the room where he could watch the entrance and be out of the way. He observed the easy camaraderie of the other students enjoying this day out of school together and thought how lucky he was to be a Marauder. To have friends like Remus, Sirius and James. Especially James, his first friend. His best friend. And while he liked, even admired Sirius most times, Peter thought it wasn't right that he and James had grown closer... like brothers, almost. Thinking about it made Peter's stomach ache and a bit of darkness crept into his heart. A little voice in the back of his head spoke so softly that Peter barely heard it: *Sirius isn't good for James.*

Time seemed to slow to an unbearable crawl as Peter forced himself to remain calm under the cloak while he waited. And as he waited, doubts and worries began to seep into his head. This had all seemed like such a good idea at the time, but what if it backfired? What if James blamed him? What if they got caught? Or expelled? Peter closed his eyes and shook his head roughly to dispel these doubts.

Then Lily and James entered the pub and all doubts vanished. Lily's face was flushed from the cold and James' face was positively barmy as he looked at her. Peter couldn't see them as they took a seat, beyond his view, in the corner of the pub. A few moments later, however, as expected, James came around the wall with the jar of raspberry jam in his hands and walked towards the proprietor standing by the bar.

"Rosmerta?"

"What is it, luv?" Rosmerta asked, wiping her hands on her apron as she crossed behind the bar to James. "What's that you've got?"

"It's from Professor Dumbledore. He asked me to bring it to you. He said you'd like it."

She took the jar from him, looking slightly confused, and then she gave a wicked grin. "Hmm... well, that's right sweet of Albus! The dear, old flirt!"

Both James and Peter winced as this unwelcome image of their Headmaster flashed through their minds.

"Raspberry?"

James shrugged.

"Well, I do love raspberry! Tell the professor thanks for me, dear!" Peter watched as she stowed the jam under the bar and James returned to Lily.

Once they were both out of the way, Peter pulled out the phial from his robes and gave it a few quick shakes. Holding his breath, his heart pounding, he quickly unstopped the glass and poured its contents into the Butterbeer barrel that stood next to the bar. A thick, blue film covered the top of the amber liquid. He took out his wand and stirred the brew a few times and the blue colour blended and dissipated into the ale. Satisfied, Peter retreated back to his corner.

In for a Knut....

Peter didn't have to wait long to see the results. As the students were served and drank their Butterbeers, he watched laughter turn to sudden silence and smiles vanish

under reddened faces. This was followed by gasps and then screams as, one by one, the potion affected their bodies.

The usual application and intent of a Fever Draught was to reduce the heat and chills of an illness-induced fever. However, if accidentally taken...or mixed...with alcohol, it produced an opposite reaction: a rush of heat, followed by profound sweating, a horrible rash and fever blisters. Fortunately, the amount of alcohol in Butterbeer was quite small, so Sirius and Peter expected...or hoped...that the reaction might be less intense and short-lived.

Peter wasn't sure how much worse it could be. He was shaking as he watched. Wailing, crying and panic took hold of the room. Rosmerta looked stricken.

"Esmerelda!" Rosmerta grabbed her cousin, the barmaid. "Floo over to St. Mungo's and get some help!"

Esmerelda looked frozen to the spot. Rosmerta pushed her towards the fireplace and threw the powder into it herself. "GO!"

Esmerelda was gone in a flash of green flames.

Peter looked over to James and Lily, who were watching aghast at the scene unfolding before them.

At that moment, Sirius ambled into the bar with studied nonchalance and walked through the maddened crowd to James and Lily, calm and unphased by the chaos erupting around him.

Sirius sat himself down next to James and laughed. "Oh my, James! This looks bad!"

Peter watched James look at Sirius, first in shock, and then, looking at the flailing students and the scene through his friend's mischievous eyes, James burst into laughter as well.

Peter quickly looked at Lily. She was watching the two friends laughing together and looked rapidly between them as if trying to understand some mysterious and elusive piece of magic. He could actually see her mind working.

"James? Our very best ideas have sprung from James' deranged mind!"

"With Sirius making them go from bad to worse."

"James Potter," Lily whispered, stricken. "What is this? What have you done?" Her face was white, her body shaking.

James' laughter died instantly. Sirius sat back and watched, his eyes glinting. James turned to her, bewildered. "I haven't done anything, Lily! How could you think that..."

"Now, Prongs! Don't be modest! No lasting harm, I'm sure!" Sirius nodded reassuringly.

James whipped his head between Lily and Sirius, panic growing.

"But... I I didn't! Lily, I swear!"

Lily was on her feet and grabbing her cloak and packages. Her eyes were cold with tears.

"I thought... believed... I'm a fool," she stammered, her voice choking. Lily ran out of the bar and into the storm raging outside.

James stood up and Sirius placed his hand on his friend's arm to stay him. James looked at Sirius, distraught and confused. And then, in the next moment, his face clouded with anger and he shook off Sirius's arm violently, like he'd been stung.

"You did this." It was an accusation, not a question. "Why, Padfoot?" James croaked, then turned on his heels and ran outside into the rain after her. Peter's heart pounded even harder and he was grateful for the cover of the Invisibility Cloak.

Several of St. Mungo's Healers had arrived and began to tend to the students who were still in the bar. As hoped, the worst of the attack had, indeed, abated and the screams had turned to whimpers. Rosmerta was sitting on a barstool tossing back a glass of her best whisky, shaking in the aftermath of the disaster that had befallen her establishment.

With everyone's attention turned elsewhere, Peter removed the Invisibility Cloak and sat down by Sirius, whose face was inscrutable as he stared at the front door. Peter waited.

Sirius tossed back the remains of James' Gillywater and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"That went well, don't you think?" Sirius remarked with a pained grimace.

Peter, completely missing the irony in Sirius' comment, sighed with relief and smiled. "Yes, Padfoot. I think it went very well."

A/N: The "Potters as inventors theory" comes from Angie Astravic with further theorizing by JOdell on Red Hen.

Winter Solstice: 1975 - Sixth Year

Chapter 8 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

This holiday season was darker than any in recent memory. Wizards and witches around Britain were reluctant to be about, to visit friends and share in the usual celebrations. Rumours of strange disappearances, 'accidents' to persons and property, tales of odd behaviour and acts of violence were circulating in both print and gossip. That they were related to the rising strength of 'You-Know-Who' was certain. When the next attack would come...or to whom tragedy would befall...was not.

Many families chose to have their children remain at school for the holidays, since Hogwarts, with its ancient protections, was felt to be the safest place in the wizarding world. Many students were disappointed and sad, missing the time with their families. For a particular group of Gryffindor students who were not on speaking terms, holidays at Hogwarts were excruciating.

The Great Hall during the Christmas Eve feast found the remaining Gryffindors seated at different ends of their usual table like so many pieces of driftwood scattered upon the shore. Lily sat at one end with Annette and Alice. James sat with Peter at the other end. Sirius sat in the middle with Remus, who didn't want to leave Sirius to eat by himself. Lily, James and Sirius ate their meals disconsolately, and their friends worked hard at trying to cheer them up. All in all, it was a pretty miserable holiday meal for everyone.

Peter

Remus had gathered them all outside the Gryffindor common room. He had decided that it was time to do something about this unbearable situation.

"What do you suggest, Remus?" asked Alice.

"We've badgered Lily to talk with them, to sort it out, but she's so bloody stubborn!" exclaimed Annette, folding her arms with an exasperated huff.

"Sirius and James are the same," Remus concurred. "But this is affecting all of us, not only them. Don't you agree, Peter?"

While Peter didn't like to see James miserable, he did rather like that, for once, James was ignoring Sirius. Still, he wasn't enjoying his holidays as much as he'd hoped.

"Yes, Remus. You're right," Peter agreed reluctantly.

Remus sighed and looked ruefully at Peter. "Whatever put that stupid idea into his head, Wormtail? And why in blazes did you encourage him?"

"Thank goodness I wasn't there," Alice muttered. "I'd have hexed him so badly he'd still be begging for mercy."

Peter gazed at his feet. "You know how he is, Moony! Once he gets something into his head, it can't be yanked out for anything. I thought if I was there, I could make sure it didn't get any worse..."

"Any worse?" Annette interrupted. "How much worse could it have been?" She grimaced, scratching her arm in remembrance of the pain. "Still," she added, "even I believe that James didn't have anything to do with it. Why won't she give him a break at least?"

"I think we're past blaming at this point," said Remus. "Sirius is miserable and beating himself up enough for all of us." Remus looked at each of them. "It's time we take matters in our own hands, and I have an idea how to do it. Are you with me?"

They all nodded, Peter a bit less enthusiastically.

"Good. First off, make sure you all dress warmly. It's going to be a long, cold night."

Severus

Severus woke as the first light of dawn flickered past his eyes. He sat up abruptly and reached for his wand, caught off guard by unfamiliar sensations. Then, realizing he was not in his bed in the Slytherin dungeons, he relaxed as he took in his new surroundings. He lay in the largest bed he'd ever been in his whole life. The imposing, four-poster, dark wood frame was elaborately carved with vines of ivy and flying birds. A large oriental rug covered the polished oak floors, and elegant, silk draperies framed the tall casement windows through which the morning light shone elegantly across the room.

Malfoy Manor.

Severus felt both unnerved and strangely happy. He'd never slept anywhere except at Spinner's End and Hogwarts. Except for the very few times, when he was small, when he'd gone to his grandparents' home by the sea. The past twenty-four hours had been the strangest, most exciting of his life, and he lay back onto the soft, down pillows and closed his eyes to relish it all over again.

~*~

On the previous day, Severus had been met at the Wiltshire train station by Lucius Malfoy's coach and driver. The coachman took his trunk wordlessly and bowed briefly as Severus stepped inside the coach. For someone who had lived his whole life feeling invisible, these attentions, these small acknowledgements put Severus a bit off balance.

The first sight of Malfoy Manor was one that Severus would never forget. The large, honey-stoned mansion stood by itself at the top of a hill, its front columns leering like a marbled grin, staring down on the trees, hedges and gardens below it. Imposing. Beckoning. Threatening. Seductive.

The coach ascended to the Manor along a gravelled path that was lined on both sides by clipped Irish yews. As the coach wound its way up the hill, the Manor grew larger and more intimidating. Finally, Severus was jerked back into the seat as the conveyance came to a stop. Stepping out into the front courtyard, he looked up and saw, carved into niches along the exterior of the Manor, tall, stone figures that he guessed must be carved representations of previous Malfoys; all of them seemed to be staring at him.

"Snape!"

Severus stepped back, startled, nearly tripping on his robes. Had one of the statues spoken?

"I hope you had no trouble on your journey?" Lucius Malfoy was approaching Severus with a smile, extending his hand in greeting. He was dressed as elegantly as always with an ermine-lined cloak and soft, calfskin gloves.

Severus took Malfoy's gloved hand in his own potion-stained one and shook it in greeting. "No, sir. No trouble at all. Thank you for sending the coach, although it wasn't really necessary...."

Malfoy steered Severus towards the left-side stairs leading to the main entrance.

"Of course it was necessary, Snape! You are my guest, and I make sure that all my guests are treated well! Besides, you'd never have gotten past the protections by yourself. I take a great deal of care minding who comes in and who goes out," Malfoy remarked with the hint of a smirk. He led Severus up the stairs with a strong grip on his shoulder. "I know you'll have a lovely visit with us. Narcissa, especially, has been looking forward to seeing you. We're both delighted you'll be able to join us for our engagement celebration tomorrow evening!"

As Severus entered the Manor through the large doors that led into the main entrance hall, he was stunned to a full stop, nearly blinded by the staggering whiteness of the room. Every inch of the entrance hall was covered in brilliant, white marble, made even brighter due to the light that poured into the hall from twelve-foot high windows and reflected off of every surface. Only enormous, flower-filled vases placed upon several marble-topped tables that lined the walls created a lush and colourful punctuation to the whiteness.

The entrance hall was framed on its far sides by large double doors, clearly leading off to other parts of the Manor, and in the middle, a regal staircase led up to a landing before winding back to the upper floors. A movement at the top of the landing caught Severus' eye, and he saw, coming down the staircase, the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She smiled as she swept down towards them and held out her hand to Severus. He took it, surprised to find his own were slightly shaking.

Both of her small hands held his one, and she squeezed it gently. "Severus! I remember you now! I was in seventh year with Lucius."

Severus looked at her blankly, amazed that he had no recollection of her. She noticed his blank look.

"I'm Narcissa Black! I'm so happy that you have come to stay and celebrate with us!" Narcissa let go of Severus' hand and swept herself into Lucius' arms to receive his kiss. Severus took in the cut of her sweeping, emerald-green velvet robes, which revealed every curve, and the necklace of brilliant diamonds that sparkled at her throat. Her long, blond hair fell loosely along her face that was as perfect as any piece of marble in the hall, and her blue eyes looked kindly at Severus, causing him to catch his breath while heat rose to his face. Thankfully, Narcissa didn't seem to need a reply.

"Lucius," Narcissa said, taking Severus' arm in hers, "I'm going to show Severus his rooms and review the schedule."

"Of course, Narcissa." Malfoy nodded. "I have some business to attend to. Severus, feel free to explore the grounds, if you like. I'll see you at dinner, seven o'clock sharp. Dress robes." Malfoy turned and went through the doors to the left.

Severus felt dizzy by the strangeness of it all, the unfamiliar opulence, the courtesy. The scent Narcissa was wearing. *Jasmine and rose petals*. Suddenly, his heart, which was already racing, sped up further, and he was suddenly possessed by a strong urge to turn around and flee. Fortunately, Narcissa still had a firm hold on his arm. "Miss Black, I'm sorry, but I don't have dress robes...."

Narcissa laughed as she guided Severus towards the main staircase. "Everything has been seen to, Severus. You'll find a full wardrobe in your room with everything you'll need inside. Our house-elf, Mab, will be assisting you during your stay."

Looking into her eyes was like falling into a pool of cool water. Her smile was soothing and Severus relaxed at once. "Thank you, Miss Black. I appreciate your kindness in having me here and making me feel... welcomed."

Narcissa laughed again. It sounded like the tinkle of glass chimes, Severus thought. "Please, call me Narcissa! I'm only a few years older than you, you know." She held him at arms length and looked him up and down with an appraising eye. "You've grown some since your first year! Hmm... yes, you have some promise." She nodded and smiled again as she hooked her arm through his once again and led him down a long hallway.

It wasn't until well after Narcissa had left him alone in his room that Severus was able to clear his head of the fuzzy feeling that had taken up residence there, as if he'd consumed several pints of very strong mead. When he had recovered himself sufficiently, he wandered around...his room...touching each surface, letting his senses take in every texture: soft, rough, smooth, cool, hard. He opened the wardrobe that was, as Narcissa had promised, filled with garments of the type that Severus had only come close to when in the presence of Lucius Malfoy. The finest wools, silks, and linens felt exotic to his touch. They had picked colours that suited him, various dark shades of maroon, blue, green and, of course, black. Shoes and boots lined the floor of the wardrobe, each made of the most exquisite leather. He knew without a doubt that everything would fit him perfectly. The adjoining bath was equally beautiful and elegant. As Severus took it all in, he was unexpectedly blindsided by a wave of uncertainty, doubt, and fear. He found himself needing to sit before his legs gave way. Lowering himself onto the nearest settee and clutching the cushions, he closed his eyes tightly.

Think, you idiot. This is Lucius Bloody Malfoy. He's brought you here for a reason. He's charming, yes. Charming like a coiled tiger, ready to attack and rip you to shreds. And you're in his cage. Keep your wits about you. No sudden moves. And Narcissa is a Black. Best to remember what you know about Blacks.

Severus took a deep breath and opened his eyes, taking in the opulence and elegance of his surroundings once more. Seeing himself reflected in a full-length, standing mirror, Severus suddenly caught a mental glimpse of himself as actually belonging to this world. Being treated with respect. Needed for his skills. Having access to resources that would enable him to truly explore, study...and create...the old, Dark magic that he had always craved to learn. Visions of shelves filled with ancient and forbidden books, a well-stocked potions laboratory and opportunities for creative experimentation danced happily through his mind.

Suddenly, the voice of Albus Dumbledore interrupted his reverie.

"Be careful, dear boy. There are those who will offer you choices that may seem tempting. Consider them carefully, for they may not be what they seem. And those who offer them will definitely not be your friends."

Blast the headmaster, Severus thought bitterly, tossing his words aside. I don't need 'friends.' I can manage this. I deserve this. It's time something turned in my favour for once. I can handle Lucius.

I just need to be careful.

~*~

Later that afternoon, the house-elf, Mab, clearly following Narcissa's instructions and ignoring Severus' objections, made certain he was washed, brushed and clothed to perfection. Standing in front of the full-length mirror while Mab picked off any remnants of dust or threads, Severus stared in shock at his reflection. He hardly recognised himself. Wearing perfectly tailored black trousers and linen shirt, black leather boots and a sumptuous silk-lined robe, Severus looked much older than his nearly seventeen years. His black hair, courtesy of the shampoo Mab insisted on using instead of his usual bar of soap, glistened. The elf had used some of his unique magic to trim his hair as well, so that it didn't automatically fall into and cover his face with every step. Severus touched his hair tentatively, as if he were uncertain that it really was his own. He liked how it felt. He liked how he looked. Severus smiled. He looked...powerful.

Lily

This had been the worst month of Lily Evans' life, and she had spent most of it berating herself and feeling terrible. Tonight was no exception.

After an excruciatingly long Christmas dinner in the Great Hall, Lily had banished herself to the dormitory and was currently lying face-down on her canopied bed, the draperies closed and a pillow over her head, trying to make the images of what had happened at the Three Broomsticks disappear. She couldn't shake them. When she could sleep, which wasn't often, she'd have dreams of people screaming and writhing. But she wasn't sleeping. She was exhausted and unable to find any relief. Her friends had tried to help, explaining that, in the end, no one had been really hurt. And that James Potter didn't have anything to do with it; it just was a silly prank concocted by Sirius and Peter to ruin their date.

But all those people in pain...for a joke? It was so horrible! *And he had laughed!* To be so completely humiliated and fooled by someone she thought she actually liked! Lily had always prided herself as an excellent judge of character. And she was the *Empathic!* Lily snorted. Right. As if that had been any help! And Sirius Black! She sat up and threw the pillow at the wall. *What sort of person even THINKS of doing something like that?* she asked herself as she moved from despondency to anger to fury.

James had laughed! Lily clenched her fists. James was ALWAYS in the middle of whatever prank Sirius was involved in. Why would this have been any different? Lily flung

herself back onto the bed.

And even worse. *"Lily Evans, Prefect and Coward"... why didn't I report it? WHY? I'm as bad as they are!*

Why didn't she report it? She couldn't fathom an answer to this question. She'd been asked, of course, when she was in Professor Dumbledore's office afterwards. She'd never seen him with a look like that. Hard. Old. Every twinkle banished. McGonagall was there too, looking so...disappointed. He asked. She asked. She said she didn't know. Well, it was partly true, at the time. She didn't have real proof. She didn't want anyone in trouble unless she was certain. But even after, when Peter confessed to her in private, contrite, she still didn't tell. WHY? Lily pushed her fists into her eyes. She felt she was somehow culpable in the whole mess. It was so confusing, and she felt she was going out of her mind.

"LILY! Where are you?" Annette interrupted Lily's mental flagellation as she tore the curtains back from the bed, wheezing, out of breath from running.

"Get UP! Come quickly!" Annette gasped.

Lily snapped out of her wallow in an instant and sprang off her bed. "What's wrong? Come where?"

Annette was still trying to catch her breath, holding on to the bedposts. "It's it's Alice... Astronomy Tower... Something is terribly wrong! Hurry!"

Lily grabbed her cloak and her wand and without another question tore out of the room, Annette on her heels.

~*~

Flinging open the door that opened to the Astronomy Tower, Lily saw Alice lying at the far end, leaning against a chimney stack, holding her side and moaning. Lily was by her side instantly.

"Alice! What happened? Are you hurt? We need to get you down to the hospital wing!"

Alice grabbed a hold of Lily's cloak and roughly pulled her down to her side. "No, Lily! Just stay here with me. I'll be all right!"

Lily flung aside Alice's cloak to look for signs of injury. She grew increasingly concerned when she could find no external signs of what was causing her friend's distress. Was this a spell? A Potion gone wrong? And what in blazes had Alice been doing up here in the first place? Lily put her arm around Alice's shoulders.

"Come on, hold onto my neck, and I'll help you down. Annette can help." She turned to Annette, who was standing by the Tower door. "Come over and give me a hand!"

Annette looked at the door, and then back to her friends. She started to take a step towards them when the door burst open and James Potter rushed in, followed by Remus Lupin. James made a beeline for Lily.

He knelt by her side and took her arm. "Lily! Are you all right? What happened?"

She was unable to respond because, in the very next second, the Tower door opened for the third time. They both looked up to see Sirius Black rushing towards them.

"James!" He stopped abruptly, seeing that James was clearly unharmed. James looked at Lily and Sirius. Lily looked at the two boys, her friend by her side and, standing near the entrance door, Annette, Remus and Peter. She was trying to make sense of it all when the three near the door raised their wands and incanted at the same time, *"Accio wands!"* Lily's, James' and Sirius' wands flew out of their robes and into the waiting hands of the others. Remus turned to the Tower door and pointed his wand. *"Colloportus!"* A squelching noise confirmed the door had been sealed.

Alice looked at Lily, abashed and very nervous. "I'm sorry, Lily," she whispered, scrambling to her feet and joining the others at the barred and sealed doorway.

Lily dropped to a sitting position. James and Sirius, standing next to her, stared at their friends, blinking. Confused. For a moment, the cold, night air seemed to stop moving, and a terrible silence filled the Astronomy Tower.

Lily, James and Sirius erupted at the same time and advanced on their friends, whose wands were out and pointed, ready to hold the line.

"What do you think you're doing? What the devil is this about?"

"Do you have any idea how cold it is up here?"

"Unseal that bloody door, or your face won't recognise itself, and I don't need a wand to do it!"

"Give me back my wand!"

"Who came up with this all-time stupid idea, anyway?"

"Move out of the way!"

Shaking a bit from both the cold and their nerves, Remus, Peter, Alice and Annette held their positions and did not respond to the continuous barrage of invectives, threats and curses. Sirius even tried throwing himself at Remus, who, unflinching, cast a mild Stunning Spell that sent Sirius flying off his feet and onto his rear end. Finally, realising that they could keep yelling until sometime into the new year without a response, Lily, James and Sirius quieted and descended into a tension-filled silence. All that remained of their rant were three pair of eyes that glared menacingly at their captors, as if looks alone might cut them up into very fine potion ingredients.

Remus cleared his throat. He focused primarily on Sirius, the most volatile of the three, but spoke to them all.

"I'm very sorry to have inconvenienced you. Especially on Christmas. But we decided that you've all gone on long enough moping, whinging, not speaking to each other and, in general, making life miserable for ALL of us. You're tired. We're tired. Now, listen up. Stupid things happened." Remus shot a look at Peter, clearly including him in this mess. "No one denies that. But it's done with. There are enough bad feelings and regrets for everyone. It's time for the three of you to finally say whatever it is you need to say to each other, apologise, forgive and MOVE ON!"

James, Sirius and Lily stared, open-mouthed, resembling a school of goldfish. Then, stealing a glance at each other and realising they were a bit too near to one another, they split apart so fast it was as if they'd all been hit by lightning.

Remus narrowed his eyes, more determined. "Fine. Understand, though, that we're not letting you off this Tower until this is resolved. And, because we're your friends and we care about you, we're all prepared to stay up here with you, until NEXT Christmas if necessary! Just remember...we hold the wands. Therefore, we're the only ones who can cast Warming Charms. So get on with it." And with that, Remus plopped himself down onto the Tower roof. Peter, Alice and Annette, who looked a bit less determined than Remus, but clearly prepared to do their part, sat down as well, huddling together for warmth.

James scowled and leaned against a parapet. Sirius continued to glare at Remus. Lily turned her back on them all and folded her arms.

"Happy bloody Christmas to you, too," she muttered through her clenched teeth, which had already started to chatter in the cold.

Peter

If asked, he'd be hard-pressed to tell which was colder: the freezing night air or the iciness emanating from Sirius, Lily and James. He sat bunched together with Remus and the girls, sharing a small, conjured fire, and thought it was entirely possible that he might die of exposure if they didn't start talking to each other soon.

Sirius sat on his hands, scowling and muttering to himself, occasionally shooting murderous looks at Remus. Lily, who had turned away from them, may have, in fact, frozen; she was so still that not even a hair moved on her head. James' head was dropped to his upraised knees, and his arms were draped over his head.

To make things worse...or better...depending on which side of the roof you were sitting, Remus pulled a pencil out of a robe pocket and transfigured it into a cup of hot chocolate, which he shared with his fellow roof guardians. As the cup was passed to him, Peter thought he heard Sirius mutter, "Bloody show-off prick."

Remus had instructed Peter, Alice and Annette not to talk while they were on the roof. "Let them do all the talking," he had said. "We're there just to make sure they don't hurt each other and force them to have it out." But Peter was cold, restless and wanted to go to bed. Slowly, however, an idea wormed its way into his head.

He smiled to himself and, handing the cup of hot chocolate to Annette, stood up, stretched his cramped legs and walked over to the three huddled forms on the roof.

"Peter..." Remus started, alarmed.

Peter ignored Remus' reproach and loudly cleared his throat. The three captives looked up at him, startled at the noise and his sudden nearness.

Peter gulped once, took a deep breath and put on his most sorrowful look. "Um, I er I just want to apologise to all three of you."

Six pairs of eyes blinked, and six pairs of eyebrows knit together on their respective foreheads.

Licking his lips, which had gone completely dry in the hour they'd already been sitting on the Tower, Peter continued. "I'm sorry for being involved in a prank that, I realise now, was a really stupid idea. I...We..." he glanced at Sirius, "we were, I think, a bit jealous of you, Lily."

Lily's mouth dropped open in astonishment. "Jealous of me?" she stammered.

"Er, yes. We thought maybe James wouldn't want us as mates any more if you were in the picture." He turned to James. "I know now that that's completely ridiculous and it would never happen, of course, but for a moment we felt it might be...true. So, we had this idea that might make you think that being with James would be a really bad idea."

"It was *my* idea, Wormtail," Sirius said in a small, quiet voice. "Not yours."

"Well, yes, it *was* your idea," Peter paused for a moment, then added, "but I did go along with it, Padfoot."

Sirius didn't respond, but dropped his head onto his chest and sighed deeply.

"Bloody well worked, didn't it?" James grumbled bitterly.

Peter turned to Lily. "But it wasn't James' fault. He knew nothing about it, really. He was as much a victim as anyone else in the pub that day. He he really cares about you, Lily."

Lily stared at him with an indecipherable expression, but she didn't respond.

Peter walked over to James and put his hand on the other boy's shoulder. "James, I was an idiot. I really do like Lily, and I think you are really good together." James looked up at him, grunted and shook his head forlornly.

"Prongs, I'm your friend! I know that you and I will always be friends...nothing and no one could ever come between us!" Peter said reassuringly. "So whatever I can do to help you and Lily to patch things up, you can count on me!"

A small glimmer of a sad smile etched itself onto the corner of James' mouth. "I I know you will, Peter."

"But he *laughed*," Lily said this so quietly that they barely heard it.

Despite the coldness of the night, Peter saw James' face flush with heat and his eyes go wide. He looked stricken, as if she'd hit him with a hex.

"All those people were in pain, and he *laughed*," Lily said, her voice rising and her anger clearly growing.

James leapt to his feet. "Lily, I didn't mean..."

Lily rose as well, still maintaining her distance from him. "What is it that you didn't mean, James?" she snarled. "You didn't mean to find it funny? You didn't mean to appreciate the cleverness of your best friends' devious plan? You didn't mean to WHAT?" She was livid now, her incriminations escalating in equal proportion to her face growing red.

All eyes turned to James, waiting for his response. No one seemed to be breathing.

James ran his nearly-blue fingers through his hair, as if searching for the right words. "I didn't mean to laugh at them. I just..." James' dropped his head, his shoulders slumped in defeat. "You're right, Lily. It was wrong. It was terrible. It was unthinking and unfeeling." He raised his eyes to her, hope drained from them. "I'm sorry, Lily. Truly sorry."

"What the hell do you have to be sorry for, mate?" Sirius was on his feet and shaking with anger. Peter, who was standing closest to him and recognising the signs of Padfoot ready to bite, stepped out of his way. Lily and James turned to him, surprised, as if they'd forgotten he was there.

Sirius moved straight towards Lily, his teeth bared. "You are a bloody hypocrite, Evans! Who do you think you are? The Queen? The judge? The whole, sodding Wizengamot?"

James leapt in front of Sirius to stop him. "Sirius! No!" Sirius pushed him out of the way and stood face to face with Lily, who was shaking but did not back down from his attack.

"Don't you dare make this about me, Sirius Black!"

"And why the hell not? This is about you! If the high and mighty Miss Evans hadn't decided to finally lower herself to go out with James after treating him like bat dung for years, this wouldn't have happened at all!"

James grabbed Sirius roughly by the arm and jerked him about. "Don't talk to Lily like that!"

"Mate, they brought us up here to 'have it out,' right? Well, that's what I'm doing. And it's long overdue. Evans and I need to have a little chat, don't we?" Sirius shrugged James off and turned back to Lily.

She met his glare. "I believe we do, Sirius," Lily replied evenly.

Peter backed away from them slowly and took his seat on the roof next to Annette. He smiled when she squeezed his hand and offered him the cup of hot chocolate.

Severus

Severus had seen the Great Hall at Hogwarts festively decorated on many occasions, but nothing compared to the elegance, wonder and perfection of Malfoy Manor's ballroom for this Christmas Eve celebration of Lucius Malfoy's engagement to Narcissa Black. Entering the room, he was struck first by the light. Small, burning orbs like miniature suns, floating near the high ceiling, cast a warm glow on the gathering below. Thousands of fairies cast a cool light from the outside through the tall casement windows that lined the long walls. Both warm and cool light mingled, illuminating the guests in such a way as to make everyone who was in attendance beautiful or handsome, reflecting off the sumptuous fabrics of their dress robes and jewels. It was a light of romance and seduction.

Severus walked through the ballroom, intoxicated by the hedonistic assault on his senses. Garlands of holly were strung throughout the room. Tables were laden with platters of food and drink. The high notes of crystal and laughter joined in the tempo of the soft music played by musicians up on the balcony. Stepping back against a wall, Severus looked over the guests and noticed, with some surprise, several of his classmates among them. Regulus Black was standing besides his cousin... 'Auntie'... Bella, who was entertaining a pair of dark-haired men, both laughing, and obviously in her thrall. Evan Rosier was standing besides a man Severus assumed was his father; they shared the same golden, curly hair and pale complexion. Colin Wilkes and Sebastian Avery, both seventh-year Slytherins, were flirting with a small group of older, but extremely attractive, women, who seemed amenable to the attentions of the younger boys.

Of course they'd be invited. The pureblood wizarding world is not vast. They're probably all related, Severus thought wryly.

"Snape! Is it true?"

Severus' musings were interrupted as he turned to see Niles Cranford, Terence Yaxley and Bertram Crabbe walking towards him, each with a goblet in hand. Yaxley and Crabbe, he noted, seemed uneasy in this environment, unlike Cranford, who moved with grace that conveyed his familiarity with this world of privilege.

"Are you in residence here for the hols?" Cranford prodded.

"Happy Christmas to you, too, Cranford," was Severus' reply. He usually found it best not to offer up more information than necessary where Cranford was concerned.

"Are you really staying here, Snape?" asked Crabbe, whose eyes were wide with the same wonder that Severus felt, but was better at disguising. He decided that there might be some advantage to be gained here, after all.

"Yes. I was invited by Mr. Malfoy to stay here during break. He's been a very gracious host."

The effect on Crabbe and Yaxley was predictable. Their looks of envy confirmed to Severus that he had risen in their estimation by several notches. Cranford, on the other hand, was not so easily impressed.

"How...charitable...of Malfoy to take in an orphan for the holidays," he drawled with a wan smile. "It's heart-warming, really."

Severus felt the heat rise to his face, but Narcissa Black, who had suddenly materialised with her cousin Reggie on her arm, rescued him.

"Good evening, boys!" she said with a shimmering smile that seemed to melt their composure, even Cranford's. "I hope you're all having a good time?"

"Yes, thank you, Miss Black," Cranford replied, recovering first. "Many congratulations to both you and Mr. Malfoy." He offered a polite, small bow and his own most winning smile.

"Thank you...Niles, isn't it?" Narcissa didn't wait for his reply but turned to Severus. "Severus, dear, you know our Reggie, don't you? I've rescued him from my sister Bella and thought he'd be much better off in some younger company." She gave Reggie a small kiss on his cheek. "Reggie, I'll be back to fetch you and your Housemates in just a little while." She patted Severus on the hand and swept away into the crowd.

Reggie turned to a nearby table and grabbed a glass of wine to cover his embarrassment.

Cranford turned to Severus with an amused smile.

"Ah, now I understand! You're here to play baby-minder for ickle Reggie! I can see how you'd be very useful there!"

Reggie turned to Cranford abruptly, spilling some wine in the process. "I don't need minding, you arrogant sod!"

Severus refused to take the bait. "Don't mind Cranford, Reggie. He's just having at me because I've been invited as a guest over the holidays, and he hasn't."

Reggie, forgetting his anger at Cranford, looked up at Severus in surprise. "You are? Really? How...er...Why?"

"I'm not sure, really." Severus shrugged and looked pointedly at Cranford. "I think Mr. Malfoy thinks I may be *useful*."

Cranford's eyes grew wide. *Scored your envy with that, did I?* Severus thought. In his brief time under Malfoy's patronage, his acceptance into this world, a world he could never before have imagined, guaranteed him an upward shift in status among his peers. He could tell they felt it as well, and he intended to use it fully to his own advantage.

"What did Miss Black mean about 'fetching' us, Reg?" Crabbe asked, inadvertently changing the subject.

"Well, I can't really talk about it," Reggie said in an offhand manner, implying that he was considered important enough to hold this information, while they were not. "But I can tell you that it is something very important to our futures." Reggie dropped his voice, the eagerness clear in his eyes. "It should be very exciting; my father said it's an honour to be invited!"

"Gentlemen." A honeyed voice spoke, and they all turned to see Bellatrix and Narcissa Black standing behind them. The boys all bowed in greeting.

"Your presence is required in the drawing room," Bellatrix said, her head held high as she looked at them each in turn, her eyes glistening with the same excitement they had just seen in Reggie's.

"Please, gentlemen, will you follow us?" Narcissa asked.

The boys all nodded in assent; Narcissa took Severus by the arm, and her sister followed with Reggie. Cranford, Yaxley and Crabbe trailed behind. As they made their way through the crowd, they picked up Avery, Wilkes and Rosier. The line of young Slytherins wound slowly out of the ballroom, oblivious to the knowing smiles and nods of their elders that followed them.

Lily

Lily stared down Sirius, waiting for his explanation, but James pulled Sirius back more roughly this time. No one on the roof had ever seen James this angry.

"No, mate. I have something to say *first*." The heat coming from James was palpable. Sirius appeared stunned by the intensity of James' reaction, and he backed away from the attack he felt coming.

Lily, who felt her own anger at Sirius hijacked by James' interruption, watched them both carefully as they rounded on each other. It seemed to Lily that James appeared to grow larger as Sirius shrank before him.

"I love you, Sirius!" James shouted through his anger, and it struck Lily's heart as he said this. "I've always trusted you. But this time," James' voice broke slightly, "this time you hurt me, Padfoot. You know how I feel about Lily. And whatever I have... or might have had... with her... has nothing to do with us." Sirius dropped his head, unable to look at James. "But, thanks to you, I've probably lost any chance, ever, and it's hurt you and I worst of all. I I don't know if I can forgive you, Sirius."

Lily looked between the two boys and was suddenly overwhelmed by the strength of what she felt emanating from the two of them. Their love and devotion. Their dependence. Their need. Their pain.

Sirius looked up at James. His eyes were full of despair, but his voice was challenging, as if compelled beyond reason to push James further. "Well, even for one of our pranks, it was rather well executed, don't you think? Wormtail and I did put a lot of effort into it. That should count for something."

Lily drew in a sharp breath, shocked. *He must be insane!*

Suddenly, James rushed at Sirius and attacked him with a fury. The girls gasped. Peter gaped, and Remus stood. There was a flurry of robes and fists. There was a loud thwack! before Remus shot another Stunning Spell that forced the two apart. They sat, breathing heavily, and Sirius held a hand over his eye, which was now red and puffy.

"Good shot, Prongs," Sirius said with a wince. He smiled wanly. "I deserved that. I deserve worse. I don't deserve your forgiveness. Despite what happened, you know I'd rather die than intentionally hurt you." Sirius averted his gaze from James. "I'll... I'll find a flat somewhere once school is out."

The fight seemed to have knocked the anger out of James, who looked stricken at Sirius' words. "What do you mean?"

"You don't need me around to mess up again, James. I understand. I have some of my own money. I can find someplace to live. Besides, it might be good to be on my own!" Sirius forced a smile.

Lily couldn't bear this for another moment. "James, I think you should," she said, her words escaping her mouth before realising that she had given voice to her inner thoughts.

James turned to her blinking, as if he'd forgotten she was there. "What?"

"I think you should forgive Sirius."

James stared at Lily, uncomprehending.

"I mean," she said, feeling awkward and unsure exactly what it was she did mean, "it was stupid and terrible, but... but the two of you need each other."

James was now both bereft and confused. But her words seemed to jolt Sirius back to himself.

"I think you should stay out of it, Evans!" he growled.

"Sirius...I...do forgive you," James said earnestly. "Lily is right. You don't need to move out. Mum and Dad would hate it if you did. I I would hate it if you did."

Sirius shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, well, if Evans says so, then it must be right. Why should this time be any different?"

But Lily wasn't going to let that remark go by. "Because I seem to be able to see things you can't, like the fact that your best friend adores you and always will."

Sirius was up on his feet and in front of Lily in a flash. "Right. And, as I recall, you and I were just about to 'have it out' before we were interrupted, weren't we?"

While the intensity of her anger had mostly dissipated, his previous accusation still stung. "Yes, we were, Sirius. You were about to explain to me why I'm such a hypocrite." She met his glare with one of her own.

Sirius gave her one of his most charming smiles, the one that usually drove the girls wild, Lily noted. She did not smile in return. "I'm happy to oblige, Ms. Perfect Prefect!" he said in a fake, lighthearted voice.

"You have the gall to judge James for 'laughing' at those poor souls at the Three Broomsticks," he began, "and yet, I have observed you frequently laughing and thoroughly enjoying many of our pranks over the years. If I'm correct in my understanding of the word, Lovely Lily, that makes you a hypocrite!"

Lily's felt her heart pounding very loudly in her ears as she continued to meet Sirius' eyes. "But none of your pranks have involved causing people physical pain before, Mr. Black! This was different!"

Sirius crossed his arms. "Oh, you think so?"

She found herself growing flustered, not a feeling she was used to. "Yes, of course I do!" she spluttered.

"So, are you saying that physical pain is worse than, say, embarrassment? Or humiliation?"

Lily squirmed. "Well, yes! No! One isn't worse than the other...."

"So, last year when we flipped Snivellus upside down and we all admired his pants, that wasn't you who fought to suppress, dare I say... a laugh? Was it?"

The memory of it flashed back to her in an instant, and she felt her face turn instantly hot.

"And yet," Sirius continued, gathering steam, "when our James here had a perfectly normal reaction to a very silly scene, he dared to laugh! What a terrible person he must be! Probably should be tossed into Azkaban for it, right, *Lily*?"

Lily's humiliation at having been called out so baldly prevented her from reacting to this unauthorised use of her nickname. He was right, of course. All of it. Suddenly, she knew how it felt being pushed off of one's 'high horse.' It hurt. A lot. But she'd blast herself to hell before letting Sirius Black have the last word.

"Fine," she said as evenly as she could. "So we're all of us insensitive idiots!" James looked admiringly at his best friend and gobsmacked at Lily. Sirius, too, seemed surprised she'd step up this easily. "You probably most of all, of course," she added pointedly to Sirius. He nodded as if this were, of course, obvious.

Lily walked past Sirius and knelt down next to James. As he gazed at her, the lost look in his eyes hit her powerfully, nearly knocking her over. She took a deep breath and forced the impact of his feelings away from her heart, as Dumbledore had taught her. Taking another breath, she took his hand. "James, I... Sirius is right. I misjudged you and blamed you wrongly for something you weren't responsible for. It wasn't your fault and... I'm sorry."

For a moment, all was silent on the Tower, and Lily felt and heard her heart beat in time with James' pulse.

"Thanks, Lily. It's it's all right," he said at last, quietly, as if for her ears only. Lily felt the hope in James rise in tempo with the blood in his veins. It coursed through his body and shot sparks through his hand and into her own. She laid his hand down gently. She wasn't ready to go back to the place that they'd been moving towards...not just yet. She smiled, then stood and turned back to Sirius and put her hands on her hips. Alice laughed, recognising this as Lily's famous 'I mean business' stance.

"Mr. Black, if you really feel the need to compete with me, may I suggest a more... interesting challenge?" Sirius looked at her, his curiosity piqued. She took a step towards him. "I propose a duel."

His smile gave way to an open-mouth gape, but Lily didn't wait for him to respond. She walked up to Remus.

"Remus, I'd like our wands back, please," she said, holding out her hand.

Remus was aghast...as was everyone else. "You can't be serious, Lily!"

"I'm perfectly serious, Remus." She looked at the astonished faces around her and sighed. "Not THAT kind of a duel, silly!" She huffed and walked to the side of the Tower, pulling open a large storage box that was used for Astronomy lessons. "Mr. Black fancies himself a dab hand at Transfiguration, right?"

Sirius, still uncertain as to what she was going on about, responded defiantly, nonetheless. "I'm the best in our year!"

"So you think!" Lily replied, a glint in her eye. "Well, let's see, shall we? Sirius Black...I challenge you to a Transfiguration Duel. Each of the objects in this box in turn, twice each. Remus and Alice can *judge*," she said with a wink, "the winner."

Sirius was gleeful. He spun around with a *whoop!* and jumped like a dog being offered his favourite bone.

"Challenge accepted, Evans!" He turned to Remus with a flourish. "Moony! Our wands!"

~*~

Evenly spread across the Tower were the various objects that Lily and Sirius had levitated out of the Astronomy storage box: a telescope; a mobile of the solar system they'd charmed to float mid-air; a large, illustrated Star Chart; a box of spare quills; and a large compass.

"Ladies first," offered Sirius with a gallant bow.

Lily nodded and pointed her wand at the telescope, which she promptly transfigured into a miniature version of the Whomping Willow. One of its branches even took a swipe at Pluto, which was orbiting next to it. She greeted the whistles and cheers of her friends with a demure curtsy and smiled sweetly at Sirius, whose grin had evaporated.

"Ah, so we're going for the grand gesture, eh, Evans? Fine!" Sirius studied the telescope-turned-willow tree for a moment and, with a flourish of his wand, transfigured it into a statue of a troll wearing a wreath of willow leaves on its head. Cheers followed, and Sirius threw his fist into the air.

Within the hour, each of the objects had been transfigured twice, as Lily had instructed. These included a dining table adorned with plates of food; an ivy-covered gate that sang when it opened; a gargoyle in a party hat that recited pudding recipes in a voice that sounded suspiciously like the Headmaster; a lamppost that shot fireworks; a picnic basket filled with spiders in party dresses; a suit of armour that danced a jig; a large step ladder with moving steps; and a full length mirror that hurled insults at them in the voice of Sirius' mother.

As the cheers died down, Alice and Remus conferred to decide the winner. After a brief, hushed discussion, Alice stood to face the contestants.

"Although you were both brilliant, we felt that Sirius charming his mother's voice into that mirror gave him a slight edge. The winner, ladies and gentlemen, by just a hair, is...Sirius Black!" Sirius took a victory lap around the Tower to appreciative applause and stopped to receive a gracious, congratulatory handshake from Lily.

"Wow, Lily! You must've been practicing in secret!" Annette remarked, truly impressed.

Lily lowered her head. "Well, um, I have been taking extra lessons with Professor McGonagall."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "You've been planning this for ages, haven't you?" He grinned. "How devious of you, Miss Evans!" he said, with a distinct tone of admiration, which made Lily look up and smile, feeling warmed by his rare compliment.

"Oh, I didn't think either of you were *that* impressive," James said with exaggerated nonchalance.

"Not impressive, eh?" Lily turned to Sirius and whispered conspiratorially in Sirius' ear. He broke into another famous Black grin and nodded. Together, they trained their wands on their friends.

"Don't you dare!" squealed Annette in a vain protest. A few short flicks, swishes and incantations later, everyone found themselves adorned with garlands of holly, elaborately flowered hats on their heads and fuzzy bunny slippers on their hands. Peter found he'd received an extra surprise when the sweets in his pocket turned into snapping turtles.

In the early hours of Christmas morning, sounds of laughter rang out from the Astronomy Tower, and it was Lily who laughed loudest of all.

Severus

The line of young boys silently, expectantly, winds its way across the main entrance hall, down a corridor until they reach Malfoy's drawing room.

Thrill and terror fill Severus in a heart-pounding combination as he steps inside.

The room is awash in firelight. Small torches are alight in sconces. A fire is blazing in the enormous hearth set in the longest wall. Two older men sit in large wingback chairs in front of the fire. Lucius Malfoy and a group of men...and one woman...flank them. The younger boys are directed to sit in a semi-circle facing their elders in straight-backed, armless chairs. A long, low table sits between the older and younger generations, set with a line of several gleaming, silver goblets that seem to dance in the reflected firelight. No words are spoken as Severus and the others take their seats. The room is thick with anticipation. Severus feels dizzy and then realises he's been holding his breath. He reminds himself to breathe. He glances sideways at his classmates and sees their faces echo with similar uncertainty. He looks at Malfoy for a glimpse of some clue, some bit of information. Lucius stares straight ahead, sitting tall, offering nothing.

Once settled, the older man in the middle facing them stirs, giving them each a piercing glare. Severus recalls that Malfoy introduced him to Malcolm Avery earlier that evening, his classmate's father. The senior Avery appears to Severus to be in his mid-fifties. He is stocky with stubbly, grey-brown hair that is in the process of receding towards the back of his head. His voice, as he speaks, is deep and resonant.

"Tonight," he begins, "our stories pass to you." They all lean forward, expectantly. "This is the time of the Telling. To learn who you are. To know how it was. To always remember. It is your future to realise. It is ours to give." The man's wand appears, and in an instant, each of the goblets that a moment ago had been on the low table now appear in the hands of the elders, who stand and take a step forward.

Malfoy gives the slightest of nods, directing Severus towards him. He watches his classmates do the same. Reggie steps up to his cousin Bellatrix, Cranford to his father, and the others to their elder partners alike. Severus crosses to Malfoy. Again, no words are exchanged as the elders drink from the goblets. Malfoy hands his to Severus

with another nod, and Severus drinks as well. He feels a moment of panic, for he knows that the goblet is not filled with ordinary wine. It is thicker, with a base of some bitter substance that he can't quite place. But he is reassured, if only slightly, that Malfoy and the others are sharing the same potion, for surely that is what it is.

Taking his seat, Severus waits to feel the effects of the potion. He realises he's curious, interested in what it will do. Nothing seems to happen and Severus is slightly disappointed. Then Avery begins to speak.

"My family lived in London before the Black Death. We were merchants who had accumulated some land and built, for its time, a respectable home. It was a time when wizards and non-magical folk, as they were called then, lived together, worked together."

Suddenly, Severus feels himself thrust into a busy, market street in what he instinctively knows is the London of Avery's Telling. The smells are overpowering, the noises are bright, and colours are vivid. At the same time, he sees the Malfoy drawing room as it is in this moment. Avery is speaking. They are listening. This, he realises, is the effect of the potion. He is fascinated and intrigued and cannot help but allow his senses to be drawn completely into the Telling.

"We thrived and our family grew. We wed into other wizarding families. Some took non-magical brides as well. And all was well until the Death began. The Death was a terrible scourge, and we knew it to be caused by the non-magical folk whom we had welcomed into our families. They had become jealous of our abilities and grew to want our power for themselves. They were testing a potion on some rats when it all went terribly wrong. The rats began to spread the sickness to other rats, and soon, Death came to nearly everyone in London. But wizards and witches had ways to protect themselves, and they were not afflicted. So it was, of course, the wizards and witches who were blamed. Neighbours turned on us. Our children were taken."

Severus is in a small house when a door bursts open and a pair of men step over the threshold. Severus looks down to see, by his side, a young girl of about six with a boy...he knows it to be her younger brother...huddled together by the hearth. Severus hears screams: their parents, who are being restrained outside by some others. The taller man, his eyes gone mad, spies the children and reaches out to them with shaking hands.

"You are children of Demons!" the man yells out. Severus panics and tries to intervene, but of course, he cannot. The children scream. The man brandishes a knife and, without a pause, stabs the young girl in the heart. Blood spurts everywhere. The boy screams and cries. The shorter man grabs the boy. Severus feels sweat pour down his brow as he sees...no, feels...the little boy's fear and panic. "Mama!" the boy cries as the man lifts him bodily by the throat. Severus feels his own throat constrict.

The man's smile is terrible. "There will be no more Demons," he rasps before bringing the knife down into the small body of the boy again and again and again. Finally spent, the man drops the dead boy next to his sister, their bloody bodies mangled and entwined in a gruesome embrace. The screams outside escalate and the men leave the house. Severus follows.

The parents have been bound in ropes and are being pulled along the street behind a horse-drawn cart. The woman falls and she is not picked up. Her body is dragged along the cobblestones, and passersby laugh at and kick her. The man...her husband...is helpless, and his eyes are wild with panic. They ascend the Tower Bridge. The mob, which has grown large along this terrible journey, lifts the woman and tie stones around her waist. They do the same to the man. As they do this, they spit at them and curse them and attack them with fists, stones, and clubs.

"Thou art Devils! Magical Demons! Bringers of Death!"

With a cry from the crowd, the two are lifted into the air, and for a brief moment, Severus sees a look of love pass between the battered couple. He sees her look into his own eyes. Then they are tossed, like refuse, into the water of the Thames. Severus feels the water envelop him, and his lungs nearly burst.

"We will always remember," voices intone.

Avery has finished his Telling, and Severus blinks, drawn back into the drawing room. His heart is pounding, his breathing ragged, and his body is shaking. He can tell, even without looking, that the others are the same. There is only a moment's pause before a man named Rookwood takes up the Telling. Once more, Severus is flung into another story of betrayal, murder, persecution. And with each Telling, he lives them all. Their panic, their fear, their horror become his. The tears cannot be stopped. His own body is wracked with the pain felt by the ancestors of the Tellers. They will go into hiding to protect themselves. They will separate from the world of the Muggles. But, they will always remember the perfidy of the non-magical folk...the Muggles...against their people. The injustices that must be avenged.

Severus cannot tell how much time has passed, but he registers that there is silence in the room. And in that silence, he reflects on things he has pushed aside for a long, long time. His father. His mother. His childhood. The door that has held them shut for so long slowly creeps open, and memories pour into his mind, feelings into his heart; they cannot be held back. The words pour out. His own Telling. Severus hears his voice speak the words, but his mind has taken him back to that house, those rooms. That pain. He is small as he tells of his father's rage against the injustice at the hands of those who hurt him, who caused his family to fall into ruin. He tells of his father...a Muggle...and his father's hatred of his mother and all things magical. He tells of the beatings...his mother's, his own. His pain pours forth, and his furious anger at this Muggle...this Monster...who, he believes, caused his mother's death. He shares his resentment that a life of joy in being magical, his life, was stolen from him, turned into a life filled with shame, hatred and fury. And loneliness.

Severus is finished. "We will always remember," they all intone.

The elders rise, another goblet in their hands. Malfoy walks up to Severus, who is too weak to stand. Malfoy gives him the cup and Severus drinks. Malfoy drinks as well. The liquid works quickly, and Severus feels his body revive; the physical effects of the Telling recede, but the emotional impact continues to resonate deeply.

The door to the drawing room is opened, and the boys file out. Severus looks at the others, who are clearly as affected as he is. They share a haunted, yet defiant look, but they do not talk to one another. Severus hears, in the distance, the bright noise of the party. The others hear it as well and, one by one, make their way back to the ballroom. Severus follows them into the entrance hall, but instead of continuing into the ballroom, he makes his way up the grand staircase and escapes into the quiet of his room. Entering, he lights the wall sconces and reaches for the comfort of a large armchair. He forces himself to breathe deeply, to quiet the adrenaline still pumping through his body. Slowly, Severus realises that something important has happened. Something that has touched him deeply. It comes to him that he's been given a gift, and he realises that he's had precious few gifts in his life. It's a gift of inclusion. Of acceptance. Of belonging. Unbidden, and without shame, tears begin to fall. He is crying for all that has been lost and for all that may be gained. For a future that might be his.

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Revulsion and Revelation: April 1976 – Sixth Year

Chapter 9 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the

puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Revulsion and Revelation: April 1976 Sixth Year

"Chin." Lily conjured a napkin and handed it to Remus.

"Thanks, Mum." He took it from her and caught the dribbling juice oozing from his apple.

"How have you all managed without me?" Lily chided with a grin. "Sometimes I feel like Wendy taking care of the Lost Boys."

"Mph?" Remus asked quizzically, his mouth full of more apple.

Lily smiled and shook her head. "Muggle book for children."

It was an early, bright spring day and Lily and Remus were taking lunch out by the lake. Whenever the weather permitted, they spent lunch there together on the day of Remus' monthly transformation; Lily wanted to make sure Remus ate enough before he slipped away to the Shrieking Shack to... change. Thinking about it, she shivered in spite the warmth of the sun overhead. The horror of what Remus had to face never lessened in her imagination. Worse, she knew that, for Remus, the *real* horror of it never lessened for him either.

Lily's relationship with the 'Marauders' had clearly shifted since their Christmas Eve adventure on the Astronomy Tower. By some unspoken agreement, she was now included in the unique friendship that bound Sirius, James, Peter and Remus. And, to her surprise, she enjoyed being with them very much. With Sirius, she relished the challenge of matching his verbal sparring skill as much as she'd enjoyed their Transfiguration Duel. She had finally found acceptance in his eyes and was touched to be included in his chivalrous mandate to always protect his 'true' friends. Peter came to her frequently for advice and opinions. He knew Lily, unlike Sirius, wouldn't make fun of him when he needed help with something, and she was glad to oblige. Of course, with Remus...well, they'd been close friends since their second year, and this friendship had only deepened over time.

And James.

She felt a tightening in her chest when she thought about James. Even though she knew how he still felt about her, she'd been reluctant to take up from where they had left off that day in Hogsmeade. However, the fact that he now found himself in Lily's company more often seemed to keep his spirits high and his always-optimistic hopefulness alive.

She wasn't sure why she continued to hold herself at arms length from James. In quiet moments, when she was being honest with herself and forced her thinking brain to sod off, she knew she did have feelings for him. Yet, something deep inside had been deeply shaken: she had allowed herself to be vulnerable. Oh, it was easy enough to open her Empathic skills to connect to someone *else's* feelings, but letting herself open to others...that was different. Too risky. And when she *had* let her guard down and opened up to James... well, the memory of that pain still lingered. So, she had shut down the connection between them. Despite the resolution they established on the Astronomy Tower, deep inside the wariness remained. She didn't trust her heart to get it right. Not yet.

So, in the new year, she'd been adopted as the female mascot-cheerleader-advisor-friend to their merry band of Marauders. And while she had little real influence on the boys' continuing efforts to wreak as much havoc as possible on the denizens and property of Hogwarts, they did, on occasion, take some of her advice. This was fortunate in that it had, on more than one occasion, managed to prevent their permanent expulsion from school.

Remus finished his lunch and vanished its remnants with his wand.

"Are you sure you've had enough?" Lily asked.

"If I ate any more I'd never be able to squeeze through the tunnel," Remus said, patting his stomach, and burped. "Oh, and thanks for rescuing Sirius from Filch. I hate it when he mucks up before the Moon and lands in detention." Remus' brows knit together in a scowl.

Remus had come to rely on his friends...in their Animagus forms...to be with him during his transformations in that wreck of a building on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. Especially Sirius. The large, black dog seemed to help subdue him the most, relieving the worst of the pain.

"He's not out of it, it's just been postponed," Lily said with a resigned sigh, accepting the reality that where Sirius went, trouble followed. "I was lucky to convince Filch that making Sirius clean the Gryffindor common room over the weekend...*without* magic...would be severe enough punishment. Filch must've been in a good mood."

"Maybe Mrs. Norris found him some juicy rats for a nice rodent pie," said Remus with a smirk.

"Or managed to catch a snog with Madam Pince in the Restricted Section," Lily whispered in Remus' ear.

Remus winced. "Eww... Lily! That is NOT an image I want in my head!"

She laughed and added reassuringly, "In any case, Sirius will be there for you tonight." Lily saw Remus' smile suddenly descend into a frown as his gaze shifted towards the school entrance. She turned to see Severus emerge with some other sixth-years that had finished with lunch and were coming outside to enjoy the mild afternoon during their free period. Lily turned back to Remus. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Remus averted his gaze, looking back towards the lake.

"Remus. You know me better than that. What's happened between you and Severus? Has he done something to you?"

Remus glanced sideways at Lily. "I thought you could read feelings, not minds."

"I'm not reading minds. I'm just not dense. C'mon, Remus...what is it?"

Remus absentmindedly began to pick at the grass. "I'm not sure, exactly." Remus yanked a handful of grass out of the ground and threw it at the lake.

"What do you *think* it is? And whatever it is, it's not the lawn's fault, Remus."

"Sorry." Remus brushed the dirt from his hands onto his robes. "Peter told me that Regulus told him that Snape has been trying to find out where I... go off to. He's seen me leave the school with Madam Pomfrey."

Lily inhaled sharply. "How how often?"

Remus shook his head and pushed the hair out of his eyes. "Don't know. Maybe just once...or twice. But he's curious all the same."

"I'm sure he doesn't know that that..." Lily paused, her certainty wavering, frightened for Remus.

"That I'm a werewolf?" He shook his head again. "No. I don't think so. Not yet, anyway."

"Maybe you should tell Professor Dumbledore?"

"Tell him what?" Remus asked with more than a little bitterness. "Snape hasn't actually done anything. Besides, maybe Reggie is just trying to wind up Peter, and he's made it all up." Remus sighed, and Lily felt his anguish wash over her. She scooted over to him and took his hand. Remus pulled it away from her as if burned and scrambled to his feet.

"I'm all right, Lily."

She raised her eyebrows into a question.

"Fine. I'm not all right. But there's nothing to be done about it in any case, so let's drop it." Remus picked up his satchel. "I'm going off to the library. Thanks for lunch, Lily. See you later."

She watched him walk along the lake, head down, and disappear into the school. She had stupidly forgotten that Remus didn't like her to touch him. Especially so close to the full moon.

Making her own way back to the castle, Lily saw Severus sitting in his favourite spot beneath the beechwood tree, reading. She fought the urge to lay into him about why he'd been spying on Remus, to mind his own business, and why had he been acting so *strange* since the holidays anyway? She sighed, knowing *that* would be a fruitless conversation, if attempted. It had been awkward trying to have any sort of a normal conversation with Severus lately, let alone one where he'd just shut down if he felt attacked.

He had returned to school from the holiday break seeming somehow... different. His clothes were suddenly nicer than the ones he'd had before, and she wondered where they had come from. His manner towards her, while still cordial and friendly...well, as friendly as Severus ever was...did seem more restrained than usual. She was curious and had tried talking with him about his holidays, but all he said was that he'd been with friends and refused to say more. When she'd mentioned his strange behaviour to Annette and Helene, they'd merely rolled their eyes.

"*He's always strange*," Helene had said. "*I don't see any difference! Well, maybe his hair seems nicer.*"

"*Lily, think about it*," Annette had added. "*You're hanging about more with Sirius and James. How do you think Snape feels about you chumming it up with his biggest enemies? You're crazy if you think you can still be friends with him!*"

But Lily was not one to be easily discouraged. As she passed Severus, she called to him and waved. He looked up with his usual inscrutable expression, gave her the briefest of nods, and returned to his book.

Severus heard someone call his name, and he looked up to see Lily waving at him. He jerked his head in a semblance of a nod and quickly retreated back to his book, but found he was now unable to take in the words.

He'd seen her with Lupin down by the lake and wondered if she knew what Lupin was up to.

Hmph. Most likely, he thought. *She's been thick as thieves with them since Christmas*. Severus noticed his hands were clenching his book tightly, and he forced his grip to relax. He wondered what could have occurred during the holidays to bring about this new... relationship between Li *Evans* and those imbecilic morons.

It didn't matter. He had been right to be wary of her, since that day she'd been with Potter in Hogsmeade. They were all trouble. He'd been watching them all, though. He was good at watching and waiting. Sooner or later, they'd slip up, and he'd be the one to expose them, finally proving to everyone what they really were: hateful and dangerous. Maybe then, finally, the Old Fool would award them the punishment his precious Gryffindors always seemed to unfairly evade.

Looking back to his book, he saw the words begin to take shape again and turned his attention to them.

It was Peter's job to make sure they got out of the castle undetected to meet up with Moony before the full moon rose. They huddled over the Map in the Gryffindor common room to plot their escape route in a way that avoided prefects, caretakers, or teachers.

The four of them had created the Map in their fifth year, completing it just as Peter finally achieved his successful Animagus transformation. The Marauder's Map was a brilliantly executed piece of charm work, one they were all rightfully proud of. Despite the skill and brilliance involved, it was true to Marauder form, that both of these amazing, magical achievements, if discovered, could get them expelled, or worse: the Map was a serious violation of school privacy, and to be caught as an unregistered Animagus could land them in prison.

"Filch is prowling around the third floor on the east end, so we'll take the stairs on the opposite side," Peter said, tracing his fingers over the Map as Sirius and James looked over his shoulder.

"Yeah, but where's Mrs. Norris?" James asked.

Peter shook his head. "The Map only shows people, not animals. But she can't be that far away from him. He always pops up the moment she screeches."

"I heard a rumour that Mrs. Norris is actually Filch's wife," James commented.

Sirius howled, his hysterical laughter causing everyone in the common room to stop and stare.

As Sirius' laughter diminished and he wiped his eyes with his sleeve, James continued as if giving the rumour some serious thought. "Supposedly she's an Animagus, and someone put a spell on her so she can't transform back. That's why Filch is so nasty...well, one of the reasons."

They all paused to mull over the idea of being stuck in one's Animagus form.

"Well," Sirius mused, "wife or not, if that mangy hairball springs up on us, I'll just hex her. Maybe a good Sticking Charm," Sirius mused. "Or maybe shave her bald."

"You'll ignore her, Padfoot," Peter admonished. "What we're doing is risky enough, thank you."

Sirius sighed and flopped onto a chair with a dismissive wave towards Peter. "You're such a killjoy, Wormtail."

Peter felt his face grow hot but he did not respond. He folded the Map and stowed it in the back pocket of his trousers. "Right. We're set then. Ready, Prongs?" he asked James, deliberately ignoring Sirius.

James nodded, then stopped and looked over his shoulder. Peter saw him glance at Lily, who was sitting at her usual place by the fire, engrossed in her reading.

"Um... could the two of you go on ahead?" James asked lightly. "I'll follow in just a bit and meet you at the Shack. I have to talk to Lily for a moment, and I can use my Invisibility Cloak to get through the castle undetected."

James' Animagus was a stag, too large an animal to be to use the secret tunnel that led to the Shack. Once they had all transformed, Prongs would head off around the forest on his own and meet them there.

Sirius pulled a face, clearly put out. "But, James...we always transform together! Can't it wait?"

James looked torn. He hated to disappoint Sirius, but it was Lily....

"Just this once, Padfoot. Promise!"

Sirius scowled. It was still hard for him to accept that, if pushed, James would always put Lily first. But he had learned...the hard way...not to push it.

"Don't worry; I'll be there in time!" James reassured his friend.

"Fine." Sirius' lanky form thrust itself out of the chair. "Come on, Wormtail." Sirius strode out of the common room without looking back.

Peter struggled to contain his impatience and anger with Sirius, something, he noted, that seemed to happen with increasing frequency. He glared at the door where Sirius had just left and then turned back to James. "Don't worry, Prongs. You go ahead and talk to Lily. We'll see you later."

James smiled and playfully punched Peter in the arm. "Thanks, Wormtail! Tell Moony not to worry, Prongs will be at his side, in full glory!" Peter smiled as he watched James amble over to Lily. He was ruffling his already mussed hair and had the usual stupid grin plastered on his face.

Peter had been jealous of Lily, but he saw how happy James was when she was nearby. Peter would do whatever made James happy. That's what best friends did for each other. Sirius could go bugger himself, he thought with a grimace. Unbidden, Reggie Black's words floated into his mind:

"If any of my 'friends' treated me the way Sirius treats you, they'd be hexed and cursed 'til the other side of Monday. He's got it in for you. If I were you, I'd watch your step."

He smiled ruefully at the memory. Reggie was right. Peter would step very carefully. He shrugged on his robes and left the common room to catch up with Sirius.

Just before they reached the main floor, Peter pulled out the Map for a final check. He froze.

"What is it?" Sirius hissed in a whisper.

Peter quickly folded the parchment and stowed it away. "I thought I saw one of the Professors moving this way. False alarm," Peter said quickly. "We're all clear."

They moved as quietly as they could out the main door, careful to close it behind them so that it wouldn't make a noise.

They began their walk down the path that would lead them to the Whomping Willow. Peter swept his eyes back and forth on either side of the path as if looking for something.

"Have you heard that Snape's been nosing about after Remus?" Peter asked lightly.

Sirius bared his teeth into the usual sneer that Snape's name seemed to evoke every time it was mentioned. "Yeah, I've heard. That foul bastard needs to keep his ugly nose out of where it doesn't belong." Peter noted that Sirius wasn't bothering to keep his voice down but Peter didn't try to quiet him.

The path wound downwards, becoming steeper, and Sirius kicked a few rocks out of the way, which clicked as they descended down the hill.

"Can you imagine if Snape were to find his way into the tunnel on one of our nights?" asked Peter.

At this, Sirius laughed. "Oh, what a sight that would be!"

They were just within reach of the great, menacing tree.

"But what do you think would happen if he did find out?" asked Peter.

"Probably try to get us expelled. His lifelong dream," Sirius replied, rolling his eyes.

"Then I have to thank you for making my dreams come true, Black," a voice hissed behind them.

Peter and Sirius whipped around to see Snape with a look of gleeful hatred in his eyes and a steady wand in his hand, pointed at them both.

Peter and Sirius reached for their own wands, but they were too late.

"Expelliarmus!"

Both their wands flew from their fingertips and landed easily in Snape's hands. Sirius yelled in a rage and, moved by some feral instinct, threw himself bodily at Snape, who flicked his wand. A blasting spell sent Sirius flying backwards, who landed roughly and skid to a stop in a daze. Peter went to help him up.

"What do you want, Snivellus?" Sirius spat, shaking off the spell.

"You know the answer to that. As you said, I'd like to get you expelled. All of you." Snape looked around. "But where are your friends? Only two against one this time? Why, the odds are almost on my side."

"None of your business, Snape," Peter huffed. "You're out of bounds just as much as we are, so there's no advantage to you!"

"True," Snape responded with a look that Peter thought must be his version of a smile. "Not yet. But you're going to lead me to that 'tunnel' where, I assume, you were heading to join your friend Lupin. I'll wager that Potter is already there with him." He flicked his wand at them. "And I'm going with you to win that wager. Lead on."

Behind him, Peter heard a grunt, saw a good-size stone fly through the air past his head, and heard a blunts*mack!* where the stone successfully made contact with the side of Snape's head. In a rush of motion, Snape dropped his wand to grab his head where blood had started to flow. Sirius rushed at him again and tackled him to the ground, grabbing his wand and holding it at Snape's throat.

Sirius' hatred for Snape was thick and palpable. "Well, if I'm going to be expelled, it should at least be for a good reason. I can think of some really nasty ones just about now."

Snape tried to push Sirius off, but Sirius held fast.

"How about a rearrangement of your face? Your nose might be better removed and stuck up some place where it would stay out of other people's business. Or how about I just kill you now and save you from your own miserable excuse of a life?"

Seeing that *look* in Sirius' eyes, Peter thought he might just do it. "Sirius! No!" He rushed to pull Sirius off of Snape. After a terrible, tension-filled moment, Sirius got up, stepped back, and kicked Snape's wand back to him. It was almost a dare.

Snape pulled out a handkerchief and held it to his forehead. "Well, I think being attacked with an intent to kill might be a worthy enough reason to get you expelled," Snape threatened, glaring at Sirius.

With a high-pitched laugh, Sirius stepped closer to Snape, who did not retreat. "Do you really want to get into that tunnel, Snape?"

"Sirius! No!" Peter was truly horrified.

I didn't mean for this to happen...I didn't think he'd really do it!

Peter grabbed his arm to pull him away, but Sirius threw him off, keeping his eyes on Snape. Snape kept his wand out, his eyes clouding over with wariness, but giving away nothing.

"Oh, but if you crawl into the dirty tunnel, you might muss up your nice new robes!" Sirius mocked, his anger rising.

Peter could only step back and watch Sirius' fury escalate and take over as Snape, although shaking in his own hatred, refused to react to Sirius' taunting. Sirius was a runaway train about to crash. It was out of his hands. Only James might be able to stop him, but James wasn't here.

"Or maybe you're just a *coward*, Snape. A snivelling, cowardly Slytherin who likes to dress up and pretend that he's equal to his betters. You want to go into the tunnel, Snape? Better think about it. It might be a risk. It might be dangerous. It might take *courage* to decide to go. Oh... wait. That would mean you'd be a Gryffindor. Which you're *not*!"

Snape was still, unmoving, like a block of dark granite.

Sirius grinned like he'd just won a prize. "All right, Snape. Maybe you want to practice being brave, to see what it feels like...to see if you've got what it takes to be a *real* man." Peter was shaking as he watched Sirius scan the ground and pick up a broken branch and transfigure it to twice its length.

"Sirius... no..." Peter said weakly. Sirius ignored him.

"It's brilliantly simple, actually. You see that big knot at the base of the tree?" Sirius pointed, enjoying this 'lesson.' He poked at it with the stick and the waving branches of the Whomping Willow suddenly froze. Sirius pointed to the base of the tree. "There's the entrance to the tunnel!" A dark hole was suddenly visible.

Peter looked at Sirius, aghast, and then turned to Snape, frantic. "No, Snape! Don't do it!"

Snape was breathing heavily and snarled at Peter. "Why? Why shouldn't I do it?"

"Tell him, Peter!" said Sirius, laughing hysterically. "Tell him why he shouldn't do it!"

Peter gasped. He looked up at the darkened sky. The moon would rise soon. "Sirius! I... No! I'd never! I... couldn't!"

The branches of the Willow began to sway again, revived from its momentary spell and sensing danger nearby.

Suddenly, Sirius' laughter died as if strangled, and Peter noticed him visibly pale and his body began to shake. His voice, when he spoke next, was barely a whisper. "Sorry, Snape! I guess you'll just have to find out on your own!"

Without another word, Sirius ran off in the direction of the Groundskeeper's hut. Peter looked back at Snape, who watched the figure flee into the night.

"Don't go, Snape," Peter said again, pleading. Without another word, terrified, Peter ran off after Sirius.

Peter found him hunched over the vegetable patch, breathing heavily. Peter was shaking as badly as Sirius, fear keening in his chest.

"I - I've really mucked it up badly this time, eh, Wormtail?" Sirius panted.

Peter needed Sirius to snap out of it. He balled up his fist and punched his arm so hard that Sirius fell over, a look of surprise in his face. "Sirius...we've got to *do* something!" Peter squeaked, his voice a full octave higher in his panic. "What if he really goes into the tunnel?"

Sirius held his head, his fingers taut and his eyes shut tight. "Maybe he won't go," he said with little conviction. "Not if I so obviously showed him how to do it. Maybe he'll think it's a trap."

"SIRIUS!" Peter shrieked, practically hyperventilating. "It's not only Snape, you idiot! Think about Remus! We have to DO SOMETHING!"

Upon hearing Remus' name, Sirius shot up to his feet, suddenly alert. "I'm going. To Moony. I'll be able to hold him off...in case..." Sirius started to pace, kicking the dust up with his feet. "Let's see the Map." Peter took it out and unfolded it.

Snape was still standing by the Willow. They allowed themselves a small sigh of both relief and hope to see the barely moving dot labelled '*Severus Snape*'. "James is still in the common room," Sirius observed. "Good. Peter, you go find him and tell him to get to the Shack. You can ride with him; it'll be faster. We'll pull Moony out of there and everything will be fine." Sirius stopped and looked at Peter. "Don't don't mention anything about...you know...to James...just now. Not yet. I'm sure we'll have a laugh over it with him tomorrow, eh?" Sirius said weakly.

"Sure, Padfoot," Peter replied, not certain at all. "You should get going."

"Right." Without another word, Sirius closed his eyes and, in a blur, transformed into the shape of a large, black dog. He barked at Peter, then spun around and vanished into the darkness. Peter, his head pounding, every nerve pulled taut, pocketed the Map and took off at a run towards the castle.

Severus was pacing in long, angry strides. He was buffeted by alternating hits of fury, humiliation, confusion...and excitement. He *had* discovered something important tonight; that tunnel was *real*. It led to a place where he knew he could find proof that Black and his gang were doing *something*...reprehensible. Certainly illegal. This is what he'd followed them for; what he'd been waiting for. And yet...

Why had Black been so willing to show it to him? It was too easy. It was more than likely some kind of trap. It was too obvious. But... Pettigrew had been afraid of something. And he'd noticed that, at the end, Black had seemed to realise he'd gone too far, done something *wrong*. He'd looked... scared! So maybe there was something there that they didn't want him to find, or see.

Severus stopped and looked about to see if Black and Pettigrew were nearby, to sense if he was being watched. The only sounds were those of the menacing, whipping sounds of the Willow branches, and the distant hooting of owls.

If they have something planned, it can't be worse than anything else they've concocted to torture me. I'm not a coward. Yes, Black, this is definitely worth the risk!

Severus felt the pulse in his neck beating like a raging drum. Despite the coolness of the evening air, he felt his skin prickling with heat. "Lumos." Casting about with his wand, the dim light fell upon the discarded stick that Black had transfigured. He picked it up and turned to face the Whomping Willow.

By the time Peter reached the Gryffindor common room on the seventh floor, he was slick with sweat and gasping in pain at the stitch in his side. He could barely utter the password.

"Gillyweed," he croaked.

The Fat Lady looked at him with concern. "Are you sure you don't need to see the Matron?"

"LET ME IN!" Peter shrieked.

"No need to scream, young man! I was just trying to be helpful," the Fat Lady simpered. The painting swung open.

Peter scrambled into the common room looking around wildly for James. He wasn't there. Peter ran up to the dormitory. James wasn't there either. He opened up the Map and saw that James was on the staircase going towards the sixth floor, so he must have left. Peter had just missed him.

Bloody hell!

Peter sat on his bed for a moment to catch his breath and, watching the tiny dot of James move on the Map, an idea came to him. A brilliant idea. One that would prove to James that he was the better friend.

It had taken Lily a while to shove James off so she could get back to her reading. He said he'd wanted her help with his Charms homework, but Lily knew it was only an excuse to talk with her. Finally, sitting by the fire, Lily was deep into her Arithmancy text, struggling to make sense of Horran's Third Principle, when a shrill voice by her ear made her jump and scream.

"LILY! I NEED YOUR HELP!"

Lily clapped her hand to her chest.

"You can't sneak up on people like that, Peter!"

Peter grabbed Lily's hand, pulled her to her feet, and dragged her towards the common room door. "No time! Come quickly!"

Peter looked panicked and pale. She grabbed her robes and followed him out of the common room with concern. Once outside, he pulled her into a darkened niche in the corridor.

"What's wrong, Peter? What's happened?" His anxiety started to flow through her.

In a rush of words, Peter told her all that had happened between Sirius and Severus. As he told the story, Lily felt her blood run cold. Then her heart froze as she understood the horrible implications of what had happened.

"Where is he now?" Lily asked in a harsh whisper.

"Who?"

"Severus! Look on your Map!"

Peter pulled out the Map and they both looked. Peter ran his finger across the parchment.

"He's gone," Peter said in a small voice. Lily gasped, instantly terrified at the image in her mind of what Severus faced on the other side of the tunnel.

Oh, Remus!

Peter looked at her with fierce determination. "Lily, you need to find James. Now!" Peter pointed at the Map. "Look, James is just getting to the first floor...you can catch him. He'll go here," he pointed to a spot near the Willow, "to transform. He has to get Snape out of there!"

Lily looked confused. "But how?"

Peter started to pull Lily towards the staircase. "He'll know how! Just tell him that Sirius showed Snape how to get into the tunnel and he's gone in...he's on his way to the Shack! James will know what to do." Peter paused and looked embarrassed. "I I'd have gone in after him myself, but James is much stronger than I am."

Peter was growing frantic, pulling at his hair.

"Um... and, I I need for you to get James, because...well...he'll be mad that I snitched on Sirius. Don't tell James that I told you, okay?"

Lily wondered for the millionth time why boys were so stupid about these things. She took his hand. "It was very brave of you to do this, Peter. Don't worry about James," she said, giving him a brief hug before turning to fly down the stairs.

She didn't see the small, black rat behind her, following at her heels.

The passageway of the tunnel was low and cramped. Severus had to bend over at an awkward angle to move forward, his wand illuminating the way. He moved slowly, with caution. He wasn't going to be caught by surprise. A fine dust kicked up with every step he took.

Well, Black was right about one thing: I will be filthy by the time I get out of here.

He stepped carefully as the passageway dipped lower. Despite his care however, his feet suddenly gave way under him as he slid on a pebble, and he fell forward, scraping his face. Severus swore as he spat out the dirt and pulled out his already bloodstained handkerchief to test the damage. The wound stung more than bled. It didn't matter. It only added fire to his zeal to punish Black.

I'll see him expelled. He'll have no home. No friends. He deserves even worse. He should be damned for all eternity!

Severus picked himself up, ignoring the pain in his leg and his head and continued his slow, deliberate, cramped march forward. He noted that the tunnel had a strong animal smell. Not surprising, he thought, considering it's location under the Forbidden Forest. Calculating the angle and direction of the passageway, Severus estimated that he was heading towards Hogsmeade and wondered what he'd find them all doing on the other side of the tunnel.

"James!"

Lily caught up with him on the path towards the Willow, panting heavily and running so quickly that the momentum threw her into James' arms, which held her fast.

"Heavens, Lily! What's wrong?"

"Severus tunnel Remus Sirius help him!" The words tumbled out between her gasps for air.

"Slow down, luv," James said. "Help who?"

Lily stepped back and grabbed him by the front of his robes. "Peter found me and said that Sirius showed Severus how to get into the tunnel...Severus is in it now...going towards the Shack! You've got to go get him out of there!"

James stepped back, his face a study in shock. "He wouldn't do that! Why why would Padfoot do that?"

"I don't know!" Lily wailed as tears began to fall. "But he did, and now your friend and mine are in terrible, terrible danger, James! Please! GO NOW!"

James touched her face gently, then turned and ran towards the Willow. She saw him pick up an extra-long branch and did something with it to calm the tree. When it stopped thrashing, James dove under the tree and disappeared.

Lily, her body wracked with fear, fell clumsily to the ground. She pulled her legs up close and wrapped her arms around them, holding herself tight. Her eyes were glued to the base of the Whomping Willow, which blurred in and out of focus through her tears.

"It will be all right. James will get him out. Everything will be all right," she chanted in a whispered prayer. Over and over again.

Severus wasn't sure how long he'd been walking. His legs were burning and his back screamed in protest at being bent over for so long; keeping track of time was difficult. He stopped for a moment and sat, allowing himself a brief rest. It couldn't be much farther, he thought, but he wanted to make sure his body wouldn't betray him when he needed it most.

There was a scraping noise ahead, and Severus snapped his head towards it. He must be close to the exit. A rush of adrenaline heightened his senses. He sniffed. The animal scent...no...scents were stronger at this end.

Severus rose and, more cautiously than before, began to move forward. The tunnel turned sharply to the right and, at the end of the long passageway in front of him, Severus saw a light emanating from the roof of the tunnel. Finally! Then, just as Severus began to step towards it, he felt the wind forcefully knocked out of him as he was tackled violently from behind, and he lost his grip on his wand. He heaved himself up, throwing his attacker off, and turned to see James Potter panting, lying on the floor of the tunnel.

"You've got to get out of here, Snape! Now! Back towards the school!"

Severus laughed. "Are you mad? After I've come all this way? How inhospitable of you, Potter! I thought you'd at least offer me some tea," he snarled.

"This is not a joke, Snape." James tore at his formerly black hair, now covered with grey dust. "It's it's dangerous! You'll be killed!" Severus saw Potter scramble in the dirt. "Here's your wand." Severus caught it as Potter threw it at him. "We're *both* in danger...now let's go!"

Suddenly, a terrible howl echoed through the tunnel, punctuating James' warning. Severus felt his heart leap to his throat and saw Potter's terrified face. But Severus didn't move. There was something wrong, something confusing; he just needed a moment to sort it all out.

Potter grabbed at Severus' robes and began to pull him in the opposite direction as the howl erupted again, louder than before. At the sound, both boys turned back to see a pair of shining, yellow eyes staring at them hungrily from the end of the tunnel. Snape lifted his wand to cast a spell, but James grabbed his arm. The eyes started to run towards them.

"SNAPE! RUN! NOW!" They ran. Blindly, moving fast despite the need to crouch. Their hearts and feet pounding so loud that neither of them heard the growl and yelp of a second animal behind them. The rush of terror coursing through their bodies propelled them forward as they fled from death rushing at their heels.

Lily was on her feet the moment she saw an arm reach out of the tunnel entrance and tap the base of the tree. As its limbs quieted, James and Severus pushed themselves up and out of the tunnel and stumbled past the tree's reach before collapsing and gasping for air.

"Severus! James!" Lily yelled, running towards them, her tears released anew.

Severus forced himself to his feet, disentangling himself from James. He stepped back and was shocked as Lily threw herself into his arms. The sweetness of her smell and the softness of her hair under his hands after the roughness of the wretched tunnel assaulted him.

"Thank Heavens, Severus! I was so worried! Are you all right? Your face is covered with blood!" She reached up to touch him, but Severus pushed her aside roughly.

"What what are *you doing here*? I don't LEAVE ME ALONE!" he screamed at Lily. She stepped away from him, stunned into silence. Severus turned to Potter, seething. "That that THING in there! It was a werewolf! You wouldn't let me stun it because you knew it wouldn't work! You've been hiding this because..." Severus stopped, and Lily saw, to her dismay, the pieces of the puzzle click together in his mind.

"Lupin," he said softly. "It's Lupin! He's a werewolf!" Severus started to laugh, a high and painful laugh. "Oh, that was a masterful prank, Potter. You've all outdone yourselves this time!"

His laugh ripped through Lily's body like a slicing hex.

James was on his feet and in Severus' face in an instant. "This was NOT a prank! Sirius would never put Remus in that kind of danger!"

Severus' rage erupted. "PUT REMUS IN DANGER?! A blood-hungry werewolf in DANGER? Oh, no, that would never do! But killing ME, well THAT would be perfectly acceptable! And to top it off, to make it bloody, infuriatingly worse, you get to play the HERO!" Severus spat, his wand emitting dangerous sparks. In the face of his fury, James did not back away, but neither did he speak.

"Severus," said Lily, confused herself as to what had transpired but knowing what James had just risked, "we don't know yet why Sirius did...what he did...but James just *saved your life*!"

Severus backed away from James as if stricken. "You should have let me die," he hissed. "I'd rather have my throat ripped open by a demon than have to owe a Life Debt to you. I'll *never* forgive you for that, Potter. Never."

Severus turned to Lily with a look of deepest loathing and his voice was unnaturally calm, deep and menacing. "And your promises, Evans, are worth *nothing*." Then he turned away from them both and stumbled back towards the castle.

James sank to the ground, arms folded around his stomach as if in pain, and moaned softly. "What could I say? I don't understand how what happened~~W~~hy?"

Lily knew he was speaking to himself, torn inside by questions that had no answers. She knelt in front of him and gently touched his shoulder. She had a thousand questions of her own, but until they could speak to Sirius... well, the words would have to wait. She knew that James would want to go to Remus, but he couldn't go in this state.

"Lily." Looking up, his eyes were filled with tears. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. She held him tightly and, in her embrace, his body pulsed with sobs, releasing the fear and anger and the despair over the damage friends could inflict on each other. Lily held him fast, like an anchor.

Taking his hand, Lily slowly and gently stroked his Quidditch-toughened fingers, his palm, his wrist. She noticed the curve of his nails, the dirt that covered his hand, the calluses on his fingertips, the scrapes on his palm. In response to her rhythmic touch, James' breathing slowed.

James pushed the hair away from her face and whispered in her ear, "I was so scared, Lily." He stroked the length of her hair, down her back. "So scared scared of my own *friend*." She felt him shudder.

Lily felt new tears spring to her eyes as his fear washed through her. "Remus will be safe. Severus is safe. You are safe. That's what matters." Resting her head on his shoulder, Lily felt his rapid but steady heart beat through the fabric of their robes. James inhaled deeply and, in the deep release of his breath, it caressed her face.

He pulled back suddenly, catching her in the web of his arms. "But its all different now, Lily." Lightly touching her face, his fingers slowly traced the path of her tears. "Before...it was fun, a lark. But tonight...what Remus is...it became... *real*."

Lily leaned into his touch, and in return, rested her palm on his cheek. His eyes were so dark, so haunted. "It *will* be different, James." She stroked his face, his hair. "But I don't think it's a bad sort of different. It's *always* been real for Remus. And now, his friends really, finally, understand how it is for him."

James took her hand from his face and cupped it as something precious and fragile. Then, closing his eyes, he kissed her palm, holding it to his lips for several heart-stopping seconds. In that simple connection, a burst of energy pulsed through Lily's hand, down her arm and filled her body with an intensity so deep that she gasped. James lowered her hand and met her eyes with a gaze that held no demand, no question. In his eyes, Lily saw a simple offering of his love. The power of it made her light-headed.

"You you probably need to go to them," Lily stuttered, coherent speech suddenly difficult. "Sirius needs you too, James. He'll want..."

James' fingers were at her lips.

"But I don't need Sirius right now, Lily," he said hoarsely.

She tasted his fingers pressed against her mouth. They were salty and dirty and rough.

"I need you, Lily. Just you."

She returned his gaze. And, holding his eyes, surprised at how easy it was to finally open her heart to his, she took his hand and lightly kissed his fingers, his palm, his wrists. James' breathing grew shallow and rapid.

She reached up to cradle his face, now flushed and warm. "I'm here, James. I'm here." She leaned forward to meet his lips, which opened to welcome her like a blessing.

The idea of Mrs. Norris being Filch's wife was respectfully borrowed from KazVL's wonderful, sadly unfinished fic, Falling Further In.

Endless thanks to my wonderful betas,celtmama and capella_black.

A Modicum of Fairness

Chapter 10 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

A Modicum of Fairness

...The Next Evening...

Lily

They sank down heavily on the dark oak bench outside the entrance to the Headmaster's office. Generations of Hogwarts students, called before the Headmaster for offences large and small, had sat on this bench and covered its surface with etchings and gouges, reflecting their state of anxiety.

Their interview with Dumbledore concluded, Lily and James sat in silence, holding hands, waiting and wondering and worrying about the fate that lay in store for Sirius and Peter, who were now upstairs before the Headmaster. Lily traced the carving of a name graffitied on the armrest. She doubted that any of the misdemeanours of students who'd come before them could possibly be worse than the one perpetrated by Sirius Black on the previous evening.

Remus had spent his usual day-after-transformation in the infirmary being treated by Madam Pomfrey. Sirius had gone into hiding, unwilling or unable to face his friends. Peter had tried to provide them with his version of events, but was unable to satisfactorily explain why Sirius had so recklessly jeopardised the lives of two of his fellow students.

"He'll be expelled. I know he'll be expelled. Bloody idiot," muttered James for about the hundredth time that day. He held his head in his hands, clutching his scalp.

Lily sighed and put her arm around his shoulders, but didn't contradict him. She'd heard James recount his version of the night's events to Dumbledore, reliving those moments of terror in the tunnel with Severus. It was horrible. Dumbledore looked ancient as he listened to the story being told. As hard as it was for her to manage the intensity of emotions swirling around her, she knew that it must have been equally terrible for Dumbledore, who was an Empathic himself.

Dumbledore had praised them both for their quick responses and, especially, James' unflinching bravery in saving Severus' life while risking his own. He'd awarded Gryffindor one hundred points each, and Lily thought grimly how entirely irrelevant House Points were under the circumstances.

James and Lily were snapped out of their reverie by the sounds of two pairs of feet...one shuffling and the other clicking. Professor McGonagall was leading Remus towards them and the Headmaster's Office.

Their Head of House put a protective arm around Remus and spoke softly. "Mr. Lupin, you wait here until the Headmaster calls for you." She turned to Lily with a nod.

"Come sit here, Remus," said Lily, scooting over to make room for him.

Remus sat without looking at either of them.

With another approving nod, Professor McGonagall gained entrance to the Headmaster's winding staircase, and the door closed behind her.

Lily shifted towards Remus, careful not to touch him. James turned as well.

"Moony... mate," said James gently. "All right?"

Remus looked more distraught than Lily had ever seen him. He hunched over his hands, which were grasping at each other in some unseen struggle. Finally, with a sharp intake of air, Remus chanced a glance at them.

"I'm I'm okay. The transformation was a bit hard until Sirius got there." He lapsed back into an anguished silence.

"Did you speak with Professor Dumbledore earlier, Remus?" Lily asked, willing herself not to cry at the sight of him.

"Yes. He came by the hospital wing this morning."

James looked confused. "So why d'you have to see him again?"

Remus shrugged. "I don't know."

"But none of this is your fault, Remus!"

"Of course it is."

Remus said this so softly that Lily almost missed it. James, hearing him clearly, stared at him in astonishment.

"THERE IS NO BLOODY WAY THIS IS YOUR FAULT!" James yelled, leaping up in frustration.

Remus flinched.

"James, please!" Lily hissed. James knelt down in front of Remus.

"I'm sorry, Remus, but how can you say that? You can't help what you are!"

Remus looked at his friend with a mixture of love and pain.

"None of this would have happened if I wasn't in school to begin with. Dumbledore made a mistake. I I don't belong here. It's too dangerous. I could..." Remus' voice hitched and tightened. "I could have killed you both! I couldn't live with myself if...I'm I'm so sorry!" At that, Remus dissolved into sobs. Both Lily and James wrapped their arms around him. Remus didn't resist as they held him tightly until his body stopped quaking and the sobs slowly receded.

Finally, Remus laid his head on Lily's shoulder, wiping his face with the sleeve of his robe. "Don't you see?" he whispered. "I've been fooling myself all this time. I needed to because it felt so wonderful to finally be almost... like everyone else. To be able to have friends. But what's the point of going to school if I'll never be able to work? If I can't use what I've learned? What's the point of having friends if they'll always be in danger?"

Lily was speechless and saw that James, who'd gone nearly white, was as well. How could she help her friend? What could she say? Despite the horrible unfairness of it all, despite how heart-wrenchingly wrong it was that such a wonderful, talented, gentle and loving boy had to stare into the face of his bleak future, it didn't change the fact that he was right. The wizarding world saw him as a Dark creature. As something less-than-human to be feared and controlled.

But Lily knew too well what determination in the heart of James Potter meant. And she saw it spark in his eyes.

"Remus Lupin!" James said intently. Remus looked up.

"You are my friend! It IS right that you are in school. You DO belong here! I'd be only half as good in school if it weren't for you. I need you, and I'm not afraid of you. Last night happened only because Sirius went off half-cocked, not because you are a werewolf. And you needn't worry about work after school. I'll I'll make sure that you can find something to do that's worthy of your talents!"

Remus forced a smile. "James, you know you can't promise that."

"My dad knows loads of people, Remus! He'll be able to help!"

"James, your father doesn't know I'm a werewolf, does he?"

James looked away. "Um, no. But..."

Remus sighed deeply. "It's all right, James. I'm grateful that you are my friend. Both of you. It helps, it really does."

James shook his head and slid back onto the bench next to Lily. "You can doubt me all you want, Moony, but we'll find a way, won't we, Lily?" he said with firm determination as he grasped her hand in his.

Remus sat back and looked at them curiously. "Has something happened between the two of you?"

Lily felt her face flush, and James grinned.

Remus broke into his first genuine smile of the day. "When?"

"Um, last night, after...." Lily started, suddenly self-conscious.

"That's brilliant!" said Remus, beaming.

"See, Remus," laughed James, "it is your fault that we came together...you scared her right into my arms," said James. "And we'll be forever grateful to you for it! Right, Evans?"

"I'm more than happy to give you the credit, Remus!" And she threw her arms around him and kissed him soundly on the cheek

Remus blushed furiously, but he smiled and hugged her in return.

Peter

"There is one final matter, Mr. Pettigrew. I'd like for you to hand me that interesting map you have in your pocket."

Peter, startled, glanced at Sirius who looked equally stunned. Professor McGonagall just looked bewildered. The Headmaster's expression, however, was clear: there would be no discussion.

"Y yes, sir," said Peter. His hands shaking, he withdrew the Marauder's Map from the inside of his robes and handed it to Professor Dumbledore. The Headmaster stored it in his own robes without a glance, maintaining the unrelenting glare that pinned the two boys to their seats.

"You'll both report tonight to start your detentions. Is this understood?"

"Yes, sir," replied Sirius and Peter in unison.

"You are dismissed." Dumbledore's expression did not change as the boys stood and turned out of the Headmaster's office. Indeed, the stern look of anger and disappointment had been solidly set on the old man's face for the entire hour they'd been taken to task for the disaster that occurred under last night's full moon.

"Minerva, I'd like a word before you go," they heard Dumbledore say, as they made their way down the spiral staircase.

As Peter descended from the Headmaster's office, he took several deep breaths to try and quell his rapidly beating heart. It had been, he was certain, the worst day of his life. The fact that no one had, in fact, been killed or expelled as a result of his taunting Sirius was a miracle. He didn't quite understand how Sirius had not been expelled, now that he thought about it, but he was so relieved that the worst had passed and his part in it had been overlooked, that he didn't give it a second thought.

Sirius stopped in his tracks as Lily, James and Remus looked up at him. Peter knew that Sirius had been avoiding them all day. He inwardly smirked, knowing that Sirius couldn't avoid them any longer.

There was a long silence. Finally, Lily stood up, walked to Sirius, and took his hand. He looked away, unable to meet her eyes.

"Sirius," she said evenly, "look at me."

There was never any point in denying Lily Evans, so Sirius looked.

"Good. Now, first: are you all right?" she asked.

"Never better!" he said, with more than a bit of sarcasm.

Lily raised an eyebrow, not amused.

"Fine. I'm not all right. I'm to blame for having one best friend nearly kill another one. How the bloody hell do you expect I'd be?"

Lily ignored his outburst. "Have you been expelled?"

Her blunt question took them all by surprise.

Sirius took a deep breath. "Um... no. I have detention with Kettleburn two nights a week for the remainder of term. Peter's with Filch one night a week for a month." Sirius bravely looked at James and Remus, who were both clearly stunned at this news.

Peter wondered whether they'd think this news was good or bad.

"I'm shocked as well, actually," said Sirius, who had never looked as hang-dogged as he did at that moment. "I was ready to be sent packing. I know I deserve to be tossed out. I've no idea why Dumbledore didn't just hex me right out of his tower window. He was certainly angry enough."

No one responded. Sirius shuffled his feet and combed his fingers through his hair, which was coming to look even more unkempt than James'. Peter stood against the wall, wanting to be out of the line of fire.

Strengthening his resolve, Sirius walked over to Remus, who did not look up. Lily sat down next to him, leaning protectively. James stood, his hands clenched into fists, and Peter held his breath.

"Remus..." Sirius began, "I don't have any excuses for what I did last night. Snape was there...you know how we hate each other. We said things, it got out of hand and I... I guess I must have lost my mind."

Remus still would not look up, and Sirius became more agitated. James looked as if he was ready to kill someone.

A brief thought...a hope?...flared in Peter's mind, that this might be the proverbial last straw that ended James' friendship with Sirius.

"I don't expect any of you to forgive me," Sirius muttered, eyes cast down. "All I can say is that I'm truly sorry...especially to you, Remus and you, James."

It was silent in the corridor and no one moved except for Lily, who looked from Remus to Sirius to James, waiting for someone to say something. When no words came, Sirius shrugged and began to walk off towards Gryffindor tower.

"Wait."

Sirius turned hesitantly as James came towards him. They eyed each other warily for a moment, and then James finally spoke.

"Padfoot," he began, swallowing hard, "this was... wrong. It was inexcusable, as you said. It will take some time to get over how angry I am at you right now. But..."

Sirius held his breath, eyes wary, waiting for James' final judgment.

Peter had long thought that there was some unwritten rule in the Black family that forbade tears or the expression of any emotion that was not swaggering arrogance, pride, sarcasm, the various shadings of hatred or, as Sirius had just allowed, a twinge of regret. Now, he saw for the first time an uninhibited display of fear and need: Sirius' need for James' approval and his fear of being alone...of being rejected.

James reached out his arm and placed it on Sirius' shoulder. "But... you're my family. Even though I'm so angry I could pummel you, Sirius, I have to find a way to forgive you."

Sirius' body slumped with relief and James embraced him, both boys in tears for the need of each other.

Remus sat and watched them, his face inscrutable but for the lingering pain still evident in his pale eyes.

Sirius disengaged himself from James, wiping his eyes as he returned Remus' gaze.

"I'll try to forgive you, Padfoot," Remus said quietly. "But I'm not sure that I can fully trust you. I'm sure you can understand why."

Sirius nodded. "I do. I'll do better, Moony, I swear I will."

I'm sure he'll manage it, Peter thought petulantly. *He should have been a cat for the way he always lands on his feet*He crossed his arms and frowned, contemplating the seemingly charmed life of Sirius Black.

Severus

When Severus had stumbled back into the castle the previous night, he'd had the good fortune to collapse into the arms of his Head of House. Horace Slughorn, quietly patrolling the corridors, had been aghast at the sight of his student with blood-soaked hair, hands and robes. Without asking questions, Professor Slughorn brought him to the hospital wing and into the caring and capable hands of Madam Pomfrey.

After the Matron had dispatched his injuries and determined that the wounds were superficial, Slughorn then wrested the story from Severus about what had happened. When Professor Dumbledore appeared in the hospital wing, the story was repeated. They had both made him promise not to tell anyone else until the Headmaster could sort it out. Severus had reluctantly and bitterly agreed.

Severus had spent most of the next day secluded in his dormitory room, stoking his anger and waiting for his interview with the Headmaster, which was, he noted as he checked his watch, in five minutes. He threw on his robes, stormed out of the Slytherin common room, and made his way up the castle from the dungeons.

They all know! he fumed. *The staff, the teachers...they ALL know that Lupin is a werewolf! A werewolf! How could they have allowed such a...such an abomination into this school! Are they mad?*

As he strode up the stairs, Severus' mind was in a fever as thoughts and emotions ricocheted off one another in rapid succession: Black had to be expelled. Lupin was a dangerous Dark creature and should be removed from Hogwarts. His hatred was mixed with humiliation at having to be saved by Potter. Fury at Lily for rescuing him again after she'd promised not to do it.

Justice. All he asked for was justice. And for a modicum of fairness when it was deserved. Like right now.

Severus scowled and snorted at the thought. When had Albus Dumbledore ever been fair when it came to his beloved Gryffindors? Severus had heard about the fiasco at the Three Broomsticks and, while it was common knowledge that it was the result of another Black-manufactured fiasco, there had been no punishments at all! Not one night of detention!

Slughorn had been rightly furious last night and had vehemently argued that Black should be expelled. Dumbledore listened and told him that he'd make his decision after gathering all the facts. This was not reassuring to Severus. What other bloody facts did he need? Black had shown him how to get into a tunnel that would result in his death! End of story!

Severus rounded into the corridor of the Headmaster's office and froze at the sight before him.

"I'll try to forgive you, Padfoot. But I'm not sure that I can fully trust you. I'm sure you can understand why."

"I do. I'll do better, Moony, I swear I will."

Trust? None of them can be trusted. Not now. Not ever.

Severus moved closer towards them, and as he passed under the torchlight, they saw him. Sirius Black took a step backwards, his face darkening. Severus felt his hand close around his wand, but before it could be drawn, the door opened and Professor McGonagall emerged, taking in the scene before her.

"Except for Mr. Lupin and Mr. Snape, the rest of you are to return immediately to your common room. Now."

They practically flew down the corridor.

Brooms couldn't have moved them faster, thought Severus wryly.

"Mr. Lupin," she said gently to Remus, "it will be just a few more minutes. I'll wait here with you." Professor McGonagall turned to Severus. "Mr. Snape, the Headmaster will see you now." She waved her hand towards the entrance and invoked the password: "*Chocolate Cherries*."

Severus struggled to keep a reign on his temper as the Headmaster offered him tea and biscuits. He declined both, forcing himself to remain patient until Dumbledore had poured himself a cup and settled at his desk.

"Mr. Snape, I want to assure you that I have looked into this unfortunate situation with the seriousness it deserves. What you went through last night was both unconscionable and horrific."

Unfortunate situation?

"Was he expelled?" Severus practically bit his tongue in his restraint.

Dumbledore gazed at him evenly. "There were so many violations of school policy last night, that it boggles the imagination to come up with suitable punishments. Despite what you endured...and I don't speak of it lightly...you violated one or two of them yourself."

Severus shot to his feet, shaking with the rage he'd been harbouring all day. "Please forgive me, Headmaster, but being set up for murder hardly compares to being out of bounds! Did you or did you not expel Black!"

"No, Mr. Snape, I did not."

Severus blinked, uncertain that he'd heard correctly, and then sank back into his chair, deflated. It was true. No justice would be found here. It would never be fair. The truth of it hit Severus square behind his eyes and burned there.

The Headmaster stood up and came from behind his desk to stand before Severus.

"You are right. It isn't fair."

Severus noted the echo of his thoughts in the Headmaster's words.

"It is a hard lesson for one so young to have to learn, and I regret that you had to learn it at my hands, but I need you to listen to me now."

Severus looked up at Albus Dumbledore. He'd listen. Then he'd decide what to do.

"There are many prejudices in our world, as you well know, and nearly all of them wrong-headed in my opinion. Several years ago I was given a unique opportunity to right one of those wrongs: I was approached with the request to admit young Mr. Lupin to Hogwarts.

"Lycanthropy is a condition that causes unspeakable harm to those afflicted. But for one horrible night, Mr. Lupin is as human as you or I, and he deserved a chance to become the man he is, not the monster he becomes. I could offer him that chance and did so. I planted the Whomping Willow the summer before your first year, created the tunnel, and set up the house in Hogsmeade to help Mr. Lupin manage his monthly transformations and keep the students safe. This decision was not made lightly, and there were long hours of debate among the staff. We were all aware of the risks, but felt that if we could succeed in our plans for Mr. Lupin, we might pave the way for others, to offer them a life that has heretofore been denied, a chance at acceptance in our society."

"So Lupin is an...experiment," Severus concluded bitterly.

"I wouldn't use that term, exactly, but in essence, yes. A very, very important experiment. One that must be protected, to preserve both Mr. Lupin and the reputation of the school. And expelling Mr. Black would only hurt us in this regard. Do you understand?"

He clearly caught the intent in the piercing gaze of the Headmaster.

"You want me to keep it secret." Severus felt the bile rise in his throat and fought to keep it down.

Dumbledore raised one of his silvery eyebrows. "You are a remarkably bright student. One with many talents. I'm hoping that maintaining confidences is one of them."

The Headmaster was well known for speaking rings around what he really meant to say, so Severus understood that the cold directness of Dumbledore's words reflected the seriousness of the situation.

At that moment, the office door opened, and Remus Lupin stepped inside. Dumbledore smiled genially.

"Ah, Mr. Lupin! Please have a seat!" With a wave, another chair appeared next to Severus'. "Tea?"

"Um, no thank you, Headmaster."

Remus sat down and Severus fought the urge to flee, settling for an instinctive flinch. There was still a hint of the feral about Lupin that he'd smelled in that tunnel. He thought he might actually vomit.

"Mr. Lupin, I've just been explaining to Mr. Snape the conditions of your admittance to Hogwarts, and helping him to understand why it's important that you remain with us."

Remus looked up, surprised.

"You want me to stay, sir? Is that wise?"

At least the monster has some common sense, thought Severus, taking several deep, measured breaths.

"Of course you'll stay, Mr. Lupin. Don't give it another thought," remarked Dumbledore with a smile.

Remus looked at Severus, facing him directly for the first time.

"Snape, I'm truly sorry about last night. I can't imagine how horrid it must have been for you." Remus dropped his head, as if in shame.

Severus didn't know how to respond. Before last night, Remus Lupin had been just another annoying Gryffindor, friend of Black and Potter. Not as bad as them, he admitted, but a Gryffindor, nonetheless. And now, Lupin was a werewolf, one he'd seen in his foul-smelling, golden-eyed, twisted form of a beast. He'd never be able to see him as anything else.

"Mr. Lupin...Remus," said Dumbledore gently, "you didn't harm Mr. Snape or Mr. Potter, and you are not to blame in this. Mr. Snape has had a terrible scare, but one I'm sure he'll recover from in time."

Perhaps some time in the next century.

"In a way, you are both victims here and as such, I'd like to offer you something in recompense," said Dumbledore.

Both boys snapped to attention: Remus looking confused and Severus filled with suspicion.

"What are your plans after leaving Hogwarts, gentlemen?"

What is he after?

Remus spoke up. "I thought I might like to study to be a Healer, sir," he said softly, without conviction. "But, I don't think I'd be allowed."

"Well, we'll cross that bridge next year, Mr. Lupin," Dumbledore remarked with kindness. "Mr. Snape?"

"I'd like to continue to study Potions, sir, and work towards Mastery."

Dumbledore nodded. "I've no doubt that you'll succeed in that endeavour. As I said, you have many talents, including many of the... darker arts, if my understanding is correct?"

Severus neither affirmed nor disaffirmed his understanding.

"But, I suspect that you will both be faced with the need to make some difficult choices when you leave the safety of our school." Dumbledore shot a direct glance at Severus. "And I think it would be beneficial to you both if you left here armed with some helpful magic, which I'm prepared to teach you myself."

Remus sat up straighter, more alert. "What would that be, sir?"

"Have you heard of Legilimency and Occlumency?"

Dumbledore smiled at Severus' look of surprise. How could Dumbledore know that these had been an abiding interest of his for the last year?

Severus

Malfoy's private library surpassed anything Severus could have imagined. The books that surrounded him would never have been found on the shelves at Hogwarts, even in the Restricted Section. As his hands gently caressed the bindings of the ancient volumes, he could feel the magic within them crackle beneath his fingertips.

"It's an impressive collection, isn't it?" Malfoy acknowledged with a smug half-smile. "My agents have spared no effort or expense in finding the rarest of magical texts from around the world."

"They are magnificent," whispered Severus, feeling almost light-headed as the power of the books called to him, the tendrils of the magic within them reaching out seductively.

"Feel free to borrow anything that catches your interest. It pleases me to share them with someone who appreciates their value. And, since you've finished school, I imagine you'd enjoy having access to this...unusual resource."

Something in Malfoy's tone snapped Severus to attention, pulling him away from the siren call of the books. As much as Severus had grown used to and enjoyed the perks of Malfoy's patronage, he had quickly learned that nothing was ever offered or given freely; there was always a price to be paid. Up to this point, Malfoy had seemed content with the small bits of information that Severus had managed to coax out of Lily Evans, in this last year, about her experiences in the Department of Mysteries. To ensure that he could continue to provide this information to Malfoy, Severus had forced himself to swallow his pride and subdue his anger sufficiently, and had apologised to Lily for his behaviour on the night she had helped to save his life. In the end, he found that it wasn't difficult to maintain, at least, the outward appearance of 'friendship' with her. It also helped that Potter and company had ceased their attempts to hex him at every turn, apparently reigned in by their collective guilt over the 'werewolf incident' and Potter's new turn as Head Boy. Being ignored by the Gryffindor cabal had been a relief, and his seventh year passed more peacefully than any previous year.

The year also proved itself notable, nearly enjoyable in fact, as he studied Legilimency and Occlumency under Dumbledore's tutelage. Severus didn't even mind that he had to share lessons with the wolf, who had proven more adept than one might have expected from a lesser being and provided Severus with more than a few challenges. Although Severus knew that he'd never like Lupin, he had grown to respect him. The fact that he'd never admit such regard was as certain as the sun rising each morning.

Severus' peaceful year, however, had come to a crashing finale when Potter stood up on the Gryffindor table at the Leaving Feast to ostentatiously announce his engagement to Lily Evans. As the applause and cheers of classmates broke out around the Great Hall, the wall that Severus had so carefully constructed around his heart nearly toppled, as Lily caught...and held...his eyes for several agonising moments. Somehow, despite the fact that he knew that Lily and Potter had been together all year, the moment still caught him off guard. Those penetrating, green eyes conveyed such an intensity of feeling, that they sliced cleanly through his carefully wrought wall and nicked at his heart, inflicting an indescribable sense of loss. Tearing his eyes away from Lily, he noted that several of his fellow Slytherins were eyeing him curiously. Severus forced his face to assume a mask of indifference and devoted more attention to his pudding than it deserved.

The next day, as the seventh-year students bid farewell to Hogwarts for the last time and looked towards their futures, Severus arrived in Wiltshire to spend the first few weeks of his summer as a guest of the Malfoys.

At the beginning of his third week, Lucius asked him if he'd like to see his library. And now, standing in the middle of this magical miracle, Severus instinctively sensed that the time was rapidly approaching when Malfoy would ask him for far more.

It was a beautiful summer day, and Severus and Malfoy sat on the veranda of Malfoy Manor overlooking the gardens, each sipping a glass of Malfoy's finest elf-made wine. A light breeze cooled the air and made the blossoms ripple under the sun. As he lifted his glass to his lips, Severus studied Malfoy discreetly through his lashes. He was impressed, not for the first time, with the man's grace and his ability to always seem so confident, so comfortable in his skin. Severus knew that he would never manage to look...or feel...like that.

Lucius stretched out like a cat in the sun. "So, Severus, what are your plans for the rest of the summer?" he asked.

"I will be investigating a few offers of employment that I have received. I expect to begin working shortly."

"Has Dafwyd contacted you?" Malfoy asked with a casual lightness.

Of course, thought Severus. *He's already arranged it.* He should have guessed.

"He has. He's asked me to Apprentice with him. I am considering the offer."

Malfoy nodded, looking pleased. "You should, Severus. He's a good man. You'll learn a lot from him. Working in his Apothecary would also provide you with opportunities to work on some... special projects."

Severus just smiled in reply, trying to parse the meaning behind Lucius' words.

"Speaking of offers," Lucius said, once again in an off-hand manner, "have you considered ours?"

Severus took another sip of wine and considered how best to respond. His first offer to become a Death Eater for Voldemort had been made when he arrived at Malfoy Manor. Two more offers would be made...three in all. Severus had learned that there were significant but unnamed 'consequences' to those who refused to unconditionally accept by the third time.

Severus finished the rest of the wine in his glass and set it down on the table. "Yes, I have considered it. I - I think, however, that it is not yet the right time to officially accept this distinguished honour. Perhaps, after I have established myself, I hope that we might discuss it again."

"I think that is a wise decision, Severus," Lucius said with an agreeable nod.

Severus felt the tightness in his chest relax, relieved that he hadn't angered or alienated his patron.

"You'll be much better suited after you've had some time to become adjusted to your new position. In fact, having you in a place to develop your Potions mastery will serve us well, even in an...*unofficial* capacity."

Lucius smiled, holding up the bottle, which glinted red in the sunlight. "More wine?"

"Please," he replied, and Malfoy filled his glass. Severus noticed that the breeze had disappeared and the day had become just a bit warmer.

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In earliest prehistory, that natural force was known as Wilde Magick. To those unfortunate enough to chance a spontaneous encounter with a surge of Wilde Magick, it was almost always fatal, akin to being struck by lightning. In later ages, to the rare few who managed to survive such an encounter, or who summoned this force deliberately in conjunction with the oldest rites and rituals, it was called Ancient Magick.

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Lily

The highlight of Lily's summer, after completing her final year of study at Hogwarts as Head Girl and her engagement to James, was her formal acceptance into the

Department of Mysteries as an Apprentice Unspeakable to Esmé Wentwhistle, Head of the Special Study Division. The ceremony where she took her final Vows of Secrecy was a solemn and beautiful rite, and one that Lily wished she could have shared with James and her parents. Happily, Corran Masten, the man who had sponsored her, had stood as a witness and helped to seal the magic that would protect her and their work from interference by the outside world.

For even the Minister of Magic, Millicent Bagnold, wasn't privy to what occurred inside the Department of Mysteries. Only the Unspeakables held those secrets and understood the power underlying their work with Elemental Magic.

On Lily's first official day, Esmé walked her through the Department's many Divisions. Each time they left one Division and returned to the main hall, its round wall of doors spun around them, reminding Lily of a carnival ride she'd once been on as a child. She didn't like the feeling of vertigo any better now than she had then.

When the room stopped spinning, Esmé took her arm and ushered her through another door to yet another of the Divisions. Lily wondered how long it would take her to learn how to navigate this puzzle of a place.

Esmé guided her through a room that held, in its centre, a large tank containing some floating matter. Lily was astounded to recognise it as human brains.

"The need for secrecy extends between Divisions as well," said Esmé as Lily stood, mesmerised by the floating cartilage. "Although it is permissible for us to enter any Division's exterior rooms such as this one, the inner rooms, where the research occurs, are strictly off limits. Only those that work within a Division truly know the matter under study." Esmé leaned in towards Lily to speak in a whisper. "Of course, rumours do leak out about what goes on in other areas. I can't verify the truth of this one, but I heard that we are close to revealing a new potion that will ease the transformation process for werewolves."

This news sent a thrill through Lily.

"That would be incredible, Esmé! Do you think it's true?" she asked, thinking of Remus.

Esmé shrugged with an enigmatic smile.

It would be wonderful if there were hope for some measure of relief in store for her friend. Of course, she was dismayed that she couldn't share this news. For this information had to be, like everything else about her work, kept secret.

Lily was overwhelmed with the array and diversity of subject matter she saw as she walked from room to room: the swirling planets; the wall of Time-Turners; the rows upon rows of orbs in the Hall of Prophecy; the strange, tattered veil hanging at the base of the stone-seated amphitheatre; and a greenhouse so large and diverse with plant matter that it would set Professor Sprout squealing with envy.

"Are there any similarities between the Divisions? Are we working towards some common purpose?" Lily asked.

Esmé nodded. "Each of the subject areas represents one of the basic forms of Elemental Magic: the Universe, the Mind, Time, Organic Matter, the Spirit or Soul..."

"That's Corran's Division, isn't it?" interrupted Lily.

Esmé affirmed this with another nod.

"Why is our Division known as 'Special Study'? It's such an odd name. It could mean anything!"

"Have you noticed that our entrance is the only one locked...the only one not accessible from the main hall?"

Lily nodded, remembering the sequence of spells she'd been taught to recognise and gain access into her Division.

Given the number of years Esmé had worked here, Lily was surprised to see a look of wonder appear on her face. "It is sealed because our work is the most sensitive of all the subjects under study in the Department. It is safer for everyone if it appears a bit...obscure. Some of us call it 'Heart Matter,' others call it 'Love.' The power of what we study is difficult to describe or capture by something as imperfect as words.

"But to answer your question, we do share a common goal. Each Division has methods of harvesting the Magic from each of our subject's source, that permit it to be studied. And we all conduct experiments with trace amounts of that energy to develop applications that will benefit our world: new spells, potions, charms, objects and so forth. Most importantly, every one of us has learned to respect the Magic in our custody. We never take it for granted."

Like a light snapping on in a darkened room, the full implication of their work, and the need for absolute secrecy, hit Lily in a rush of understanding. Her mouth suddenly felt dry.

"That Magic, that energy we draw upon and use, is volatile...unstable," she whispered.

The threat of the growing darkness and evil that loomed on the periphery over both the wizarding and non-magical worlds took a sickening shape in Lily's mind like a poisonous cloud. "If people were to know about it, or worse, to get their hands on it, it could be devastating..."

Esmé looked at her with a wistful, almost sad smile. "In the wrong hands, or just in ignorant hands, that power, if unleashed, could destroy the world."

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The invention of the hollowed and cored wand in the era we now call the 'Middle Ages' replaced the solid, wooden staff used by Shamans and Priests in earlier periods. The smaller and more flexible wand proved more durable and less prone to destruction than its more primitive antecedent. It also had the benefit of amplifying the power of the intent behind the casting of spells, its magical core conducting power more efficiently, and providing less resistance to the Magic that flowed through it. The cored wand functioned as an extension of the wizards' central nervous system, but did so more safely, since the actual connection to the power of the Magic occurred within the wand itself, outside the caster's body. This most important development in conducting Magic meant that Wizards survived, for the first time, to live dramatically longer lives.

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Peter

After completing his studies at Hogwarts, Peter settled comfortably back into his childhood home. At first he enjoyed his mother's fawning and fussing, but eventually, as it always did, it became tiring. He had been home only a month when he became irritatingly bored with himself and annoyed with his mother and finally realised that he needed to find a job and move out. However, actually taking the steps necessary to make these things happen was more than a bit daunting; he'd never lived fully on his own before and had, moreover, earned Professor McGonagall's disapproval by never settling on a career plan in their sessions. The truth was that Peter had never been much good at seeing past the nose on his face, thinking that there would be plenty of time to think about his future 'later.' It didn't take long for him to realise that 'later' had indeed arrived and was now staring at him, impatiently, waiting for a decision.

While he wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life, Peter was clever, and he knew what he ~~didn't~~ wanted. And what he didn't want was to feel useless and dominated by his mother for the rest of his life. So, at James' suggestion, Peter had sent an owl to Lily to ask for her help and was delighted when she arranged an interview for him at the Ministry of Magic's Department of Magical Transport.

Peter had never set foot in the Ministry of Magic before. He had heard Lily's detailed descriptions of the Atrium entrance, the Fountain and the flying memos, but they paled in comparison to the reality of the wondrous place. As he entered the grand hall for the first time, Peter felt that this was a place where he could fit in, belong to, and do something *important*.

Stepping onto the lift, he consulted the scrap of parchment that Lily had sent.

Department of Magical Transport

Floo Network Authority Sixth Floor, Room 621

Mr. Antiocus Sheffield, Director

21 July - 9:30 a.m.

Peter's nerves were in full flight. He wiped his sweaty palms across the new robes his mother had bought him, and his stomach began to squawk like an angry owl.

Pull yourself together, Pettigrew!

As the lift called out his floor, Peter sucked in a deep breath, smoothed down his hair, and adjusted his robes, then left the cab to bravely meet his future.

The Floo Network Authority was located in a giant room, filled with so many small cubicles that it brought to mind a rabbit warren. Peter was scurrying after his guide...a Mr. Polopolus...who had suddenly appeared at his side and was now escorting Peter to his interview. He had to walk fast to keep pace with the man who was providing Peter with a running commentary on their operations.

"Over there is Miss McKenny," Mr. Polopolus said, pointing to one of the cubicles. "She oversees the manufacture and distribution of Floo Powder. Big responsibility, that is."

Miss McKenny looked up from her mountain of parchment at the sound of her name and gave Peter a wink as they passed. She was a very pretty witch, and he blushed.

"These are the offices," said his guide with an expansive but unspecific gesture, "of our Regulatory Panel staff. About seventy-five work in that area. All approvals for fireplace connection requests go through there, of course."

"Over there is our International Unit. Rather self-explanatory, I'd say."

"Down this hall is the Network Logistics Service...the area you're applying for. Ah, here we are. Step inside and Mr. Sheffield will be with you in just a moment." And just as quickly as he'd arrived, Mr. Polopolus was gone.

"Thank you, sir," said Peter to the now-empty doorway, practically panting from his whirlwind tour. He turned and stepped into a small room that was furnished with only a small desk and two chairs. The room had no windows but was well lit; Peter wondered where the light was coming from. He sat down and then sprang back to his feet as an elderly wizard entered the room.

"Sit down, Mr. Pettigrew," said the man, gesturing to one of the chairs. Peter sat. The wizard looked to be only slightly younger than Dumbledore, Peter thought, but his long beard was flecked with black, and he had absolutely no hair on his head.

"I'm Director Sheffield, Mr. Pettigrew." He pulled out, unrolled, and quickly perused a parchment. "Yes, I see you are applying for a Regulator position in our Logistics Service. Do you have your curricula vitae with you?"

Peter handed over a scroll that contained his O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. grades as well as recommendations from Professors McGonagall and Flitwick. Fortunately, Peter had passed his final year in Arithmancy, Transfiguration and Charms with reasonable grades, all of which were required for this position.

After the initial interview, Peter was escorted to the Logistics Section and handed off to its Supervisor, Broderick Stemwithers. Stemwithers was an average-size man with an average sort of face, appearing to be of average age and wearing the usual Department robes of dark brown. The only thing that stood out as being definitely not average were the man's shoes, which were astonishingly shiny, purple and made of dragon-hide.

"Applying to work with us, Mr. Pettigrew?" Stemwithers asked in a moderately deep voice.

Peter forced his eyes away from the sight of Mr. Stemwithers' amazing shoes. "Um, yes, sir. I hope so!"

"We'll see, won't we?" Stemwithers said with a kind smile. "Come this way and have a look at what we're up to, Mr. Pettigrew!"

Peter followed Mr. Stemwithers into a large, darkened room that was circular in shape. The workers sat at desks that formed an inner circle, facing the walls of the room. Overhead, projected onto the walls and monitored by the workers, were adjacent rectangles of lights, covered with layers of thin phosphorescent beams in at least a dozen different colours, each criss-crossing one another in no discernable pattern.

"What is that?" Peter asked, both amazed and perplexed.

"It's the Floo Network, young man!" boomed Mr. Stemwithers with evident pride. "Each rectangle corresponds to a different section of the country, and each beam corresponds to a connection link within that section. Have you ever been on the Muggle Underground?"

"Once, sir," said Peter, in awe of the complexity of a system he'd always used but never thought much about.

"Yes, well, it's a bit like that."

As Peter looked from panel to panel, he had a sudden flash of understanding. "You have to make sure the Network doesn't get all choked up or people would be bumping into each other, wouldn't they?"

Mr. Stemwithers chuckled and nodded with approval. "Or splinched together! Very astute observation, Mr. Pettigrew. It is our responsibility to make sure the Floo connections remain clear and flowing. Ah, watch Miss Simmons over there...she's spotted a problem." Stemwithers pointed to a section of an overhead Floo map, and Peter could see that a round dot had appeared in the middle of a green beam of light, which was growing larger and darker. "There is a blockage in the energy flow in that sector."

A witch, a tall, dark-haired woman of about twenty-five, stood at her desk and pointed her wand towards the 'problem' on the map and uttered an incantation. Peter noticed that she held her wand with both hands and a thin beam of white light was pulsing from its tip. As she continued to chant and hold her wand steady, the light stretched out until it made contact with the round, green dot. Slowly, the dot shimmered, and then grew smaller until it finally disappeared, leaving the straight, green beam whole and unbroken.

"Well done, Miss Simmons!" Mr. Stemwithers said with an approving smile.

"Thank you, sir. That sector in Manchester's been acting up all week. I think we should send someone to check for an energy leakage."

"Put it in your report, Miss Simmons." He gestured towards Peter. "Mr. Pettigrew here is applying for a position with us. Perhaps you can explain what just occurred."

Miss Simmons smiled at Peter, whose eyes were as wide as a Great Horned owl. "First time here, is it?"

Peter nodded. "It's incredible!"

"I remember being gobsmacked my first time, too." She nodded in understanding. "It's a bit much to see so much magic in one place!"

Peter was impressed that everyone seemed to take such pride in their work. He would be proud too, he thought suddenly, if he could get a job here!

"Well," continued Miss Simmons, "Floo connections are like magical chutes, or tunnels, except that they're made of magic. The Floo powder activates the magic, along with the spoken destination. It follows the same principles as Apparition, except the Network holds the magic instead of the person.

"Each Floo connection has a series of assigned stops, or grates. You can see them pass by if you peek a bit during your trip. And of course, there are hand-offs from one connection to another. Say you want to travel from London up to Newcastle: you'd be passing through about five different Floo connections to arrive at your final destination.

"So it's our job to make sure the magic flows uninterrupted. That's what you just watched me do: there was a leak in that connection and I had to fix it. But if it's a continuous problem, we need to send Repair to the site to do it directly."

"But what causes the problems?" Peter asked.

"Lots of things can cause energy leaks or fluctuations," said Miss Simmons with a smile, clearly enjoying the chance to explain her work. "Sometimes bits of things fall out of folks' pockets during transport and clog up the system. Sometimes a bad storm will disrupt the flow. Other times the Muggle utilities will decide to move some power line and muck things up."

Peter frowned in confusion. "Why should the Muggle...thing...be a problem?"

Mr. Stemwithers chuckled again. "The Ministry decided to lay out the Floo Network to avoid Muggle utilities: electricity, gas, water lines and so forth. Since the magical properties of the elements that run through their system could interfere with our operations, we need to make sure that our Network and theirs don't cross paths. Despite our best precautions, though, it happens from time to time. There was a blackout in South London a few years ago when their electrical grid came into contact with the Network. It left the poor Muggles without power for days! The problem runs both ways, but we're the ones that have to keep an eye on it.

"Thank you, Miss Simmons," he said with a nod as he led Peter away, and the witch returned to her work. "So, what do you think, Mr. Pettigrew? Do you think you would like to join our little team?"

Peter nodded enthusiastically. He could feel the magic in the room pulsating, connecting not only the Floo Network, but also the people who worked here. He didn't know why he felt drawn to it, but suddenly, he knew that it was something he had always wanted.

"Oh, yes. I'd be honoured if you'd let me be a part of this," said Peter sincerely. "I'll do my very best for you, sir! You can count on me!"

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However, in living longer lives, Wizards made a terrible discovery. The longer they spent summoning and channelling their physical and spiritual power to connect to and control Elemental Magic, they found the Magic itself began to consume them, to destroy their spiritual self. The Wizard would, over time, exhibit both an increase in power and a type of mania that removed their ability to empathize, to feel, to see others as individuals. The majority of Wizards and Witches, who actively practiced Magic by the methods and procedures that had been established up to that time, found that they eventually lost their grip on...essentially...what it was to be human. If the ability to conduct magical energy itself was a quality of the soul, this descent into madness was seen as a spiritual malady...a warping of the soul.

Seeing the devastation around them and alarmed at their own vulnerability to this terrible malady, some Wizards and Witches began to voluntarily limit their use of Magic, and others abandoned the practice of Magic altogether. For those already afflicted, outbursts of increasingly delusional and powerfully violent behaviour would inevitably put everyone within proximity of the affected Wizard at risk of harm. It therefore became the responsibility of the family or community to contain and neutralize them. It has been theorized that the Imperius spell became more commonly used during this period, as an aide to help families control their devastated loved ones. Others were transfigured into animals, objects or Guardian Trees, planted at gravesites. The most famous of these so incarcerated is reported to have been the Wizard Merlin, who was confined in his later years in an oak tree by his Apprentice Nimue.

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Lily

At the end of her first week as an Apprentice Unspeakable, Lily sat in Esmé's office listening to her mentor describe the long-term dangers of using older, 'Elemental' Magic with growing alarm. Lily had always considered that her ability to connect to people as an Empathic was due to her willingness to give up some part of herself, some spiritual part, in order to make that connection.

"Will I be affected? Am I in danger?" Lily asked, her heart skipping beats in her chest. "What will happen to me over time?"

Esmé took a moment to consider how best to respond to her Apprentice, tapping her fingers on her mahogany desk. This was a critical lecture for all new Unspeakables, but Lily was different. Indeed, it was her 'difference' that made her so valuable to the Division. She could take their work so much farther than they had ever been able to go.

"Your ability, Lily, is a rare and extraordinary gift. It is, as you correctly surmise, a form of older, Elemental Magic. However, your practice of this magic creates an opposite response to the one that would affect the rest of us. Rather than your spiritual or psychic self being affected, as it would others, yours is...enhanced."

Lily was both relieved and surprised. As a student, she'd always suspected that when she left school there would be more to learn about the world she felt so privileged to be a part of. And now, she caught a glimpse into the depth of its mysteries for the first time.

"However, you must still be circumspect in your use of this magic, Lily," Esmé cautioned. "The barriers that you have learned to erect on a daily basis are critical; to maintain control of your gift is imperative, for even this type of magic could turn and use you in other ways. At best, you might find your emotions clouding your judgment, affecting your ability to make good, objective decisions. At worst, you could lose yourself to another kind of madness. Rather than being stripped of empathy or developing permanent paranoia, you could become, instead, pure feeling, only able to reflect the human feelings of others around you. Your own essence could be totally subsumed, and the 'Lily' that you and I know would be lost. As you get older and your magical powers increase, the risks increase as well."

The thought of losing herself in this way was terrifying. "Have other Empathics worked here?" Lily asked hoarsely. "Is that how you know how it will affect me?"

"Only one other. She established this Division. Have you heard of Perenelle Flame?"

Lily thought back to her studies and shook her head. "No, I don't think so." Her mind careened wildly from thought to thought, truly frightened as she began to understand the dangers they faced. "But what about everyone else? What do you and the others do to protect yourselves?" Lily asked.

Esmé smiled. "Excellent question. As you now understand, all of us who work in the Department of Mysteries tap into and use the oldest and most basic of all magical energies to fully understand the objects of our study. We must do this in order to better understand those energies and to devise new ways of using them, but we do it sparingly and under carefully controlled and supervised conditions. In addition, every two months we undergo mandated Spiritual Healing and Counselling sessions to monitor our physical and psychic health, and we rotate assignments within our Division to lower the overall risk, as some assignments require more use of Elemental Magic than others."

"Has that kept you safe?"

"In the last three hundred years, only five Unspeakables have been lost, relegated to St. Mungo's for permanent care. I'd say it's worked pretty well, but the risks are real, and we don't take them lightly."

They sat in silence for a moment, to consider all that had been said.

Finally, Esmé stood. "Are you ready to move on to the...heart of the matter?" she asked, chuckling at her own pun.

Lily, her mind still reeling, stood as well. She took a deep breath. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

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It became the work of Magical Scholars for generations to find a way to practice Magic that did not lead to the progressive madness that threatened them all. In the end, they discovered that the unchanged, ancient practice of Magic itself was the key: conducting magic by drawing on the caster's combined physical and spiritual energies meant that the magical elements of nature still controlled the user. If the progression to madness was, basically, a 'spiritual' malady, the solution, therefore, was to reconstruct the way one conducted Magic by removing the psychic or spiritual 'self' from the casting of spells.

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Lily accompanied Esmé down one nondescript hallway after another, trying to make a mental map of where she was, but after the fifth turn, gave it up as a lost cause.

"Don't worry; you'll learn your way. We all do!" Esmé reassured Lily in her usual perfunctory tone. They entered another door and started down another hallway.

"So how's that young man, your soon-to-be husband? James, isn't it? Is he keeping himself busy while you are at work?"

Lily was taken aback by Esmé's sudden shift to the personal, but smiled. "Yes. James is fine. Wonderful, in fact." Lily paused as she felt herself blush, thinking about their last weekend together. "Um, James is plotting some grand business scheme with his best friend, Sirius, to develop some 'useful' inventions, as he calls them."

"Ah, so the two of you will have a lot in common. Except for the fact that he can talk about his inventions and you can't!" Esmé smiled ruefully.

Happy that Esmé was willing to indulge in some personal conversation, Lily sensed an opening. "If I'm not being too forward, are you married?"

"Forever, I think," replied Esmé with a nod. "His name is Gawain. Sixty years."

"Is it hard...in a marriage...not to be able to share...to talk about...." Lily stammered, unable to find the right words.

"To keep secrets from your husband?"

Lily nodded.

Esmé stopped besides an ugly brown door and turned to Lily, her face softening. "Like everything important in a marriage, it always comes down to trust, my dear. Gawain understands that my work is a part of my life that he can't share, other than accompanying me to the odd, boring social gathering." Esmé placed a hand gently on Lily's shoulder. "I've found it helps to develop relationships with colleagues. You'll find that many of us here have become very close friends. You need to think of us as your family, in that way. We're the ones you can talk to about your work. I hope you'll be comfortable coming to me, or to Corran, at any time."

Lily felt as if a weight had been removed, and she realised that she'd been harbouring this concern for some time. She was grateful for older woman's offer. "Thank you, Esmé."

Esmé pointed her wand at the brown door with a slight furrow to her brow as she concentrated.

"Ready, my dear?" Without waiting for a response, Esmé incanted the spells to permit them entry.

As they walked through the door, it closed quietly behind them. Lily found herself standing in a dark, nearly pitch-black space of indeterminate size, illuminated only by what appeared to be a sky full of twinkling stars.

"This is the Storage Room, where the Donor specimens are maintained and cared for."

There were five primary functions in the Division which gathered and studied the essence of what Esmé had called 'Love.' That essence, Lily discovered with more than a little awe, came from willing Donors at the time of their deaths.

The 'Harvester' had the most dangerous of jobs: to cast the spell that released the magical element from the Donor and capture it for study.

The 'Recorder' was the liaison with the family making the donation and documented the link between the Donor and the element.

The 'Archivist' managed the storage and retrieval of elements needed for research, from the room where Lily and Esmé currently stood.

The 'Researcher', the second most dangerous function, worked directly with the magical element to experiment with and study its properties.

And lastly, the 'Inventor' worked to develop practical applications based on what the study of those properties had revealed.

Lily would rotate through each of these functions, and she was excited to try them all. But now, as she stared at the glittering lights above her, a feeling of wonder draped over her like a warm cloak.

"Are those the..." she started, but began to sway as she was suddenly overwhelmed by the energy permeating the room.

She felt Esmé's steadying hand on her arm.

"Is it too powerful in here for you, Lily?" Esmé asked with some concern.

Lily shut her eyes and, with several deep breaths, brought down the curtain barrier in her mind that would shield her from the flow of emotion assaulting her.

"I'm - I'm all right. It just...caught me by surprise. I'll be ready next time."

"What was it like?"

Lily turned and was surprised to see an expression of childlike curiosity on Esmé's face.

"Um, I - I don't know if I can describe it." Lily thought hard to find the words. "Pure 'love.' It's - it's like being bathed in warm light." Lily started shaking, as the after-effects of the full-on demonstration of this power. "But, it's seductive, too. A bit unnerving."

"Remarkable," Esmé whispered, impressed. "Let me retrieve one for you. Don't worry," she added, "it can't be opened in here."

Suddenly, a parchment filled with undecipherable symbols appeared in Esmé's hand. With her wand, she tapped one of the symbols on the parchment, and then pointed towards the ceiling. Nothing seemed to happen, but then, slowly, one of the 'stars' descended towards them, floating down to land in Esmé's outstretched hand.

It looked like a locket, about the size of a walnut. It glowed with light, it was silver in colour and heart-shaped, and had the same strange symbol etched on its surface.

Esmé tapped her wand onto the rune of the object, and Lily saw one of the symbols on the parchment rearrange itself into written words.

"The symbols on the parchment match the specimen to the Donor so we can know to whom it belonged." She glanced at the object and, speaking softly, read from the parchment. "This small one belonged to a child. His name was Devon Waverly and he was eight years old. He died from a sudden illness about fifty years ago, before Healers had a cure for his affliction. He was loved by a large family."

Lily stood transfixed by the image of a little boy, surrounded by his family, their laughter and their love. There was something comforting, she thought, about preserving this personal information.

Esmé then demonstrated her ability to answer Lily's question before she'd had a chance to voice it aloud. It was something, Lily thought, she'd have to get used to.

"We document and maintain the connection between the element and the specific Donor because it creates a magically powerful triad: the Unspeakable, the Donor, and the Element. It is also our way of acknowledging and honouring the essence of the individual and their gift."

Esmé placed the heart-shaped object into Lily's hand. With her protections firmly in place, she turned it over reverently, still able to feel the traces of the astonishing power contained inside such a small thing.

"Do the families or the Donors know what they are giving?" Lily asked, understanding a bit more about what moved Esmé about this work.

Esmé shook her head. "No, they don't. They can't, for reasons you now understand. But they're told it's for research, that it's a gift from them to their brethren. That seems to be enough."

With another tap and wave of her wand, the essence of little Devon flew back to join the other stars twinkling above.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

By separating the physical from the spiritual, the Magical community had to learn a new way of practicing Magic, one that evolved from...and was based on...the older, more ancient practice. This led to the separation of forms into what we now refer to as 'Magic' and 'Dark Magic.' In its original form, as we have seen, Dark Magic was not inherently evil, merely chaotic and unpredictable. All Magic was Dark Magic. The fact that those who continued to use the older practice of Magic were observed to have an increase in their psychic power along with its cumulative attending madness, in which the afflicted seemed to hold no conscious awareness of what we understand in modern terms as 'right' and 'wrong' or morality, helped to contribute to the misunderstanding that Dark Magic was the province of those inclined to amoral or evil intent.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Severus

If there had ever been a more perfect moment in his life than this, Severus couldn't think of one. The as-yet-untrodden path of his future lay open before him. There would be important choices to make soon, but he had carved out a bit of time before he'd be called upon to make them. For now, he relished living in absolute solitude, sitting with teacup in hand on the windswept porch of his grandparents' cottage, nestled atop a cliff and overlooking the turbulent sea below, far away from the demands and torments of others.

The small house was his, claimed when he reached majority and was able to Apparate. For the house was unreachable by any other means, designed for its seclusion and made unplotable by his mother's parents. While others knew of his residence on Spinner's End, Severus sensed that there might come a time when he'd need a place unknown to others, and he intended to keep this location absolutely private and secret. This was also the only place that resonated with any positive childhood memories. Although he had only been here with his mother on a precious few occasions, the images were still strong and soothing: his grandmother plying him with biscuits; running unfettered in the sunlight; hearing his mother's rare and easy laughter.

It was early morning, and the late-summer sun was already glinting in the waves of the Channel. Severus checked his watch and drained the remainder of his tea. Quickly dispatching the breakfast fixings and dishes to where they belonged, Severus stepped outside the cottage and Disapparated to begin his day at Amberson's Apothecary.

"Good mornin', Severus," said Seamus as his Apprentice entered the shop, alerted by the little bell attached to the door that jingled to announce his arrival.

He was pleased to be working for Seamus Dayfwyd, a short and affable man who sported a riot of dark brown curls atop his head that fairly bounced as he walked. Importantly to Severus, Seamus was knowledgeable, had a well-stocked laboratory and, for the most part, left him alone.

"Good morning, sir. Shall I check on the stores and prepare the list of needed ingredients?"

Seamus beamed. "Yes! Yes, that would be splendid!" he said with a vigorous nod that sent his curls flying. "There's a new supplier who tells me he has a splendid batch of dragonfly wings that I should take a look at. I'm meeting with him later, so I'll pick up our replenishments while I'm at it. Thank you, young man!"

With a nod, Severus made his way to the laboratory and set to work.

It was early afternoon when Seamus interrupted Severus from the reverie of brewing a batch of Pepper-Up potion. He held out a piece of folded parchment.

"Owl message for you, my boy."

He took it, and Seamus returned to the front of the shop.

Unfolding the message, he tensed as he recognised the curling hand of Lucius Malfoy.

Severus,

Have it ready by 3:00 p.m. today.

LM

With a flick of his wand, the missive burst into flames and disappeared into ash.

A week ago, Malfoy had appeared in the shop to place a 'special order.' Severus knew without being told that this would be the first of several 'special orders' for him to prepare, outside the scope of his routine Apprentice responsibilities.

That visit was followed by a delivery of special ingredients. The kind that Seamus did not, and probably would never, stock in his usual inventory, along with a book that Severus had seen in Malfoy's library, bookmarked to the page that provided the receipt for this particular potion. A quick glance at the text set Severus' heart racing, and his usual steady hands began to shake.

Aduro Sanguineum.

A potion intended to cause a slow and agonising death. Once administered, the victim's blood would heat slowly, and then increase to an untenable temperature, causing the vessels to melt and the heart, eventually, to explode.

Severus was aghast as he contemplated what he was being asked to create and horrified as he pictured how it might... *no ~~would~~* be used. Yet, this was a 'request' he knew he could not refuse. It was part of the unspoken agreement that he had made the day when Malfoy first appeared at Spinner's End. He had sealed that bargain when he accepted Malfoy's sponsorship and now, as he had expected, payment had come due.

Oddly, though, as he continued to stare at the list of ingredients, the more they became, well, just ingredients.

A pinch of this, a dram of that. Nothing he hadn't done before.

It wouldn't be that difficult, he thought.

I can do this.

And he did.

And, as he came to incant the transformative spells as described in the ancient book, the ones that called upon the oldest of Magic, he was surprised to feel...elation. Something deep within him, a part of his soul, was called forth to mingle with the aspects of this brew to create the final potion. When he completed his unspeakable task, a tingling sensation filled his body, like remnants of an electrical current. Then, as if he'd quickly consumed a glass of firewhisky, a rush of pure energy filled his head with such power it was intoxicating.

At precisely 3:00, Severus heard the door open, and he stepped into the shop to greet Lucius Malfoy. Seamus was out on his rounds and Severus wondered if it was more by design than accident that Seamus was never around when Lucius appeared.

"Severus," Lucius said briskly, his usual affable persona replaced with a more businesslike demeanour.

Severus pulled a small box from a top shelf. Again, feeling the tingling sensation pulse in his fingers, he handed it to Lucius.

"I think you'll find it satisfactory," he said with a feeling of pride and accomplishment at succeeding at this first challenging task. The Magic of the potion pulled at him, creating an instant yearning to create and touch that Magic again.

Lucius opened the box and held up one of the phials, shaking it so that its components mixed to form a deep, swirling purple colour. He smiled as he returned it to its box and closed it.

"Your next order will arrive by tomorrow, Severus. I think a week will be sufficient to fulfil it."

Severus felt his heart leap, as if in answer to his unspoken need. Then, unbidden, he chanced a quick look down the path he was about to walk and wondered if he'd ever be able to return. With a twinge of regret, he took a deep breath and turned his mind away from what he already knew was a pointless train of thought.

"I look forward to receiving it, Lucius."

"Well done, Severus. Our Master will be pleased."

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New spells, based on the framework of older Magic, were developed, along with a set of corresponding wand movements that ultimately stabilized the elemental forces and formed the type of Magic that is practiced today. These new spells required Wizards to developed greater and more precise use of their wands, since the removal of 'self' from the magic depended on all the energy being directed physically through the object. Form became, therefore, equal to intent in spell casting. There are, of course, some spells that are cast without wands, such as those involved in Animagus transformation or Apparition. However, due to the risks still inherent in wandless magic that require full application of the 'self' into the casting, Wizarding Authorities have imposed protective regulations and controls to monitor their use.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Peter

"Do you have any idea what the 'surprise' is?" asked Remus, a bit worried about what Sirius was up to this time. "He must have dropped some hints!"

"I swear I have no idea!" said James. In the next moment, a loud roar erupted behind and above them, and James, Remus and Peter turned as one towards the sound.

"But I think we're about to find out," James noted, shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun and... something else.

From out of the clear, blue August sky, hovering over the copse of trees that surrounded the Potters' home, something shiny glimmered in the sunshine and grew larger as it descended towards them. That it was Sirius astride this strange object became apparent as he waved enthusiastically.

"Oi, mates!" came Sirius' voice from up above.

Sirius executed a nearly perfect landing, if one didn't count the damage inflicted upon Mrs. Potter's vegetable garden in the process.

They all stared at the clumps of roots, pummelled veggies and dirt below his feet.

"Er, sorry, Prongs," Sirius said as he dismounted, taking in the mess. "Don't worry. I'll take care of that before Mum comes back."

Peter stared at the odd contraption that had delivered Sirius to their end-of-summer Marauder reunion. He poked at it with his wand.

Sirius laughed. "It won't bite you, Wormtail!"

"What is it?" asked Remus as they all crowded around it to have a good look.

"It's a motorbike!" Sirius replied with a rush of excitement. "A Muggle machine that's been enchanted to fly! Those extra Galleons that my favourite Uncle Alphard left to me were itching to be spent!" Sirius had never looked so proud as he did standing next to his new, shiny toy.

Sirius's uncle, to the endless disapproval of his parents, had left him a considerable amount of money as an inheritance, permitting Sirius to move out on his own at the end of school.

James looked at Sirius as if he was a few Knuts short of a Sickle. "Are you mad, Sirius?" he said, shaking his head. "No...I already know the answer to that question. But really, mate, where did it come from? Is it safe? How do you know it's not been jinxed? And what, in bloody hell, are you planning to do with it?"

Remus tentatively sat astride the bike and felt the smooth solidity of its handles. "It's a marvel, Sirius," he said in awe. "Where did you get it?"

Sirius mumbled something about 'a man' and 'back of a lorry', which only made James look more sceptical than before.

"But I did check it out, and there aren't any jinxes on it," Sirius said defensively.

They all stared at him.

"Well, you can't grow up in my house and not learn a few detection spells. Not with my mother, the Queen of Paranoia."

That seemed to satisfy them as they nodded in understanding.

"But why would you use it? Isn't it faster to Apparate or Floo?" Peter asked, bewildered. His newly acquired special knowledge of the Floo Network gave him a unique appreciation of the system's speed and agility. "Even a broom looks to be faster than this," he added.

Sirius looked at him with something akin to pity as he shook his head. "Peter, have you no appreciation for style?"

Sirius walked over to the motorbike and lovingly caressed its back fender. "She is an elegant work of art," he said in a husky voice as he slowly moved his hands over the bike. "Such beautiful curves, polished to perfection. Her smooth seat practically begs you to sit on her. She feels fantastic when you ride her and vibrates and roars like a well-pleased lioness when she's revved her up. What more could a boy want?"

The boys all fidgeted, feeling suddenly flushed.

"So, who wants to go first?" he asked with a sly grin.

Several hours and multiple turns trying out the motorbike later, they all agreed that Sirius was a lucky bloke to have found such a brilliant new ride.

They were splayed out upon the grass behind the Potters' home, enjoying the late-afternoon sun, finishing off another round of Butterbeer and playing catch with a Bludger. James' parents were away on holiday and had agreed to let his friends over for the weekend. It was not a coincidence that tonight was the full moon, and James had arranged for them all to be together to help Remus with his transformation.

"How do you like your new flat, Padfoot?" asked James, picking at the dandelion weeds in the grass.

Sirius flopped over onto his stomach. "It's fantastic! Well, I miss you lot, of course," he said to James, "but I've always loved living in London. There is so much going on there...so much to do. It's given me loads of new ideas for products! And, of course, there are the most beautiful Muggle birds to watch!" Sirius sighed, and then pulled a sad face. "Too bad Evans has her hooks into you permanently," he sighed dramatically.

James pelted Sirius with the Bludger, but he was beaming. "And they are the most wonderfully delightful hooks, Padfoot. I'm not complaining!"

Sirius turned to Remus and Peter.

"Well, the two of you can come play with me. I'm sure I can find you a few lovelies, since James is otherwise occupied!"

Remus blushed and didn't reply, and Peter snorted, having no desire to go 'bird-hunting'...or anything else...with Sirius.

"Actually, there's this girl at work that I've met...." Peter started.

After that, Peter had to endure about a quarter-hour of teasing from his friends. He had noticed Alicia McKenny...the Floo Powder witch...acting very friendly towards him at work, and Peter enjoyed her attentions. He had not, however, worked up the courage to ask her out.

"What are you waiting for, mate?" prodded James. "Are you a Gryffindor, or not?"

"Well, she is a bit older than me, you know," Peter said without much conviction. He'd always felt awkward around girls, but older and 'wiser' women were especially intimidating.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Who cares about that, Wormtail? She's a woman who fancies you. What else matters?"

Remus snorted. "Yes, nothing else would matter to those as indiscriminating as you, Padfoot. What about intelligence? A sense of humour? An ability to care about someone else?"

Sirius nudged Remus with his foot. "Careful, Moony. James might think you're talking about Lily!"

Remus got up with a loud huff, glaring darkly at Sirius. He turned his back on his friends and walked down the hill towards the pond that lay at the end of the Potters' property.

James groaned. "Sirius! Was that necessary?"

"I thought that crush-on-Lily thing ended ages ago," said Sirius with a pout.

"It did, you wanker," scowled Peter.

"What's he going off all sensitive for, then?"

"You know how tense and anxious Moony gets just before the moon," James replied, gently chiding his friend.

Sirius shrugged, but had the grace to look a bit sorry. "I forgot. I'll make it up to him, don't worry."

Peter sniggered, thinking of how much time Sirius had spent 'making up' to Remus in the past year. It had been gratifying to see him taken down a peg for once. And he was truly delighted when he'd heard that Sirius had moved out of James' house. Still, Sirius always seemed to find luck on his side. It was sad that his uncle died, Peter thought, but even with that, he had ended up with a fortune and his own flat! Peter was hoping to get his own flat soon, too. Then he wondered about Remus.

"James, what has Remus been doing since school?" Peter asked. "Has he told you?"

"Only that Dumbledore has helped to find him some tutoring work," said James. "I asked, but he was a bit cagey about telling me any more than that." James frowned and ran his hand through his hair, a sure sign of his concern. "I worry about Remus. There aren't many choices open to him. It's so bloody unfair."

"Then it's a good thing we'll be there to help him," said Peter. James brightened at this, and Peter felt pleased.

"You're right, Peter. We will, indeed!"

Sirius jumped up. "Well, I think we should help Remus right now! I think he'd love the chance to play with his animal friends before the moonrise," said Sirius with a grin. "He's never been able to do that before. That will cheer him up!"

"Brilliant, Padfoot," said James with a broad smile of his own. Peter sighed but smiled back at James, as if in agreement. So, drawn once more into Sirius' contagious enthusiasm, they all rose. With a quick turn to connect to the rat, dog and stag within, they transformed into Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs, and scampered together down the hill to find their friend.

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While there was disagreement among the Magical community about the use of new or older forms of Magic, and both were...and still are...continued in practice, they did agree that their children should be taught this newer form of Magic in a more formal manner than they themselves had been taught. This led to the founding of the great Wizarding Academies in Europe and the Middle East in the latter part of the 10th century. The other critical decision was that the study of the older forms of Magic should not be taught at all, at least in any formalized manner. However, this repression of knowledge about Dark Magic only served to enhance its mystique and propagate misunderstandings about its intent that continue to this day. It is this author's belief that this decision, this misguided omission in the education of Witches and Wizards, poses a considerable risk to the uninformed who might stumble upon it by accident or, even more dangerously, to those who seek and acquire knowledge of this ancient practice for unsavoury purposes.

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Art work is by the awesome anemonesque.

The Origins of Magick has been adapted and, in some cases, quoted directly from JOdell's wonderfully persuasive essay, "The History of Magic," used here with her generous permission. It can be read in its entirety on her website, Red-Hen Publications:

<http://redhen-publications.com/HistoryofMagic.html>

The 'author's' conclusion in the last paragraph at the end of the essay, however, is mine.

Thanks to my ever diligent beta, celtmama, who is such a great help.

Invitations and Obligations, Part 1: March 1978

Chapter 12 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Invitations and Obligations (Part 1): March 1978

Lily

"Please, *please* don't leave me here with them!"

Petunia had worked herself into a near hysterical fit, clinging to her mother's arm in desperation, impeding her progress down the garden path towards the car idling in wait at the curb.

"Dearest, your father and I and the Dewitts don't want to be late to the wedding. Sandy and Gerry were kind enough to drive us, and it's not polite to keep them waiting." Mrs. Evans wasn't getting very far down the path, and Petunia wasn't listening.

Lily stood at the front door, watching the scene unfold with a combination of anger at her sister's endlessly irrational prejudice and sadness at yet another rejection. It was like an unhealed wound that had remained raw for more than seven years. It still hurt...each and every time. Still, Lily loved her sister and held onto the hope, possibly beyond reason, that somehow Petunia would find her way back to the relationship they once had.

"Petunia, love, everything will be fine," her mother said, attempting to pry Petunia's fingers off her arm. She was trying to maintain her patience, but her eldest daughter

was doing a pretty fair job of testing its limits. "Besides, I think it's high time you learnt to get along with Lily's friends. She's getting married in just a few months, dear, and you'll have a much nicer time at the wedding if you make friends with some of the young people who'll be there."

"MAKE FRIENDS?" shrieked Petunia. Her reaction to this suggestion caused her to involuntarily release the grip on her mother, freeing Mrs. Evans, who hastily made her way to the open car door. Petunia ran after her.

"But...but I...."

Mrs. Evans slid into the back seat of the car with her husband and shut the door; Petunia banged on its window, tears now flowing down her face.

Opening the window, her mother took her hand.

"We've got to get a move on, we'll be late!" said Mr. Dewitt, the driver of the car, impatiently.

"Love, listen to me," her mother said gently. "We'll be back home before supper. Everything will be fine. Just remember your manners, Petunia. I know it's difficult, but you will try your best, won't you?"

Petunia wiped her reddened eyes, sniffled and, after a moment, gave a weak nod.

"That's a good girl!" said her mother with sigh of relief. "Ta!"

Petunia and Lily watched as the car drove away.

After a moment, Petunia walked back towards the house, her face darker than Lily had ever seen it.

"Tune," Lily said, "you'll like my friends if you'd just try...."

"Don't worry," interrupted Petunia, wiping her nose with her sleeve. "I told Mum I'd 'do my best'." She glared at Lily, not bothering to mask her contempt. "I always keep my promises." Petunia pushed past Lily roughly and stepped into the house, leaving a trail of fear in her wake so intense that Lily felt it in the pit of her gut, as if she'd been punched.

"Happy Birthday, Remus!"

Remus was so surprised when his fellow Gryffindors leapt out of their various hiding places in the Evans' family room that he reflexively jumped back and pulled out his wand. As his friends laughed and applauded, he flushed in embarrassment as he absorbed the reason for this startling display and stowed his wand back into his robes with a sheepish grin.

The girls all rushed him with hugs and kisses, while the boys stood back, chuffed at having pulled off another successful prank. Remus accepted their attentions awkwardly but with welcome pleasure.

Lily noted that Petunia remained in the kitchen, watching the proceedings warily through the open archway that served as a pass-through to the family room. While Petunia had agreed to be polite, she'd apparently decided that it might be easier with a bit of distance between herself and Lily's guests.

It had been James' idea to organise the party, both because it was Remus' birthday but also as a way to help his friend stay connected to all those who cared about him. James was worried. Remus seemed to disappear without notice for extended periods of time, and he suspected that Remus was on his own most of the time. Both he and Lily had tried to pry information from him as to his whereabouts during these episodes, but Remus had only revealed that it was some 'business' on behalf of Albus Dumbledore and had steadfastly refused to say any more than that.

They did learn, however, that Dumbledore had helped Remus acquire some bit of work as a private tutor. Since Ministry regulations made it nearly impossible for werewolves to find regular employment, the Headmaster had done what he could to help Remus eke out a meagre living. This had also been the inspiration for Lily and James' birthday gift.

"C'mon, mate!" said James, thrusting a package at Remus. "Open ours next!"

Sitting on the sofa and on the floor surrounding Remus, his friends leaned in to get a good look. Even Petunia allowed herself to venture as far as the doorway between the family room and the kitchen for a better view.

"Careful, Remus," said Annette. "If it's from James it might be dangerous!"

"True," agreed Helene with a grin. "You should check it for hexes or jinxes first, just to make sure."

"No," Sirius sniffed indignantly, "it was *my* turn to hex the gift!"

They all laughed as Remus pulled the paper off a large box and shook it.

"Do you think it bites?" asked Peter.

Remus smirked. "If it does, I'll just bite it back."

Lily looked up in time to see Petunia wince and step back into the kitchen.

Remus opened the box and pulled out a leather case. He turned it in his hands to feel the smoothness of the leather and the cool touch of the brass clasps.

"Look at the top, Remus," prodded Lily.

He did and, with his fingers, slowly traced the gold lettering stamped in the corner.

"Professor R.J. Lupin," he read in a whisper.

The room went quiet.

"It's amazing," he averred to Lily and James. "Really, beautiful. Thank you. But... 'Professor'? Isn't that, um... a bit grand?"

"It is not too grand," said James, clearly pleased. "It is what you do. You teach. The title goes with the job. That old raggedy satchel won't do for a professional!"

Lily, sitting next to Remus, gave him a hug and held on. "Besides, I have a feeling that there's more in your future than just tutoring," she said with confidence.

Remus laughed. "All right! I give up. I know better than to argue with your feelings, Evans!"

Helene grabbed the case from Remus. "Don't hog it now! Let's all have a look!" she said, opening it up to poke through all of its compartments as Peter and Annette looked

over her shoulder.

A little while later, Peter and James were fiddling with the Evans' television set in the family room, gawking at the rapidly shifting moving pictures, and trying to wrestle the remote control away from each other. Remus, Helene and Annette were in the more formal front room, rummaging through the odd disc collection they'd found, and laughing at the strange, unmoving photographs on the disc covers and the funny names of the musical groups. Lily had put on a record that she said was by a group called 'The Beatles'. Strains of *Help! I need somebody... Not just anybody...* filled the room.

"I think that one is pretty cute," said Annette, pointing to the picture on the disc cover of a boy with a mop of dark hair and soulful eyes.

"But they don't look like insects!" Helene said, confused. She shuffled through more of the disc covers and pulled one out. "Look, these blokes are named after rocks!"

Lily and Sirius sat at the kitchen table with a wide-eyed Petunia, who sat frozen, thinking perhaps that if she didn't move she might be invisible.

"This is delicious, Evans!" exclaimed Sirius, holding the glass up to the light, entranced by the bubbles in his drink. "What's it called?"

"Coca-Cola," she replied. "And no, you can't get pissed off it."

"Pity," he sighed, grabbing a handful of crisps from the bowl on the table and stuffing them into his mouth. Try as she might, Petunia was unable to stifle an involuntary cringe, which Sirius noted with amusement. Lily watched with morbid fascination as Sirius pulled his chair closer to Petunia's, swallowed the crisps, took another swig of his cola, and graced Petunia with one of his trademark, swashbuckling, lady-killer smiles.

Petunia looked as if she were being stalked by a lion. She glanced at Lily, as if asking for help. Lily just shrugged.

This is one lion she'll have to escape from on her own she thought. It was a bit unkind in the face of Petunia's distress but, at the moment, Lily was both peeved at her sister and curious to see what Sirius would do.

"Petunia, isn't it?" said the lion to its prey.

Petunia jerked her head in the semblance of a nod.

"I'm Padfoot," Sirius said with a toss of his hair. "Just a nickname, but I'd like it if you'd called me that."

Petunia just gaped, and Sirius looked deeply in her eyes. "I understand that you haven't met many wizards before," he drawled, leaning in towards her.

Petunia looked as if she might spontaneously combust. Lily fought the urge to burst out laughing.

"I could show you some *real* magic..."

"Sorry we're late!"

Alice entered the kitchen followed by Frank Longbottom who, dropping a heavy sack onto the table, drew Sirius' attention away from a visibly shaking Petunia. Lily wasn't sure if she was relieved or sorry that her sister had been spared further torture at Sirius' hands.

Frank took out a bottle of Ogden's from the sack. He moved to hand it to Lily, but Sirius jumped up and caught the bottle as deftly as he might a Quaffle and took out his wand to open it. Petunia squeaked and pushed her chair as far into the corner as it could go.

Alice hugged Lily, looking apologetic.

"We've been at Frank's house," Alice said wearily, her head on Lily's shoulder. "His mother was having tea and we couldn't get out...er...we had to stay until it was over. Augusta can be a bit, um, persuasive."

"That's all right," said Lily. "I'm just glad you've both made it. It's been great for Remus to have us all here." She gestured to her sister. "You remember Petunia? 'Tune, this is Alice and Frank. They are engaged as well."

Alice and Frank looked at each other with a smile, a bit embarrassed.

Remembering her manners as she'd promised, Petunia found her voice. "Yes, nice to see you again, Alice. F Frank. Um... congratulations."

Lily's estimation of Petunia went up a few notches. She knew that her sister was terrified and would have preferred to face a herd of rampaging rhinos rather than a roomful of wizards. That she was able to manage her fear and remain seated in the face of it all, made Lily think that, had she gone to Hogwarts, her sister might have been sorted into Gryffindor as well. An odd lump formed in her throat, and she forced herself to swallow it.

Frank pulled out a copy of the *Daily Prophet* and slapped it down with a vengeance on the kitchen table. "It's getting worse! Look!" He pointed at the screaming headlines. Sirius leaned over to read.

'Dark Mark in Devonshire! Family of Eight Killed by Death Eaters! Muggle-borns Targeted!!'

"It's the second time this month," Sirius muttered, glancing nervously at Lily.

Lily felt her blood turn to ice. She knew that her family was a target, but this reality was one that she tried not to think about. For once, she was glad that Petunia didn't live in her world and was ignorant as to the danger that seemed to grow more insistent and closer each day.

Alice reached over and turned to the middle of the newspaper.

"Of course they'll put the worst news in front and bury the good news in the middle! Look," she pointed, "here it says three Death Eaters were captured and sent to Azkaban!"

"Sadly, they're getting more of us than we are of them," said Frank. He was an Auror in his second year of training, just one year ahead of them out of school. Alice had followed him and was finishing her first year. Frank had been on patrols and had already seen, first hand, the devastation and terror caused by Voldemort's troops.

Lily frowned. "Azkaban's the wizard prison, right?"

Sirius looked at her in surprise. "You don't know about Azkaban?"

"Well, I've heard about it of course, and seen it mentioned in the *Prophet*, but I don't know much about it."

"Well, yes. It is the wizard prison, luv," Sirius said casually. Petunia was sitting behind Lily, watching him as if he'd grown an extra head. He winked and graced Petunia with another one of his charming smiles.

"It's in the middle of the North Sea, impregnable and guarded by Dementors," Sirius added in his most dramatic voice.

"But, Dementors are... vile...." Lily said with a grimace. Alice shuddered and Frank held her closely.

Sirius continued, noting Petunia's increased discomfort. "Yes, Dementors are vile creatures, really bad sorts. Not like us," he said, directing this comment to Petunia. "Not even human."

Petunia's irises were fully open, her mouth agape, her skin pale.

"But why do they use Dementors if they're so horrid?" Lily asked.

"Well, that's it precisely. It's because they are horrid!" Sirius said with a roll of his eyes. "When they come near, they drain every happy memory out of you and leave you weak and hopeless. And then, when they've done with that," he leaned in closer to Petunia and whispered, "they *kiss* you..."

Petunia gasped.

"... and *suck* the soul right out of your body!"

Petunia let out an ear-piercing scream, leapt to her feet, pushed past Lily, and ran outside through the kitchen's back door. Her screams echoed back to them as they heard her run towards the street.

For just a moment, those in the kitchen were frozen in place, staring at the still-open back door. Then James ran in, followed by the others.

"What in bloody hell was that?" James asked as he went to Lily who was staring at the back door. Then they all began speaking at once.

"Sirius!" "Who screamed?" "What was that about?" "Have you lost your mind, man?" "What happened?"

"QUIET!" yelled Frank, whose deep, commanding voice managed to cut through the confusion.

Frank was glaring at Sirius and all eyes followed his gaze. Sitting at the kitchen table, Sirius focussed on the pattern he was etching nervously around the top rim of his empty glass. He glanced up.

"What?" Sirius asked, his voice pitched a bit higher than usual.

James moaned and shook his head. Remus pinched the bridge of his nose. Peter grinned like the fox had been caught in the henhouse.

Sirius set his chin defiantly. "Lily asked me about Azkaban and the Dementors, and I told her! It's not my fault her barmy sister went mental!" he scowled.

Frank turned to Lily. "Alice and I will go after her. I'm sure she hasn't gone far." They were out of the door before she had a chance to reply.

Annette grabbed Helene, Peter, and Remus. "Let's go look at some more of those song discs in the front room. It's too crowded in here, anyway." The boys looked at her dumbly, so Annette took Remus by the arm and Helene pulled Peter, who stopped on his way out of the kitchen to grab the bowl of crisps.

Lily started to shake as James held her. "She was trying so hard not to be afraid," Lily said, wringing her hands. "I didn't even try to help her. It's not fair to expect her to accept all... this...." She made a random gesture.

James looked sharply at Sirius over Lily's shoulder, his expectations made clear.

"Um, sorry, Lily." Sirius shifted awkwardly in his chair. "I didn't mean to scare her. I was just having a bit of fun...."

Lily was on him like a niffler finding gold. "Terrorising Muggles is your idea *of* fun, Black?"

Sirius leapt to his feet. "That's not fair, Evans. I wasn't *terrorising* her!"

James got between them before it could escalate further. "Right. Padfoot, that was a completely brainless thing to do. Lily, he's really sorry, and I'm sure he'll find some way to make it up to Petunia. *Won't you, Sirius?*"

James' glare brooked no argument.

"Sure, mate," Sirius grumbled, looking sideways at Lily. "I'll...I'll send flowers, or something. Beg her forgiveness. Whatever."

At that moment, they heard the front door open with a bang and footsteps pounding through the front room. Then, Petunia flew into the family room, looking like she'd been through a storm: her hair was wild and her eyes were bleary and wide-eyed. But despite her wayward appearance and the manner of her departure, she appeared oddly calm. Sirius ran towards her. Annette, Remus, and Helene stayed a safe distance away, watching from the front room doorway. Lily and James watched from the kitchen pass-through.

"Listen, Petunia," Sirius began, "I'm really sorry...."

But Petunia ignored him and looked vacantly at Lily, as if she had never seen her before. Seeing her like this sent off alarm bells, but Lily was confused as to what it meant.

"Lily," said Petunia, her voice sounding rather mechanical and stilted, "there are some men...they say they're detectives...who want to have a word with you. About some trouble in the neighbourhood. They are waiting outside." Petunia made a strange, dislocated gesture with her arm that looked as if it were being controlled by some unseen puppeteer.

"What are detectives?" Peter asked before Helene jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow.

"Shhh!"

"Ow!"

"Don't make it worse," she whispered.

Sirius was studying Petunia, and then, noting Lily's expression, he pulled out his wand and pointed it at Lily's sister. "*Finite Incantatem!*"

Petunia's eyes immediately cleared, and she looked around her in confusion and then in panic.

"*Imperius!*" gasped James.

The next second, chaos erupted.

Petunia looked at Sirius, his wand still pointing in her direction, and she began to shriek. Petunia's shriek seemed to trigger flashes of exploding red light in the front room.

Helene screamed; Remus shouted. The mirror over the fireplace shattered, tables overturned and the four in the front room were either Stunned or Petrified before they could reach for their wands. Then the two 'detectives' flew into the family room, one disarming Sirius and the other grabbing Petunia from behind, pinning her arms to her sides and pointing a wand at her throat. Petunia was beyond hysteria, screaming in an endless, high-pitched panic. All this happened in mere seconds.

As soon as the attack began, James had pulled Lily down to the kitchen floor and fought to hold her there.

Lily struggled in a panicked whisper. *"Petunia! I have to do something!"*

"Stay down for now, until we know what they want," whispered James, *"and who they are!"*

The two men were both dressed in Muggle clothes: black jumpers and trousers. The one holding Petunia was tall and muscular. The one holding Sirius at bay with his wand was short and stocky. For all their efforts in the last few minutes, they hadn't even broken a sweat.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" growled Sirius. "Let her go!"

Petunia kept screaming.

The one pointing his wand at Sirius laughed. "Oh, so brave are ya'? Are you the Mudblood's lover?"

"Where is she? The sister?" barked the taller one. "We know she's here." He squeezed Petunia harder, and she screamed louder. "This one told us she was here." He put his head down to whisper to Petunia, "Very helpful of you, little Muggle." Then he bit her ear. The screaming suddenly stopped as Petunia fainted dead away in the intruder's grasp.

He rearranged his grip to maintain his hold on her collapsed body, his wand still pointing steadily at her head. "The sister comes out now or this one is dead."

"What do you want with Lily?" Sirius asked, trying to stall for time. Unseen by the intruders, Frank and Alice had returned and, making eye contact with Sirius, were hiding in the front room.

Lily pushed James away and bounded to her feet, skittering into the kitchen doorway. She was terrified, but knew enough to hold herself back from tackling the man holding her sister. She felt James at her side, standing but still hidden.

"Frank and Alice are here. Front room. Wait for their signal," whispered James. Behind her back, she handed James her wand. Just in time.

"Expelliarmus!" the shorter intruder shouted, but Lily held up her hands.

"I don't have my wand!" Then she put her hands on her hips as if she were Head Girl scolding a pair of unruly second-years. "I'm here now, so you can let go of my sister."

"Not until you've gone with us, Mudblood," threatened the tall one.

"I'm not doing anything until you tell me who the bloody hell you are and what you want with me," Lily shot back defiantly.

Sirius stared at her like an adoring puppy.

"I don't know why he wants you, or what he needs you for," the shorter one said with some impatience. "I'm not one to ask questions, neither. He just said to bring the Mudblood." He tugged at the neck of his jumper. He looked at his partner and growled. "Let's just get on with this so I can get out of these bloody clothes!" Keeping his eye and wand on Sirius, he moved slowly towards Lily.

Sirius had backed up to a small table and put his hand around a small, black object.

"He?" Lily asked, already knowing the answer to this question.

Sirius smirked. "Lily, how thoughtful of you to invite Death Eaters to our party!"

He nodded and laughed. On Sirius' cue, a round, black disc flew across the room and, as it neared the roof, a blast of light shattered it into thousands of pieces of vinyl. When the intruders ducked against the falling debris, Sirius pushed a button on the remote control, and the television came alive with the sudden sounds and sights of scantily clad girls singing and dancing. The combined effects caused the two Death Eaters to momentarily lose their focus.

It was enough.

Frank and Alice burst out of the front room and, with a flash from their wands, the two Death Eaters fell, Stunned. Released from her captor's grasp, Petunia collapsed, still unconscious, to the floor. James handed Lily her wand and, to finish the job, they quickly cast Body-Bind spells on the two Death Eaters. It was over as quickly as it had begun.

Sirius ran into the front room with Alice and Frank to help their friends. Lily ran to Petunia and cradled her sister's head in her lap. James knelt next to her.

"You sure know how to throw a party, Evans!" he teased, belying the fear still evident in his eyes.

Frank emerged from the front room supporting Annette on his arm. She was still reeling from the spell, holding her head and wincing.

"Alice has gone off to the Ministry," Frank informed them, as if this were just another routine day on the job. "The Aurors on duty should be here shortly to take care of these two," he said, indicating the bound invaders.

"Thanks, Frank," said James with a grin. "You should get a promotion for this one. Lucky for us you're on our side!"

Frank blushed, not one to take compliments very well.

Lily cast an *Ennervate* spell on Petunia, who awoke screaming beyond all reason, picking up where she had left off. Both she and James had to struggle to hold her down.

"James, I have to do something. I have to get her help..." Lily said, casting about frantically for an idea. Her parents couldn't help. She couldn't Apparate with her sister. She needed someone nearby. She had a car....

Corran. His home was close by.

"I'm taking her to Corran's house," she said decisively. "It'll only take about twenty minutes to get there by car. He'll know what to do."

"Why Corran?" James asked, puzzled.

Petunia's screams hadn't diminished, and she continued to thrash about as they tried to maintain their hold on her. Lily looked at James with an expression that required no further explanation.

James nodded. "Right. I'll go with you!"

"No, James. I need you to stay here. Help... put things back to rights before my parents come home." Lily looked at the two rooms, now in shambles. "If they do get back before we return, I need you to explain what happened. All right?"

James didn't seem pleased to have to be the one to explain *all this* to Lily's parents, but he grunted in agreement. "How are you going to move her?" he asked, still holding down the screaming and struggling Petunia.

Lily sighed. "Sorry, 'Tune, I hate to do this, but..." She pointed her wand. "*Stupefy!*"

The room finally went quiet, the echo of Petunia's screams still ringing in their ears. Lily, red-faced and sweating, pushed the tousled hair out of her face and stood up.

"Now, help me get her into the car."

Lily barely remembered driving to the Mastens' house. She vaguely recollected blurting out to Corran, in a rush of words, all that had happened as he carried Petunia into his house. She recalled him laying her sister on the sofa in his drawing room and his wife, Heather, handing her a cup of tea, and instructing Corran to fetch a blanket for Petunia.

"What a fright for you all!" exclaimed Heather, patting Lily's hand and looking ruefully at Petunia's recumbent form.

Lily just nodded, shaking and blowing her nose into the handkerchief Heather had conjured for her. She'd managed to hold herself together until Petunia was in safe hands, then she'd fallen apart. She looked up at Heather, grateful for the calm she saw in the older woman's bright blue eyes.

Corran re-entered the drawing room with the requested blanket, followed by Albus Dumbledore. "We have another visitor, dear!" Corran announced cheerfully, seemingly pleased by the arrival of all these unexpected guests.

Lily leapt to her feet, both in surprise and relief. "Professor! How did you...? Who...?"

"Frank Longbottom sent a message. He thought I might be useful. Resourceful boy, Mr. Longbottom," Dumbledore said, placing his vein-shot hand on Lily's shoulder in a gesture of reassurance. He took in the sight of Petunia lying unconscious on the sofa.

Heather drew up one of the large, padded leather chairs. "Please sit, Albus. Tea?"

"Something stronger, I think. One for Lily as well. It looks as if she's had a trying afternoon."

Lily didn't argue as Heather bustled off towards the kitchen. Dumbledore, Corran and Lily all sat staring at Petunia as if she were a fish out of water. Which of course, she was.

"Professor, Corran," Lily started, relieved to find her voice came out at a normal pitch, "You-Know-Who...."

"Voldemort," said Dumbledore quietly.

"Voldemort," repeated Lily, "sent two Death Eaters to my house... for me. But, why? What would they want with me?"

"Do you think they knew your friends would be there?" asked Corran.

Lily shook her head. "No, luckily for us. I can't imagine what would have happened had I been there alone with just Petunia... or my parents." The thoughts she could imagine caused a shiver of ice to cascade down her spine.

"Yes, you were fortunate," nodded Dumbledore, throwing a glance at Corran.

Corran leaned over to take a hold of Lily's shaking hand. "Is it possible, dear, that you've spoken about your work in the Department with anyone?"

Lily's eyes widened and gasped. "No! Of course not! I couldn't do so anyway, after taking the Vow!"

"Yes, that's true. Not since then. But, is it possible you might have mentioned something to someone before then? Certainly, your friends all know where you work, even if they don't know the specifics."

The idea that she could have done something like that, to be so unthinkingly responsible for what happened today, was horrifying. Her mind raced as she racked her memory for what she could have said and to whom.

"I don't know! I - I may have; I don't recall! But I can't imagine any of my friends would ever go to... to..." she gasped. "This is my fault!" Her hands flew to her mouth, and she burst into tears all over again.

Corran conjured a second handkerchief, and Lily accepted it wordlessly.

"The issue seems to be," reflected Dumbledore calmly, "less about who said something and more about what Voldemort wants with this information, or what he thinks Lily can provide him. Clearly, Voldemort has deemed whatever it is you are working on valuable enough to think that you can help him get at it."

"Do you...think he'll...come after me again?" Lily asked between hiccups, trying to regain her composure.

Dumbledore stroked his beard. Corran pulled his chair closer to Lily and held her hand. She squeezed his hand in return and gave him a weak but grateful smile.

"No, I don't think he'll go that route again," concluded Dumbledore. "He doesn't like to repeat tactics that have failed. He may, however, try to get the information some other way. Corran, I suggest that you look into increasing the security in the Department, and speak to Esmé about placing additional protections in her Division as well. Forewarned is forearmed, I always say!"

It seemed as if that would be the end of the matter, until Lily noted Dumbledore turning his gaze back to Petunia.

"What can we do for her, Professor? She was frightened about all this before today, but, now... I think this may drive her completely 'round the bend!"

Heather had entered the drawing room, handing small glasses of port to both of them. Lily gulped hers down.

"I think a Calming Draught might help the young lady," Heather suggested, indicating Petunia. "I've brought a phial."

"Excellent suggestion, dear!" said Corran.

Lily watched Corran, Heather and Dumbledore consider the figure reclining on their sofa, as if they were studying a creature in the zoo. It made Lily very uncomfortable as she recalled the same look on Petunia's face watching her and her friends this afternoon. Apparently the feelings of distrust went both ways. This realisation made her unaccountably sad.

"Oblivate?" suggested Heather.

"No!" shouted Lily, startling them all. "I don't want you to poke holes in her mind! She may be a Muggle, but that doesn't give you any right to take her memories!"

"But, Lily, dear," said Corran with some sympathy, "you know that if the Ministry hears about her involvement, they'll require it anyway."

Lily's eyes narrowed and her voice went suddenly calm. If James were there, he'd have recognised it for the warning signal it was.

"Then, we'll just have to make sure they don't know she was involved, *won't we?*" she said, clipping her words with intent.

The Mastens looked at each other and shrugged, conceding, if not completely understanding.

"I agree with Lily, actually," said Dumbledore, drawing a look of surprise from the others. "I think that it's important to keep Petunia on our side, and she'll need those memories if we want her to be useful."

"Useful?" asked Corran. Lily frowned, uncertain where he was going with this.

"Nothing specific... yet. Call it a 'hunch'." He looked at Lily. "I promise that I will do nothing to harm your sister. In fact, I think it may help to protect her. Do you trust me?"

Lily hesitated, uncertain. Then she looked into her former Headmaster's eyes and felt both his power, concern for her and her sister, and his reassurance.

She nodded.

"Please be careful, sir. She's very frightened."

Dumbledore took the phial from Heather and raised the still-unconscious Petunia up to a sitting position. He eased the Calming Draught to her lips and helped her to swallow it.

"Lily, come sit here where she can see you." He indicated the space in front of Petunia. Lily dropped to a kneeling position.

Then he pointed his wand. "*Ennervate!*"

Petunia sputtered, wiped her mouth, and sat up, looking around the room wildly until she caught sight of her sister kneeling in front of her. The draught was working, since Petunia wasn't screaming, but she was still shaking. Lily drew her into a hug and held her there.

"Petunia, I'm so sorry all this happened! But you're safe. I'm safe. It's going to be okay!"

Petunia clung to Lily, unable to speak. Finally, breaking her embrace, Petunia looked around the room and took in the strange faces staring at her.

"Who are they?" she whispered to Lily.

Lily moved up onto the sofa and kept one arm around her sister's shoulder while the other held her hand.

"This is a co-worker of mine, Corran Masten, and his wife Heather. This is their house, Petunia. I brought you here because I thought they could help."

Heather smiled kindly. "Tea, dear? You look as if you could use a cuppa?"

Petunia nodded weakly. Tea sounded normal, and her throat was parched and sore.

Heather went off to make some more tea.

"And this is Professor Dumbledore, 'Tune. He's the Headmaster at my school."

Petunia shrank back from the sight of the elderly wizard, edging back so far that she was practically sitting in Lily's lap. Lily grimaced, knowing the sight of the Headmaster with his long beard and purple robes would be the visual epitome of 'magic' in her sister's eyes, but Dumbledore caught Petunia's gaze and held it without a word. They stayed this way for a few quiet minutes until Lily felt Petunia slowly relax the vicelike grip she had on her hand.

"It's nice to meet you, sir," said Petunia calmly. Lily looked at Dumbledore with suspicion, but the old man merely smiled sweetly.

"And it's my pleasure to meet you as well, Miss Evans. I was very sorry to hear about the disturbance at your party. I am equally regretful that you were forced to bring those two...gentlemen...into your home."

Petunia frowned. "But they didn't force me. I invited them in..." Her hand went to her mouth as the words slipped out.

"Indeed!" Dumbledore said, in what Lily could tell was mock surprise. "Well, that is very unfortunate!"

"How... how? Unfortunate?" stuttered Petunia, going pale.

"Well, in our world, Miss Evans, it means that you put your sister's life at risk. It's thanks to both her skill and the help of her friends that your own life was spared."

"That's... that's a good thing, isn't it?" she said weakly.

"Yes, very good, for all involved!" Dumbledore agreed with a nod. "But it does leave you with an obligation, my dear."

"A...what?" squeaked Petunia.

This was all getting to be a bit too much for Lily.

"Professor! Petunia isn't obligated to anything or anyone!"

Petunia whipped her head around, having forgotten for a moment that Lily was there. She looked at her sister with an expression of need that Lily hadn't seen in years. She hugged Petunia even more tightly.

Dumbledore shook his head. "I'm sorry, Lily, but she is. In the wizarding world, Petunia, which I know appears odd and frightening to you, we have rules and laws, just like in your world. Unbreakable laws. One of the oldest of those laws holds that if someone saves your life, you owe them a debt. A life debt. And if you are responsible for putting that person at risk to begin with...which you so clearly did...that doubly strengthens that debt. This means that you will remain bound to your sister in a very serious way, until that debt is paid."

Lily was furious. "Is this really necessary, Professor?" she hissed.

He opened his palms and shrugged. "It isn't a matter of necessity, my dear; it's just the truth, whether we voice that truth or not. It can't be undone, and it's important that your sister understand what's at stake. She is as bound to that debt as any magical person. Do you understand what I am saying, Petunia?"

Petunia Evans pulled herself upright and straightened her clothes. She was still shaking but looked at Albus Dumbledore without flinching. Lily stared at her sister,

impressed that she was bravely holding her own against the old wizard.

"I understand, sir. You needn't worry." Petunia turned to look at Lily, who felt fear, stubborn pride, anger and sadness in her sister's gaze.

"I always keep my promises and meet my obligations!"

Dumbledore stood up. "Well, then, that's all settled!" He reached down to shake Petunia's hand. "I'm delighted to have met you, dear girl. I hope to have the pleasure of speaking with you again in the future!"

Petunia pulled her hand out of Dumbledore's and nodded stiffly. "Forgive me if I say that I'm not looking forward to it, sir," she responded with a grim smile.

Lily felt her heart constrict, as she wondered where, how, and under what circumstances Dumbledore would find the need to speak to her sister again.

A/N: Corran and Heather Masten appear in this chapter courtesy of their creator, Morweniris. Corran's story is told in Mor's wonderful fic, Unspeakable Truth.

Thanks go to my super betas, celtmama and cappella_black for their diligence and efforts on my behalf.

Invitations and Obligations, Part 2: May 1978

Chapter 13 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Invitations and Obligations (Part 2): May 1978

Severus

Entering his home on Spinner's End, Severus dropped his parcels next to the sofa, shrugged off his robes and headed for the cabinet containing his store of spirits. Without much thought, he reached for the already opened bottle of Firewhisky and poured himself two fingers... no, three. It had been a bugger of a day. Malfoy was expecting the delivery of his most recent 'special order' at six o'clock, but until then, he'd relish this one, quiet hour.

With something between a grunt and a sigh, he sank into the sofa, took a long sip, and relished the heat of the liquor as it coursed down his throat. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Unbidden and unwelcome, the image of his last customer...the young woman with the child...flashed into his mind. His eyes popped open and he downed another swallow with a grimace.

He reached for the morning's post and newspaper, both resting on the end table next to the sofa. He preferred to sort through it after work; reading the *Prophet* in the morning tended to set his teeth on edge, making for a bad beginning to his day.

He skimmed through the newspaper, pointedly ignoring the sections filled with stories of Dark Marks, recent attacks, and other reports of violence. The headline on the fourth page, however, made him stop. The voice in his head told him sternly to '*Turn the page!*' but his instincts...and the photograph of a smiling Lily Evans watching a very animated James Potter...compelled him otherwise. He took another large gulp of his drink and began to read.

~*~

The Pureblood and the Muggle-born:

Enchanted Engagement or Misguided Match?

by Rita Skeeter

After announcing his engagement to Muggle-born witch, *Miss Lily Evans, Mr. James Potter*, only son of *Stephen and Emily Potter* and the grandson of the famous inventor *Ernest Potter*, seems to have anointed himself spokeswizard and champion of all Muggle-born witches and wizards. It has been reported that Mr. Potter has been making impromptu speeches in public, decrying the treatment of Muggle-borns by the general wizarding community. Some speculate that Mr. Potter is reacting to the supposed recent target of an attack on his betrothed by *You-Know-Who*. Others believe that his odd behaviour may be the result of some unnatural enchantment, cast by his red-haired fiancée. Miss Evans, daughter of Muggles Roger and Barbara Evans, is rumoured to be employed as an Unspeakable in the Ministry of Magic's Department of Mysteries. This reporter, however, was unable to confirm this speculation with Ministry officials, who declined to comment.

Last evening, Mr. Potter was overheard engaged in a lively discussion with patrons at one of Diagon Alley's finest dining establishments *The Treacle and Tart*

"If You-Know-Who has his way, Muggle-borns will be wiped out! Do you realise what that means for our world? If we turn our backs on this danger, if we don't stand together to fight against this evil, our world will be completely destroyed in just a few generations!"

His bride-to-be, wearing a simple, light-green Muggle garment, sat by his side, eyes glistening with grateful devotion. Gauging the reaction of the patrons listening to this diatribe, none seemed to take his dire warnings with any seriousness. Coming from such a noble lineage, one must wonder if it is wise for Mr. Potter to denigrate his heritage by vocally supporting such a mundane cause.

~*~

An unnatural enchantment, my arse. Potter's the one who should be ridiculed, not Lily.

Severus crumpled the rag, threw it in the fireplace, and set it afire. He watched it burn as he considered the 'supposed' attack on Lily. A fleeting moment of panic rippled lightly in his chest, as he considered the likelihood that the attack had been provoked by *his* information. Tossing back the rest of the Firewhisky, he pushed the thought quickly and roughly aside.

He shook his head and reached for the bottle of Ogden's.

Just one more before going off to meet Malfoy.

He replenished his glass and emptied it in two swift moves, then grabbed and donned his robes. As he did so, he espied a thickly folded parchment peeking out beneath some adverts in his post pile. Curious, he picked it up and traced the gold engraving of his name on the outer parchment. It was a traditional Muggle-style invitation:

Mr. and Mrs. Roger Evans and Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Potter

request the honour of your presence at the Wedding of their children

Lily Ana Evans

and

James Ernest Potter

9 June, Nineteen Hundred and Seventy Eight

at Five O'Clock in the evening

The event will be held at the Potters' home in Glenshire Abbey

Reception to follow

Please RSVP by Return Owl to the Potters

or by telephone to the Evans at 02864 272 811

Severus stared at the parchment in his hand, stunned. He was quite unable to absorb the idea that anyone would think that he'd ever attend this... this.... He swore and crushed the parchment in his hand, stuffed it into the pocket of his robes, picked up Malfoy's parcel, and stormed out of his house.

Severus paced fitfully while Malfoy checked the contents of the parcel, making circles around the private room at the Hog's Head Inn, an empty glass clutched in his hand.

"These appear in order," Malfoy commented with satisfaction. He glanced at the younger man. "Severus, please do stop before you gouge a rut in the parquet floor. I'd hate to be charged for its repair."

Severus paused in mid-stride and threw himself into one of the club chairs with a huff and a scowl. He lifted the glass and stared at it, wondering where its contents had gone.

"Anything you care to discuss?" Malfoy inquired.

"No."

"Ah, I see. Well, there is something I'd like to discuss, if you don't mind," said Malfoy in a tone that triggered Severus' 'be-on-guard' instinct. Severus lifted an eyebrow, his cue that he was listening.

"The Dark Lord has been extremely pleased with your work. The potions have all been expertly brewed and have proved most... effective."

Severus preened. He knew the potions were the most exacting and difficult he'd ever encountered, and he was exceedingly proud of his work. He drank in this praise like a tonic.

"The Dark Lord does not dispense his praise lightly," continued Malfoy. "Since your Apprenticeship with Dayfwydd is coming to an end, he has asked me to convey to you his third...and final...offer. It would be a singular honour for you to stand as his personal Potions master, and you would be an invaluable addition to his cohort. And, to convey his appreciation, the Dark Lord will ensure you have the finest facilities in which to work. What say you, Severus?"

Severus did not respond immediately and the silence hung heavily between them.

He felt his mouth go dry and the faint beginnings of a headache stir behind his eyes. The actuality of a personal laboratory was his fantasy come to life. A Potions master! The Dark Magic he had invoked in the creation of Voldemort's potions now pulsed in his blood, pulling at him, calling to him like a beacon in the fog. He nearly ached for it. Of course, he also knew that he wasn't being offered a genuine choice. It was as clear as the glass in his hand that either 'choice' would cost him his life: either his actual death or to live out his life stripped of free will and independence, all for a cause he didn't really believe in.

To give himself a moment away from Malfoy's expectant glare, to hold himself whole and uncompromised for one final moment, Severus closed his eyes, shoved his hands into the pockets of his robes, and drew them about himself like a security blanket. As he did so, the fingers of his left hand wrapped themselves around a crumbled piece of parchment.

. . .request the honour of your presence at the Wedding of their children. . .

Like a bolt of lightning, a shot of flaming hatred sparked from his fingertips and coursed straight to his heart. Another layer of protection was added to the wall that he had so carefully built around it, solid and unmoving.

Severus opened his eyes.

"Of course I accept, Lucius."

Malfoy smiled, happier than Severus had ever seen him.

"I'm so pleased!" he said, rising and extending his hand to Severus, who stood as well and accepted Malfoy's embrace.

This close, Severus could see flints of black in Malfoy's grey eyes as he gripped Severus' arm tightly, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "The Dark Lord would like to extend his thanks to you... personally."

The announcement caught Severus by surprise. "Now?"

"Our master does not like to postpone welcoming his new recruits."

His headache was spreading and he instantly regretted those three shots...no, four...of Firewhisky. Severus nodded.

Malfoy let go of his arm and stepped back. "Excellent!" He took up his cloak and gestured towards the doorway with a flourish.

"After you, Severus!"

Severus was surprised to find they had Apparated to Malfoy Manor, but he held his tongue as he followed Malfoy up the gravelled pathway towards the house.

However, instead of taking the steps up to the main entrance, Malfoy veered around to the side of the house and stopped by a blank, stone wall. Severus' guessed that this was not an ordinary wall, and his hunch was confirmed when Malfoy removed his leather glove and, wordlessly and without a wand, held his right hand up against the stone, tracing a shape with his fingertips. After a moment, an open archway appeared, not dissimilar to the one leading into Diagon Alley.

The edge of Malfoy's mouth turned up slightly. "This entranceway hasn't been needed for over one hundred years, Severus. I will teach you the spell, since, I imagine, you'll be here fairly frequently. Fortunately, I expect that you'll have a much more enjoyable time in the former dungeons than its previous occupants. Follow me."

Severus followed Malfoy and noted that, as soon as they had passed through the entrance, the archway disappeared into its stone-wall form.

"Lumos!"

The end of Malfoy's wand illuminated a long, dark, stone corridor, which slanted downwards as they walked, taking them further underground. It was very cold, and Severus could see the fog of his own breath that grew increasingly ragged the farther they descended. The corridor ended at a large oak door, which Malfoy opened with his wand and a muttered spell. It creaked as it opened to reveal a narrow, spiral, stone staircase.

"Nearly there," Malfoy called over his shoulder as he led the way down.

Another door and another spell later, Severus entered a large room, and Malfoy ignited the torches that were set into the walls, illuminating the space. Ignoring Malfoy's chuckles, Severus walked around the room, his mouth agape in astonishment, his fingers outstretched to touch, to absorb the reality of the most magnificent laboratory he had ever seen.

There were four large worktables with every manner of piping and glassware fitted to them. Shelf after shelf held every imaginable potions ingredient, clearly marked and ready for use. Cabinets with utensils and equipment to meet any need, lay waiting to be called to work. A large cupboard was filled with cauldrons of every type, size and thickness. And, best of all, one wall was lined with books. Severus recognised many of them from Lucius' library and many others that he had only heard about.

"This is glorious," Severus whispered, as if he were in a holy place.

"Well deserved, my young man," said a voice Severus did not recognise. He turned sharply to see Malfoy kneeling in obeisance to a tall man who Severus knew instinctively was Lord Voldemort. The most dangerous wizard alive held his hand gently atop Malfoy's head, and Severus forgot to breathe.

"You have done well, Lucius. I am pleased." His voice was soft, yet it conveyed a power that Severus had not experienced since he'd left Hogwarts; only the Headmaster had ever been able to evoke such a feeling.

"Thank you, my Lord," said Malfoy, rising to his feet and, with the flick of an eyebrow, motioned Severus forward. "This is our new Potions master, Severus Snape."

Severus stepped forward, sank to his knee and lowered his head, mimicking Malfoy's gesture. His heart thudded a tattoo in his chest. Incredibly, the Dark Lord knelt in front of him. Severus kept his eyes on the stone floor, too terrified to look up.

"You wish to join my service, young Snape?" Voldemort asked gently, with a kind of hopeful curiosity.

"Yes, my Lord." Severus was surprised that he was able to form coherent words.

"Let's have a look, shall we?"

Severus felt the wizard's long fingers clasp his jaw firmly, forcing his head up. Severus gasped in surprise as he saw dark eyes flash red as they captured his gaze. He felt Voldemort swiftly reach into his mind with amazing strength, probing and searching with precision and purpose. If Severus had thought to throw up his Occlumency shields, he would never have had a chance in the face of the wizard's vastly greater skill and power.

Instantly, memory after memory flashed through Severus' mind as Voldemort examined and discarded them rapidly: his mother, his father, living alone at Spinner's End, his studies, his teachers, his enemies, the Telling, his meetings with Malfoy, the apothecary and the dark enchantments already working in his blood. Severus felt his very soul sliced open for Voldemort's scrutiny; every failure, success, joy, disappointment and humiliation was poked and prodded and examined at will. As his memories and feelings about Dumbledore unfolded, he felt Voldemort pause to examine them more deeply, and seemed pleased to find Severus' distrust and dislike of his former Headmaster. When he evoked memories of Lily, Severus tried to pull away, to close his mind, but Voldemort held fast, ruthless in his thoroughness. He could feel the Dark Lord smile.

While Voldemort held his mind firmly, time had no proportion, weight, duration or meaning. The examination may have lasted minutes, hours or days. Finally, when the wizard released him, Severus slumped to the floor in exhaustion and nausea as the room spun around him.

Severus heard Voldemort and Malfoy speaking, but couldn't make out the words. He was relieved to be ignored for the moment and focused his energies on not being sick. He took several deep breaths, trying to force the bile he felt creeping up in his throat to recede.

After a moment, when the room had stopped moving, Severus felt a rush of anger and embarrassment at his display of weakness. He wanted to impress the Dark Lord, not collapse like some frightened first-year. But his self-recriminations were cut short when he felt Malfoy helping him to stand and press a bit of chocolate into his hand.

"Here, eat this," Malfoy said with encouragement. "It will help."

Malfoy didn't seem to be upset or disappointed. On the contrary, his mentor indicated that Severus had done well, and relief displaced his anger.

He took the chocolate and noticed that several leather chairs had appeared in the corner of the laboratory. Voldemort was sitting in one of them, observing Severus with a look of both fondness and curiosity; like watching a new pet to see how it would behave with its master. Which was, as Severus understood with sudden clarity, exactly what he was. Malfoy sat to one side of Voldemort and indicated that Severus should sit on the other.

Severus lowered himself into the indicated chair, took small bites of the chocolate, and, keeping his head down so that his hair masked his face, cast a sideways glance at Voldemort. He hadn't had a chance to really look before, and Severus wanted to take the measure of the man who was the most feared and powerful wizard in the world. He observed that Voldemort was lean and taut, and his fingers long and graceful. His face was oddly distorted, Severus noted, but it was his eyes that demanded attention. They were dark, almost as black as his hair, and the man never blinked. His eyes were hypnotic, Severus realised, and they refused to be ignored. From time to time, Severus thought he saw flashes of red flit across his pupils, the same red flash he had seen when Voldemort had invaded his mind, and an involuntary shiver went through him when he saw it again. Reclining, with his legs crossed casually, Voldemort didn't seem as frightening as he had before, but Severus was careful to keep his guard and Occlumency shields up... just in case.

"What do you think of your laboratory, Snape?" Voldemort asked with a sweep of his arm.

"My laboratory..." Severus repeated as he pulled himself out of his reverie over Voldemort's appearance.

"Malfoy, didn't you explain all this?" Voldemort snapped with a flash of impatience.

"Yes, sir," Malfoy replied quickly. "I think Snape is a bit... overwhelmed with your Lordships' generosity. Aren't you, Snape?"

The meaning of Malfoy's glare was obvious.

Severus snapped to attention. "Yes, I was not expecting anything nearly so... grand," Severus demurred as he watched Malfoy carefully.

Voldemort nodded. "I've been impressed by the quality of your work, Snape. It has been consistently excellent and already proved to be extremely valuable."

Severus bowed his head in a studied gesture of respect. "Thank you, sir."

He felt a jolt as Voldemort laid his hand atop his head. The hand began to stroke him with gentle and soothing caresses, and as he spoke, his voice resonated deeply, reaching into Severus' very soul.

"Yes, my son, I see great things in store for you. The knowledge you have always sought, I can give you. The respect that you crave will be yours. The yearnings of your heart will be granted. Everything you have dreamt of will be realised, young Snape. In your duty to me, all this can be yours."

Severus looked up, and as he fell into those fathomless eyes, he saw himself receiving the entirety of the Dark Lord's promise. He saw himself standing by the great wizard's side, powerful in his own right. He saw other wizards looking up to him with respect... even fear. He was suddenly filled with an unfamiliar rush of joy, and when Voldemort smiled at him, Severus felt something else, something he had so desperately longed for from his own father: acceptance and... *love*? Overwhelmed, he sensed tears prick at his eyes and he blinked hard to push them back.

"Don't be afraid of emotion, lad," Voldemort said, smoothly breaking eye contact, his pleasure evident. "I am delighted that I evoke such... devotion." He leaned in towards Severus and took both of his hands in his own, a double pair of long and slender fingers entwined. "It is time now," Voldemort whispered. "Are you ready to be bound to my service?"

Severus could only nod.

Yes. Devotion.

"Excellent! Malfoy, you will serve as our witness and assist our newest member." Voldemort stood and Severus followed, flooded with emotions he didn't recognise and couldn't describe, blood pounding in his head, his mind held in a thrall as moment followed moment in time with the beating of his heart. Severus knew there was no way to control the events that were unfolding and he had willingly relinquished any desire to do so.

He was only vaguely aware that Malfoy was helping him out of his robes and his shirt, leaving him bare-chested in the chill of the laboratory. He watched Voldemort remove his garments as well and wondered, with oddly detached curiosity, what the Binding would entail.

Then Voldemort was standing before him, and Severus was surprised to find that they were of equal height. In his imagination, Lord Voldemort was several heads taller.

"Extend your left arm," Lord Voldemort commanded.

Severus did so, and Voldemort grasped it, turning it so the smooth underside of his arm was facing upward.

"Severus," said Malfoy, who stood behind him, "you must not move. Do you understand?"

Severus nodded mutely.

Holding Severus' arm taut with his left hand, Voldemort began to chant a repetitive spell and trace a pattern across Severus' arm with the tip of his wand. Severus was rapt, caught up in the Binding, among the oldest of all Magic in the world. Suddenly, Voldemort's wand flared and a sharp flame began to eat into his exposed flesh, like a knife afire. Severus gasped, the pain beyond anything he had ever experienced, his eyes rolling back into his head. He was barely aware that Malfoy's hand was on his back, helping him remain upright. As the spell went on, and the fire continued to eat through the layers of his skin and bore into his veins, Severus began to scream, but Voldemort held tight and maintained his cadence. Just as he thought he might faint, the chanting stopped. Setting aside his wand, Voldemort placed the underside of his own left arm over Severus', now throbbing and covered with blood. Slowly, Voldemort lifted his arm until it hovered slightly above Severus' and, through the haze of his pain, Severus watched as the blood on his arm rose upwards, like hundreds of small red fingers reaching up towards the waiting skin of Voldemort's arm. As the rivulets of blood made contact with skin, they were absorbed, Severus' blood mingling with the Dark Lord's, binding one to the other, irrevocably, until death. Once the blood on Severus' arm was gone, Voldemort sealed the wound with his wand, leaving the reddened outline of a skull and serpent; the Binding and the Marking were complete.

As Voldemort released his grip, Severus collapsed into Malfoy's waiting arms, whimpering as the echoes of searing pain still screamed through his body. Malfoy helped him to sit atop one of the worktables, and began to expertly cover his arm with a numbing salve.

With a gesture, Voldemort was fully clothed once again and stood in front of Severus, his smile more twisted than before, his eyes flashing red.

"You will be reporting to Malfoy, Snape. But make no mistake," he said, trailing one finger gently down the length of Severus' face, "you belong to me." He grasped Severus' left arm and touched the newly made Mark. It took every ounce of Severus' remaining energy not to flinch or wince.

"When I call, you will appear at my side. When I bid, you will comply. When you disappoint me, you will feel my displeasure." Voldemort dropped Severus' arm.

"I'll expect you here tomorrow, Snape," Voldemort said, in a tone far more perfunctory than the caressing voice he'd used before the Binding. "There is much work to do."

Severus nodded weakly. Although he was still disoriented by the Binding spell, he was aware that something had changed in the voice that commanded him. Malfoy helped him off the table and indicated he should kneel. He did.

"Yes, my Lord. I will be here to do your bidding." He bowed his head. "I am always at your service."

Voldemort granted him a genuine smile, and then he was gone.

A/N: My thanks to my two diligent betas, celtmama and capella_black.

Invitations and Obligations, Part 3: October 1978

Chapter 14 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Invitations and Obligations (Part 3): October 1978

If one were to ask any member of the Order of the Phoenix where precisely its headquarters were located, none would be able to say for certain. They might guess that it was in the countryside, which would be true, since the usual sounds of the city did not reach Phoenix Farm. The only things to be heard here were birds, the wind, the rustling of the trees, the voices of Order members as they went about their business or the *pops!* and *cracks!* that signified their comings and goings. Or, they might say it was south of Hogwarts, which would also be true, because they'd noticed that both autumn and the first snows of winter came later than they did in the colder climes of Scotland. But the only one with the ability to pinpoint its exact location on a map, were he so inclined, would be the Order's leader and Secret-Keeper, Albus Dumbledore.

The Order's headquarters were comprised of an old farmhouse and several outbuildings, all situated in a clearing surrounded by forest. In addition to having been made Unplottable, there was no road...paved or otherwise...which led to it, preventing hikers or other Muggles from stumbling upon it unawares. Even communications were limited in and out of headquarters, to prevent tracking by unwanted eyes, including their enemies as well as their purported allies in the Ministry. Thus, owls did not fly in and out, and broom travel was prohibited. The only methods of permissible communications were the use of Floo fire in emergencies and their individual Patronus charms, conveniently invented by Dumbledore himself. The user's Patronus was a singular form of sending messages, unreadable by anyone other than another member of the Order.

By all appearances, Phoenix Farm was a perfect bucolic setting, but its peaceful exterior masked the seriousness of its true purpose: to provide a logistical centre of operations for the Order of the Phoenix, and its mission to defeat Lord Voldemort.

According to the Ministry of Magic and its official point of view, the Order didn't exist. Unofficially, however, Dumbledore's 'irregulars' were considered a useful resource for underground surveillance and intelligence. This information was used to assist the Ministry's official forces, the Aurors and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement officers, in their efforts to mitigate the increasing number of Death Eater attacks.

Albus Dumbledore, however, had another purpose for the Order. In the face of an official body that was often encumbered by political machinations, bureaucracy, enemy infiltrations, and an unfortunate penchant for corruption, Dumbledore had deemed that it was necessary to establish an independent entity, one that could use the Ministry's resources to its own advantage. He'd learned the necessity of working outside official channels the hard way, in the wasted years it took to finally defeat Grindelwald. And so, while the Order was happy feed the Ministry helpful information, the intelligence they so painstakingly gathered was used by the Order of the Phoenix for its own purposes: to sabotage and subvert Voldemort's plans whenever and wherever possible.

~*~ **Sunday** ~*~

Peter

Peter was nearly beside himself with excitement in the days leading up to this one, his first day as a recruit into the Order of the Phoenix! James and Lily had already been to their first meeting and began training soon after their wedding, and Sirius had joined shortly after that. Remus, he'd been surprised to discover, had been invited into the Order before he'd even finished school, which finally explained the reasons for his extended absences over the last year. And today was his turn! Early on this Sunday morning, Peter rushed to meet with his former Headmaster in Diagon Alley in front of Flourish and Blotts.

"Good morning, Mr. Pettigrew," said Dumbledore genially as Peter approached. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir! How will we be travelling there to..."

"The Farm?" Dumbledore interrupted.

Peter surmised that he should be more discreet and nodded. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"You'll Side-Along with me. I escort all new recruits on their first visit. It helps to ensure security, you see. After today, you may Apparate there yourself or, if needed, by using one of the Order Portkeys."

Peter nodded again, his excitement growing. "But where is the... Farm, sir?"

"Unfortunately, I can't answer that particular question. Again, security and all that. Any other questions, Mr. Pettigrew?"

"No, sir. I'm ready."

Dumbledore held out his arm and, as he took it, Peter was swept along with his former Headmaster to Phoenix Farm.

They set down in the yard of the old farmhouse, which stood amid several outbuildings of what had once been an actual working farm. Peter was pleased to see James, along with a yellow-haired man Peter didn't know, coming to greet him.

James pulled Peter into a one-armed hug. "You made it, Wormtail! Did you have a nice trip? Hello, Professor!"

"Mr. Potter," acknowledged Dumbledore with a smile. "How is the lovely Mrs. Potter doing?"

"She's wonderful, sir!" said James with his usual in-love grin. "Off with Emmeline, working up some pretty tricky charms."

"I'm delighted to hear it!" Dumbledore smiled and turned to the other man. "Mr. Podmore, how are things today?"

"Quiet, sir," the man replied. "Been expecting Dearborn to show today, but we haven't seen him yet."

Dumbledore nodded. "Please inform me when he arrives, will you, dear boy? I'll be in my office. But first I'm going to stop in the kitchen to see if Emmeline has baked some of her special biscuits. I've been thinking about them all day!" He looked down at Peter. "These two will take you from here, Mr. Pettigrew. Good luck and glad to have you with us!"

"Thank you, sir," Peter said, standing up as straight as he could as Dumbledore ambled towards the main house.

"Peter, this is Sturgis Podmore," said James in introduction. "Podmore was two years ahead of us in school. This is Peter Pettigrew, one of ours!"

Podmore and Peter shook hands. "One of them Marauders, eh?" Podmore queried. Peter glanced sideways at James, who was smiling broadly.

"Um, yes," Peter replied, uncertain as to whether this was a good thing or not.

"Good!" Podmore said with a nod of approval. "That means you've already developed some valuable skills, as I've seen for myself. Good for the Order, Pettigrew!" Podmore's square jaw widened into a smile. "I'm to show you around before the meeting, to get a lay of the land. Follow me!"

Walking around the grounds, Peter could see that the only remnants of Phoenix Farm's previous incarnation were to be found in a small, outer barn, where a small number of cackling hens and braying goats were kept to provide milk and eggs for the Order members in residence.

As they rounded the main house, a short witch with long, dark brown hair was tending a nice, large garden, situated near a side door that appeared to lead into the kitchen. Coming closer, the woman paused to look up with a handful of weeds in one hand and tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear with the other.

"Hello, ducks!" she called. "A new one?" She stood and took Peter's outstretched hand.

"Peter Pettigrew, ma'am," he said. "Pleased to meet you!"

"Dorcas Meadowes is our Healer-in-Residence," said Podmore. "Infirmary duty, basic field potions and supplies and, um, other special projects." Podmore looked at a pile of wooden beams and construction supplies lying beyond the garden.

"I can see that Hagrid hasn't gotten far on the greenhouse, Dorcas," he said with a knowing smirk.

Dorcas stared at the unfinished building with a dark frown. "He promised to finish it before winter, but at the rate he's going, it'll be next summer!"

Podmore laughed. "The book wagers are odds-on that you're right; the money's on springtime." Dorcas flung a clod of dirt at him in exasperation, but Podmore just laughed.

Peter looked at James in surprise. "Hagrid? From school? He's in the Order too?"

"Dumbledore needs every bit of help he can get," James said, "and he trusts Hagrid with his life."

"Of course," added Podmore, "he can only help when he's here, and Hogwarts keeps him pretty busy." He turned to James. "Not all of us can be 'To the Manor Born', like you and Black. Some of us have to work days to earn a living. Right, Pettigrew?"

They walked towards the back of the Farm. Where the growing fields had once flourished, wild brush and trees had since reclaimed the land.

"Are you and Sirius here every day, James?" Peter asked, feeling a bit of envy flare within him.

"Padfoot is here a fair amount of time. He even has his own room in the farmhouse," James said. "I come during most days, but Lily prefers us to go home at night, after training. Says we need a bit of privacy," he added, pink spots glowing on his cheeks.

They had stopped in a large, open space and Peter observed several odd bits of wood in the shape of houses, fences at odd angles and fake hillocks in various locations.

"This is our outdoor training field," Podmore explained. "Moody has it set up for drills in outdoor defensive manoeuvres. He transfigures the space into whatever we need it to be. We also train in the forest," Podmore said, gesturing to the thick close of trees that surrounded the farm, "and in the main barn for indoor manoeuvres."

"Alastor Moody?" Peter said, his eyes wide with astonishment. Moody was a famous Auror, known for his dogged ruthlessness. Peter had read about him in the *Prophet* several times. "How can he be in the Order? He's an Auror!"

Podmore shrugged. "Dumbledore has several secret contacts in the Auror Office, including Moody. We may give the Ministry information, but it helps to have intelligence flowing both ways, if you catch my drift."

"Moody is amazing!" exclaimed James. "Scary as hell, but the best. He's tough, though. I ached like the devil after my first week with bruises from head to foot!"

Peter wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. Unless he was in his Animagus form, he wasn't very good at physical exertions, strenuous or otherwise. His mother had always been upset when he was out of breath for any reason, so Peter had made it a habit to avoid any type of exercise.

As they walked back to the farmhouse, Peter discovered that not only was Moody responsible for their training, but he was also Dumbledore's senior officer, charged with coordinating all Order missions. Peter was suddenly gripped with worry that he might not be able to do this. James, however, caught his expression.

"Don't worry, Peter. Everyone gets assigned to the tasks they're best at. I bet your work in the Floo office will be right helpful! But we all have to go through training, to be prepared, don't we? Never know when we might be faced with a surprise attack."

This was not terribly reassuring to Peter, but he nodded to James with a weak smile. It wouldn't do to show he was afraid, not on his very first day.

~*~ **Monday** ~*~

The next afternoon, Peter was at work, struggling to manage a blockage in the Floo district near Dorset. He'd had to send out a team to the site and was hoping they'd have it all sorted out before the end of the day so he could get to Phoenix Farm in time for training.

Peter heard, rather than saw, his supervisor approach, the tap-tap of his purple boots giving him away.

"Status report, Mr. Pettigrew?"

"Watson and Calloway have been on site, sir, since noon." Peter glanced at the Floo map, with its bright green, pulsing circle. "The flow has increased in that area, so they are making some progress." He pointed to the green dot. "See? It's gotten smaller," he said, his voice wavering.

Mr. Stenwethers frowned, his foot still tapping. "This is the type of disruption that shouldn't have required a site visit, Pettigrew."

Peter didn't respond, but he felt sweat begin to creep down the back of his neck.

"This is the type of disruption that is caused when one is distracted and unable to focus their energies at the task at hand, Pettigrew."

"I-I'm sorry, sir. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again." Peter clutched at his hands and felt his face heat with embarrassment.

"Make sure of it. You'll remain on duty until the situation is resolved." Mr. Stemwithers turned on his purple heel and strode away.

Peter let go of the breath he'd been holding and dropped his head into his hands. His first day at Phoenix Farm had been exhausting and frightening. It was no wonder that he had trouble concentrating at work today. And he'd be going back tonight, and every night this week until Friday, when the newer recruits would be given a night off.

Peter sighed but returned his gaze to the map in front of him with resolve. Yesterday, Moody had told them there were going to be gruelling times ahead and they would have to maintain constant vigilance. He'd just have to apply that lesson to remaining sharp at work.

~*~ **Tuesday** ~*~

Phoenix Farm's main structure was a two-floored, wood-beamed, old farmhouse. In its dining room, Peter and the other recruits were gathered around a magically expanded table, where a Pensieve, several scrolls of parchment, some maps, and photographs of presumed and known Death Eaters were laid about. Marlene McKinnon and Edgar Bones were instructing them on intelligence gathering and analysis.

"Potter, how do you suppose you can identify a Death Eater when they're all in the same ridiculous get up?" Bones asked, looking at James.

There was tittering around the table, but a sharp glare from Bones silenced them at once. Bones wasn't big, but he was solid, and his dark, brown eyes told them he was all business.

James pulled a few of the photographs towards him and studied them seriously.

"You might be able to identify them by the way they walk, or their hair...if their hoods are down...or their voices. If you could get close enough to hear them."

"Excellent, Mr. Potter," nodded McKinnon.

"Their shoes," added Alice.

"Hey, not fair!" Sirius chirped. "She's already learned this in Auror training."

Alice stuck her tongue out at him.

"Children!" snapped McKinnon. Her voice was stern, but there was an indulgent smile on her face. Marlene McKinnon, in contrast to the heavy foreboding personality of Edgar Bones, was light and cheerful. A witch a bit younger than Professor McGonagall, McKinnon was the maternal sort and had taken them all under her wing. But, as with her own children, she brooked no foolishness when it was time to get down to work.

"Alice is correct, Sirius," concurred McKinnon. "And useful information, regardless of its source, is welcome information."

"Quite right," agreed Bones. "Good intelligence can make the difference between life and death in the field." The older man turned to Remus. "Lupin, I think you can provide us with an excellent example to demonstrate this point. Something from your mission this past weekend would be instructional."

All eyes turned to Remus, who looked pained at being the centre of attention and clearly startled at having been called out in this way.

Lily frowned as she watched Remus struggle to respond.

"Remus," she said, "whatever happened, it will be helpful for us to hear. I'm sure we'll all have our share of mistakes."

McKinnon nodded. "She's right. We debrief after every mission and spend the most time discussing where things went wrong. We can't learn from our mistakes any other way. Go ahead, Mr. Lupin."

Remus took a deep breath. "Fenwick and I were conducting surveillance on a rumoured location of a Death Eater hideout, based on information we obtained from a neighbour. We saw robed figures entering throughout the night. It had all the signs of being the right location and we reported it up." Remus paused and swallowed hard. "The next night, based on our intelligence, ten Aurors showed up for a raid." Remus paled and Lily put her hand on his, which was clenched into a fist.

"Go on, Lupin," said Bones, his voice flat.

"It was a trap. The lead was false. We'd been... set up. Once the Aurors were in place, they were attacked from behind. Ambushed."

"And?" prompted Bones.

"Three Aurors were killed and five were wounded."

Alice gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. The Aurors-in-training obviously hadn't been told about this yet, Peter thought.

"Were any Death Eaters apprehended that night, Lupin?" Bones asked, more softly than before.

"No," Remus said hoarsely, glancing shamefaced at Alice. "They all got away."

~*~ **Wednesday** ~*~

Peter found himself struggling to charm a basketful of acorns that had been covered in aconite powder. The charm wasn't holding and the acorns were disintegrating instead of glowing to indicate the spell had taken.

He was also annoyed as he heard Sirius and James off in a corner, laughing with the Prewett brothers, who were in charge of Diversionary Tactics.

"I could use some help here, mates," Peter called to them petulantly.

Gideon Prewett came over and knelt down besides Peter. He thought it was Gideon, anyway. The brothers, although not twins, looked astonishingly alike, both tall and lanky with reddish-blond curls.

"Sorry, Pettigrew. The blokes there," he said, indicating Sirius and James, "have some smashing ideas that we think might work for us. So, what do you need help with?"

Peter explained the charm problem to Gideon.

Gideon scratched his chin and called to his brother. "Oi! Fabian, c'mere."

Fabian ambled over, and the two brothers examined the acorns, lightly brushing the powder off a few, and tried casting the charm themselves.

"It's the aconite," said Fabian. "The acorns are too heavily coated. The charm won't take."

Peter, Sirius and James spent the next hour brushing the powder off the acorns until there was only a fine coat of aconite on each one.

"Ready to try it now?" asked Gideon after he inspected their work.

Peter nodded and took out one of the acorns from the basket, set it on the table, and pointed his wand.

"Illuminate!"

The acorn glowed red before settling down to look like an ordinary acorn.

The Prewett brothers smiled broadly. "Perfect!" they said in unison.

"They'll explode?" asked Sirius, his eyes shining with excitement.

"Definitely," responded Fabian. "Set them where we want, cast a time-delay spell and..."

"BOOM!" yelled Gideon as he clapped his palms together to demonstrate the effect.

"Wicked," said Sirius and James together, looking at the Prewetts with unabashed admiration.

"Great," said Peter without much conviction, as he envisioned himself getting blown to bits.

~*~ **Thursday** ~*~

After a training session with Moody in the forest, they all gathered around the dining room table in the farmhouse to receive their field assignments for the following week. Moody stood at the head of the table, and Peter looked up with more than a little apprehension, since this would be his first real job for the Order.

Moody glanced around the room at the still dirty and sweaty recruits, his expression indecipherable. Peter noticed Sirius leaning his chair back precariously, his hands clasped behind his head. Moody seemed to notice as well.

"You lot have worked pretty hard this week, but I want to see a double effort this weekend. Potter and Black, don't think because you've been at this longer you can get sloppy!" Sirius scowled but returned his chair to a more respectable position.

"You're all still recruits till I say otherwise!" Moody picked up a parchment and cleared his throat. "Starting on Monday night, you'll report to work in the following assignments: Alice and Frank, you'll be with me and Podmore on Surveillance. This will tag on nicely to your current Ministry assignment."

Alice and Frank sat up straight and nodded. Moody was their boss both on and off the job.

"Potters, you both will report to McKinnon on Intelligence. Black, the Prewetts want you with them on Diversions with Vance."

Sirius preened, happy to have been requested.

Peter waited anxiously for Moody to call his name. Moody scanned the parchment.

"Right. Pettigrew?" Moody looked up to catch Peter's eye. "You'll be on Headquarters Logistics with Doge."

Peter blinked in confusion. They hadn't received any training in Headquarters Logistics. Not wanting to appear stupid in front of his friends, though, he just nodded.

"Lupin, Dearborn and Diggle are all on special missions next week, but they may call on any one of you for assistance, if needed." Moody scanned the room one more time. "Any questions?"

The room was silent.

"Right then. Off with you. See you on Saturday, bright and early. Dismissed."

They all rose from the table and started chattering about their assignments. Peter pushed through them to make his way up to Moody, who was gathering up his parchments.

"Excuse me, sir, if it's all right, I, um, do have a question."

Moody looked up. "What is it, Pettigrew?"

"What exactly is Headquarters Logistics?"

"Easy as pie, Pettigrew. Inventory supplies, stores. Make a list of what's needed. Make sure we have fresh linens here for members who are staying overnight. Doge will fill you in." He gave Peter a pat on the shoulder. "You'll do well, don't worry. G'night, then!"

Peter watched Moody as he swept out of the farmhouse, a bit stunned. He wasn't sure how he felt about his assignment. On the one hand, he'd be pretty safe tucked away here at headquarters. That was a good thing, wasn't it? He looked around the room. Sirius, James and the others were so clearly excited about their tasks. Peter wasn't very excited about his.

Maybe he wasn't good enough yet to be sent out into the field. Moody had been pretty impatient with him during their training exercises this past week. Yelled at him quite a few times, in fact. Maybe Moody didn't like him.

Peter gritted his teeth. *I'll just have to work harder then*, he thought. *I'll show them I'm good enough. Maybe good enough so that someone will request me next time.*

~*~ **Friday** ~*~

Peter had never been so happy to see the end of a week as he was today, exhausted and bruised, just as James had said he'd be after his first week in training. With the added stress of working full time, Peter couldn't wait to get home, have a long soak in the tub and tuck into the meal his mother had sent over.

So, it was with immense joy that he greeted the night shift when he arrived to relieve him.

"How's it been today, Pettigrew?" asked Bancroft, setting down his pack and taking off his cloak.

"Everything's been quiet, thank Merlin," sighed Peter, who stood up to let Bancroft take his place. "It's all yours, mate."

"Have a date tonight?" Bancroft winked as he jerked his head over to Alicia McKenny, who, Peter was surprised to see, was standing across the room, waving. At him.

Peter waved back and blushed. He knew he should buck up the nerve to ask her out, but every time he tried, his tongue turned into a sausage.

"No," Peter answered. "I'm knackered. Long week."

Bancroft shook his head. "You're a prat, you know that, Pettigrew?"

Peter smiled and blushed again. "Yeah, I suppose I am."

He gathered his things and made his way out of the office and towards the lifts.

"Hey, Peter!"

He turned. Alicia was behind him, smiling.

"Um, if you're not doing anything tonight," she said, trying for a casual tone. "Would you like to go round the Leaky for a pint?"

Peter blinked hard. "Me?" he squeaked, then winced, knowing how stupid he sounded.

"Well, I've been waiting for you to ask me, but I thought I might get old and die before that happened," Alicia said, rolling her eyes. "Well?"

This was turning out to be a better end to the week than he could have imagined!

"Sure!" he said with a huge grin. "But, it's on me," he added.

Alicia laughed. "As it should be!"

Peter thought she had a lovely laugh.

The lift doors opened, and he and Alicia squeezed into the crowd of Ministry employees, all fleeing their offices on a Friday night. He was going on a date. He was a member of the Order of the Phoenix. *Life couldn't be any more perfect than this*, he thought with a sigh of satisfaction as the lift doors closed.

Peter had a few more than just a single pint on his date and thought it best not to Apparate home, lest he find part of him splinched and left behind at the Leaky Cauldron. Fortunately, his flat wasn't too far, it wasn't raining, and he was happy enough to walk home, feeling better about himself and his future than he had in a long time.

He was thinking about Alicia, her easy laughter, her pretty hair, her lovely scent. Peter was so lost in his reverie that he didn't notice the two tall figures coming his way until they were nearly upon him. However, even in Peter's slightly intoxicated state, he recognised those robes... those masks....

Shit.

He fumbled for his wand, trying to remember *something* he'd learned this week.

What were we supposed to look for? Hair? Voice? Their hoods were up and they didn't speak. One of them raised his wand.

Shoes! That was it! Alice said to look at their shoes!

"Stupefy!"

And just before he lost consciousness, Peter noticed that one of them was wearing a distinctive pair of very shiny, purple, dragon hide boots.

A/N Thanks to celtmama and capella_black for their due diligence in beta'ing this chapter!

Descending into Darkness, Part 1: Autumn 1978

Chapter 15 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Descending into Darkness (Part 1): Autumn 1978

Peter

It was hot for November in this part of England, wherever this 'part' of England might be, for none of them knew the exact location of their headquarters. It was even hotter in the old, dusty farmhouse, crowded with Order members who were clustered in several small groups, speaking in lowered voices, waiting for Albus Dumbledore to arrive and for the meeting to begin.

Peter sat in the back, off by himself, wiping his sweating face with a handkerchief he now kept with him at all times. He was perspiring a great deal lately. He also found himself startling at odd moments, like when someone touched his head or at the sound of high-pitched laughter. Moody had apparently noticed it too, for Peter had been chastised for being less vigilant than he should have been during training exercises. He couldn't seem to help it, though. He felt trapped, paralysed as if under the Imperius Curse. Only it was worse, because he wasn't. Peter had been forced to spy for Lord Voldemort, to turn traitor on his friends, on the Order, unwillingly bound to the Dark Lord's service. *I have no choice*, he repeated to himself hundreds of times each day. *I was kidnapped! I've no choice!* Indeed, the despair Peter felt in his heart was genuine. All he could do was to ferret out some information that would keep his master happy, and Peter, his family, and friends alive.

James certainly wasn't making it easy. *If only he'd stay out of the press*, Peter thought with despair. Since James had first spoken out against pure-blood politics in the Prophet, he'd become a bit of a celebrity, and other articles about him had followed. Moody wasn't happy about it either, since publicity of any kind was bad for the Order.

Peter was there when the Auror bluntly admonished James to 'keep his bloody opinions to himself!' But he knew that it was too late. Voldemort had taken notice of the 'outspoken boy and his Mudblood wife' who had managed to defy him. His master had instructed Peter to *'keep an eye on Potter'*. Every time he thought about it, he felt like a hand was tightening around his throat and he found it difficult to breathe.

I'll do everything I can to protect him, affirmed Peter, wiping his sopping brow and the back of his neck. *I don't care about anyone else, but he can't have James!*

Fretting about his friend, Peter scanned the room in a momentary panic, needing to reassure himself that James was all right.

To his relief, he found James and Lily sitting together on a frayed sofa in a corner, her head resting on his shoulder. He knew he was being silly, but the sight of the two of them together was calming.

Glancing further through the crowd, he saw Sirius and Emmy Vance sitting on the floor near the fireplace. Sirius was leaning in such a way that he was able to snake his arm around the young witch's back. He was whispering something in Emmy's ear, and she smiled and blushed. Sirius edged himself closer to her side and looked smug.

Peter grimaced and briefly wondered if he should warn Emmy about Sirius' ongoing game of Seduce, Conquer and Abandon. He then looked around the room for Remus, but the man wasn't there. Now that he thought about it, Peter realised that he hadn't seen Remus for over a month! Perhaps he was on another special mission for Dumbledore. He'd have to remember to talk to Dumbledore later, just to make sure Remus was all right.

Dumbledore enters the room. The crowd grows quiet and Peter sits at attention, preparing to listen carefully for any information he might be able to give his master. He feels his soul being battered every time he's called to Voldemort's side, and yet he truly believes that he won't have to betray his friends, the ones he loves. I'll find some way, he thinks fervently. I have to.

Lily

Lily found it hard to pay attention during the meeting. It was hot and she'd had a very stressful week. In her first full week as a 'Harvester,' she'd been at the deathbeds of an elderly wizard, a middle-aged witch, and a child. It was her job to cast the difficult and precise spell that drew out and captured each donor's unique bit of Elemental Magic, the essence of the love both given and received during his or her lifetime; she marvelled at how this powerful magic fit into the tiny, heart-shaped vessel.

In addition to her work, she'd spent the past three nights with Alice and Dorcas creating healing potions and draughts to replenish their supplies. She loved her job, and was devoted to the Order, but the combined efforts had left Lily both physically and emotionally drained.

Dumbledore was speaking, and James' hand was gently stroking her arm. The words in the air around her seemed to blur, but she didn't care. The repetitive touch of her husband's fingers on her bare skin was soothing.

She jumped in her seat, startled as her left foot received a decisive kick.

"Stay awake!" Alice whispered loudly.

Indeed, she had dozed off, and Lily shook her head so vigorously to rouse herself that it prompted Dumbledore to ask, "You disagree, Mrs. Potter?"

She felt the heat rush to her face in embarrassment. "Sorry, sir. No, sir." Of course she had no idea whether she disagreed or not. Alice sniggered, and Lily kicked her foot in return.

"In that case, we shall proceed as planned," Dumbledore concluded. "Thank you all for your kind attention." And the meeting came to an end.

Lily saw Moody scurrying through the crowd, his eye fixed on James. "Potter!"

"Sir?" James asked, turning to Moody.

"Glad to see you've not been in the paper this week. Keep it that way!"

Lily knew that James wasn't happy to have been anointed by the press as the 'spokeswizard' for half-bloods and Muggle-borns. That Rita Skeeter was horrible in the way she always managed to twist his words. But she also knew that it was hard for James to remain silent if asked his opinions. Moody was right, though. It wasn't safe to be in the limelight. So, Lily had drilled James to use the phrase 'no comment,' and so far, it seemed to be working.

Lily left James to be further tormented by Moody as she made her way to Dumbledore, who was speaking in the corner to a very animated Dorcas Meadows. As Lily approached, she noted that a Silencing Spell had been cast, since their mouths were moving but their voices could not be heard. So, she stood patiently, waiting for their conversation to finish, and tried not to stare or read their lips. She did wonder what Dorcas was going on about, though. *It must be something very sensitive,* she thought, and recalled that no one had been assigned to work with Dorcas in the last few months.

Finally, Dumbledore released the spell and Dorcas stormed out of the room, clearly unhappy with the outcome of their conversation. The old wizard turned to Lily with a sigh.

"Yes, my dear?" He sounded as tired as she felt.

"I wanted to apologise, sir. I didn't mean to nod off like that."

Dumbledore dismissed her concern with a wave of his hand.

"No need, Lily. I know how difficult it is to work all day and then have Order duties on top of that. I'm sure that James will fill you in at home."

"Thank you, sir. I'll make sure to have Alice kick me regularly throughout future meetings, just in case," she said with a smile.

"I always find it helpful to have a plan, Lily," Dumbledore remarked with sage nod and a wink.

Lily turns from Dumbledore and scans the room, looking at the determined faces around her. Faces that belong both to people she has loved for many years, and to those she has come to love more recently. She tries to imprint their faces in her memory, to fix this moment in time. She knows that the danger is growing and the risk to all of them is higher than ever. It is important to capture this moment, she thinks, so she can recall it in the dark days certain to come.

Severus

Severus was running a fever, but at this stage of the process the bubbling ingredients in the *Consentire* Potion had to be stirred continuously for two hours. By hand. He had the presence of mind not to stand too close to the cauldron, so the sweat pouring from his brow would not drip into the potion by accident and ruin the painstaking work of the past few months. Glancing at the timepiece on the bench, he noted there were five minutes left.

Sparks of pain ignited in his aching fingers and shot up his arm like fire. He gritted his teeth, ignored it and kept on stirring. He had worked hard to master his response to pain, and so, to distract himself, he closed his eyes and concentrated on thoughts of the book he was currently reading, *Delicate Poisons and Dangerous Draughts*.

Severus joyfully soaked up the knowledge his master had provided him and threw himself into his tasks with a fervour he didn't know he had. The more complex the potion, the harder Severus drove himself. His hands were never idle, and he worked himself so relentlessly that he slept only when his body could no longer remain upright. He ate sporadically, indifferent to the gnawing pains in his stomach.

It was discomfiting to him, however, that when it came time to turn over a completed potion to Lucius Malfoy, Severus felt something within him tear, the parting from his work a painful, keening loss. He actually found it difficult to breathe, and one time he had to fight the urge to hide the phials. He didn't understand why this happened or why he couldn't prevent himself from being overcome by such feelings. He certainly didn't like it. Inevitably, his concern would evaporate, forgotten, as soon as he received new orders and started to create a new Dark potion.

His eyes snapped open, and seeing that exactly two hours had passed, he stopped stirring. Stepping away from the cauldron, Severus stumbled. It felt like his arm was still moving in a ghostly echo of itself. His body was screaming to sit, to lie down, but Severus ignored it. Instead, he made his way to the shelf holding the restorative potions and salves, found the small blue phial with the Fever Reducing Draught and swallowed it quickly. His breathing came in gasps, his grip on the phial slackened, and it fell from his hand, shattering on the stone floor. Severus didn't notice, as he swayed and fell to the floor himself, unconscious.

When he awoke, he found himself lying on the pallet that he used to catch one or two hours of sleep. He heard Lucius Malfoy speaking with someone he didn't know. The constant thud in his head argued against opening his eyes, so he opted to listen instead.

"He'll be assigned to your cell, Mulciber." This was Malfoy's voice.

"But can he handle it?" The man Severus assumed must be Mulciber spoke, the doubt in his voice evident.

"Our master is certain, and that is all that matters. You and Dolohov will help him to recover, prepare him, and ensure that he is capable and ready."

A long silence followed, and Severus, though the fever still addled his mind, realised that they were talking about him.

Cell? Ready?

He must have moved or attempted to speak because he felt Malfoy sitting by his side and holding up his head.

"Drink this," Malfoy said, and Severus forced his eyes open enough to see a goblet of water being held to his lips.

He drank and recalled that he hadn't had food or water in nearly two days.

"You're no good to anyone like this, Severus," Malfoy said quietly, as if he didn't want the other man to hear.

"But the *Consentire*..." he croaked, sounding like a frog had taken up residence in his throat. Severus moved as if to stand, but Malfoy pushed him back down.

"You will finish the potion, but then you will move on to a different sort of task. Drink more."

He sat up and drained the goblet, feeling the relief of hydration at once.

"Different task?" Severus asked, feeling suddenly alert and anxious.

"Our Lord has been very pleased with your work, Severus. You have exceeded all our expectations, but you must be prepared to serve our master *iall* ways."

Severus was alarmed. *What did he mean?*

Malfoy continued. "You will report on Monday to Mulciber and Dolohov, who will oversee the next phase of your training. I believe some of your schoolmates are in their cell as well."

Severus tried to process what Malfoy was saying. He knew that his master's servants were divided into small groups, or cells, each responsible for a piece of some larger mission, and only those in Voldemort's Inner Circle...such as Malfoy...knew how the pieces fit together. Even the identities of Death Eaters outside their own cell were unknown, as they wore masks and hooded cloaks on the rare occasions when they gathered as a group or worked together in the field.

"Training?" Severus asked, stiffening.

"Physical training, Severus, to prepare you for field missions. You already have a wide knowledge of curses, hexes and other Dark spells, all of which will be valuable to the work of Mulciber and Dolohov's unit. But you need to build up your stamina, which has been, unfortunately, severely neglected."

Severus had to fight a growing panic. He was needed here! He was Voldemort's Potions master! The thought of leaving the safety and certainty of the laboratory made him break into a cold sweat that had nothing to do with his fever. "I've been working hard, sir," he said, controlling his tone and careful not to use Malfoy's given name. He couldn't recall, in fact, when he had last called him Lucius. "There is so much work still left to be completed and..."

Malfoy interrupted him, placing a hand on his knee and squeezing it gently. "You have performed brilliantly, Severus. And you have provisioned our stores so completely that our master feels he can spare you to other duties for a while."

Severus glanced up at Mulciber, who stood silently, watching them carefully.

He looked at Malfoy, suddenly understanding. "I will no longer report to you?"

Malfoy stood and smoothed out his robes. "Mulciber will keep me informed as to your progress, but you'll heed him in all regards," he said. "I'm sure you will not disappoint us." He considered Severus' appearance with a frown. "Eat your dinner, then go home and get some rest."

Malfoy inclined his head to the other man and, without a further word they both left the laboratory.

Severus drops back down on the pallet, his head throbbing against the thin pillow. Despite Malfoy's words of praise, he feels that he has failed. He has been demoted, handed off. Pushed aside. A horrible dread fills him. He has heard about the raids, the attacks, the bloodshed. Then, he begins to shake violently, an involuntary reaction to the caustic and terrifying combination of fever and fear.

Descending into Darkness, Part 2: Winter 1978-1979

Chapter 16 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

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~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Descending into Darkness (Part 2): Winter 1978-1979

Peter

He never knew when the Dark Lord would call for him. This uncertainty, combined with a constant state of fear and dread, and the knowledge that these requests always came in the middle of the night, made it difficult for Peter to get a good night's sleep. Half awake, half-asleep, Peter had learnt to keep an ear open for the telltale tapping on his window that indicated a summons from his master had arrived. To keep his identity secret from his master's other servants and the members of the Order, Peter had not been given the 'Dark Mark' and could not be summoned in the usual way.

On this very cold winter night, however, Peter left the window open. He was so very tired that he didn't trust himself to hear the tapping if it came. He *had* to get some sleep. Others had begun to notice Peter's increasingly haggard appearance, and he'd made more than a few mistakes at work. Fortunately, since Stewwarters' surprising and sudden 'retirement,' his new...and less strict...supervisor had easily accepted Peter's explanation of long nights spent caring for his sick mother. Those among the Order barely noticed his demeanour because they were all suffering from their own exhaustion.

Tossing and turning under his blankets, more tired than he could ever remember being, Peter was frustrated to find that he was unable to shake tonight's events out of his mind and fall asleep. They played like a Muggle film loop...over and over again...behind the curtain of his eyelids.

~ * ~

Earlier that evening, he had been upstairs in the farmhouse study, completing his inventory notations and thinking about the freshly baked pasties Doge had made that were now cooling on a rack in the kitchen. He was hungry and thought that maybe he'd nick one or two of them before heading home. Moody might complain about Doge's silly chef's hat, but Peter thought Elphias was a right brilliant cook and could wear whatever the bloody well he liked.

A sudden crash below him and voices...screaming, yelling...made him drop his quill with a start. He scrambled out of the study and rushed down the stairs.

It was pandemonium and blood was everywhere. He had never seen that much blood before. Suddenly, hands grabbed hold of him...it was Sirius.

"Peter, call for Dorcas! Then get water and clean flannels! Hurry!"

He could finally make out two people lying on the hearthrug. Emmeline and Sturgis were moaning, pale, barely moving, and blood was pouring from multiple gashes and wounds. Sirius and James were also covered in blood, but they appeared to be fine...or less injured. It was hard to tell.

"Didn't you send a Patronus?" Peter asked, fighting the queasiness that had suddenly come upon him.

James was trying to squeeze a bit of torn fabric around Sturgis' arm to staunch the bleeding...he didn't dare use magic until Dorcas had diagnosed the spells that had caused the injuries in the first place.

"We tried, but it came back," James said with a wince. Peter noticed James' arm was at an odd angle. "She must be undercover. Try the Floo."

Peter ran upstairs to the emergency Floo and, grabbing a handful of powder, threw it in and called for Dorcas. Miraculously, her head appeared in the fire, but she looked pretty bad herself. Her brown curls were flying in every direction and there were deep, dark circles under her eyes.

"Sorry... just got back. Have you been trying to contact me?" she asked, breathing heavily.

"Just come! We've injuries!" urged Peter.

"Right. Be there in just a moment." Dorcas' head retreated from the flames.

Rushing back down to the kitchen to fill a bucket with water, Peter saw the cooling pasties and sighed with regret. It was unlikely he'd get to them any time soon.

A few minutes later, Dorcas was there, tending to Emmy and Sturgis. They had come around a bit, but were finding it difficult to talk. James and Sirius stood to the side, out of the way, looking worried. Peter handed Dorcas the bucket and flannels, and she began to wipe away the excess blood to get a better look at their wounds.

"Are you all right?" Peter asked his friends, alarmed at their appearance. "What...what happened?"

"We're fine," said James, his voice tight as he held his arm. "We got there too late...."

"It was lucky that they managed to send a *'help needed'* Patronus at all," muttered Sirius, his fists clenching and unclenching. "If we hadn't arrived when we did, there wouldn't have been anything of them left to bring back."

Peter felt the blood run cold in his veins. He had to force the words out of his mouth. "They... were ambushed?"

James nodded and suddenly dropped to the floor as if his legs were too weak to support him any longer. He removed his glasses and wiped his eyes, which only served to smear more blood across his face.

"I don't understand it," James said hoarsely, trying to work it out. "They've done this sort of reconnaissance mission dozens of times, and each one with some variation to avoid just this kind of thing. But this time..."

"They walked into a half-dozen Death Eaters who were there waiting for them," Sirius finished.

They sat quietly for a while. With some direction from Dorcas, Sirius attended to James' arm and smiled when he had mended it successfully. Peter watched Dorcas work, apprehensive.

Then Emmy began to scream, as if reliving the attack all over again. Sirius ran to her side and lifted her slightly to hold her in his arms.

"It's all right, Emmy, it's us... you're safe now," he said softly, rocking her. Sirius looked questioningly at Dorcas. She just shrugged and released a ragged sigh.

"They really need to be at St. Mungo's," she answered his unspoken question with quiet frustration, "but they're too weak to transport. The wounds are deep, but I think I've knitted the worst of them. Fortunately, the bastards used straightforward slicing hexes...nothing Dark or wonky to make them worse." Dorcas stood with a groan, forcing herself to her feet. She cleaned her hands with a swipe of her wand and then vanished the bloody water. "Let's get them into beds upstairs. I'll monitor them overnight and see how they're doing in the morning. Help me move them, then get some Blood-Replenishing and Strengthening Solutions from the stores and bring them to me. All right?"

Sirius nodded, looking grateful for Dorcas' no-nonsense manner. James rose and gestured to Peter, and the three of them levitated their two injured friends upstairs. Peter found it hard, though, to keep his wand hand steady in the face of Emmy's continued horrific, piercing screams.

~ * ~

A sharp pecking in his arm rouses him from a deep sleep. He leaps out of bed with his heart pounding and finds his master's bird...a large raven...perched atop the blankets, staring at him with its dark, beady eyes.

Wide-awake now, Peter takes the small object from the bird's outstretched leg, and, relieved of its burden, it takes flight out of the open window. The object is a Portkey that will take him directly to the Dark Lord, to one of more than a dozen hidden locations that Peter would never be able to find on his own. He is always summoned in this way.

Peter quickly dresses, dons his warmest cloak and picks up the object. He feels nauseous when he recognises it as Emmy's bracelet. The one he stole from her just last week, as instructed. He is shaking from head to toe when he picks up his wand, taps the bracelet and whispers, "Take me."

Lily

Lily and Alastor Moody Apparated to an oddly-shaped house. She had never seen anything like it before and concluded that it could only have been constructed with magic, for, if gravity had its say, this strangely configured building would have come crashing down long ago.

Standing outside in the cold night, they heard laughter, scraping chairs, babies crying and all the usual sounds of a family enjoying their Christmas Eve at home.

"Are you sure you need me here, Moody?" Lily asked, shivering more with apprehension than from the cold. "I don't know what good I'll do."

"Another pair of hands is helpful in situations like these. One to tell the story and the other to bear witness. It's just how it's done." Moody shrugged. "I'm afraid that you'll all have a turn at it sooner or later. This first one's yours." Moody sighed and rubbed his calloused hands together. "Are you ready?" Lily nodded, and he rapped on the front door.

She heard footsteps approach from inside and then the door opened. A thin, red-haired man appeared and looked at them with wide-eyed surprise through wire-rimmed spectacles. He cocked his head and squinted at them at first, then grinned broadly.

"Hullo!" he said genially. "I know who you are! Moody, isn't it? Auror?"

Unexpectedly, Moody bristled. "Are you daft, man! Don't you know there's a war on! We could have been anyone, and you just openin' the door like that! Constant vigilance, young man!"

Lily, seeing the man back away and turn pale in the face of Moody's gruff assault pushed herself in front of the older man. "Yes, he's Alastor Moody and I'm Lily Potter. Are you Arthur Weasley?"

"Y yes," he replied, the colour returning to his face, which then brightened. "You know me? Of course, I've only been at the Ministry for a few years. I don't know how you would have heard about me!" Mr. Weasley put a hand to his chest. "But, I'm forgetting my manners. I'm pleased to meet you both! Please come inside! Molly will have my head for letting you stand out here in the cold!"

After fussing to take and hang their cloaks, they were ushered into a small, but cosy, living room, where a blur of red-haired children were in mid-chase around a large, gaily decorated Christmas tree that was so tall that its tip bent at an angle where it met the ceiling.

"My dragon is faster than your broom! You'll never catch me!" said one of the children. His dragon appeared to be a well-worn stuffed one that was held out before him.

"Not so!" the one who was obviously the eldest retorted with a determined grin, tapping something imaginary in front of him. "My Nimbus 1500 is the *bestest* and *fastest* model. Your mangy old dragon won't keep up with this!"

"Dagon! Boom! NO FLY!" admonished a toddler in a loud, demanding voice. He trailed behind his older brothers, startlingly serious for someone so small.

Lily noticed Moody looking rather apprehensive at the scene before them, and she stifled a laugh.

"Can take on a dozen Death-Eaters single-handed, but you're right terrified by a bunch of kids, eh, Moody?" she whispered with a giggle. He grunted something she couldn't make out for all the noise in the room.

A small, round woman, who seemed to be a few years older than Lily, appeared in the living room with two infants in her arms, her husband by her side. She smiled sweetly at her guests, but then turned to the children with narrowing eyes.

"Boys! Stop flying this instant!" she boomed. Her commanding voice stopped the children in their tracks, although the one with the stuffed dragon hissed some pretend fire at his brothers. The smallest one waddled over to his mother, little hands on his hips.

"Mum! Chalie, Bill bad, Mum. Fly bad!"

She ruffled his head. "Well, Percy, it's time now for everyone to stop flying. Dragons to bed and brooms in the closet!"

The elder children moaned and the toddler beamed.

"I'm so sorry for this chaos," the woman sighed in resignation to her guests, handing off one of the infants to her husband. "Christmas only makes them more excited than usual."

"Molly," Mr. Weasley said, perching the baby on his shoulder, "this is Alastor Moody and Lily Potter."

Molly's eyes went wide. "You're that Muggle-born girl, the one married to James Potter, aren't you? I've read about you!"

She must have looked dismayed, because Molly took her by the arm and bent her head towards Lily's.

"Now don't you mind what that woman writes, dear. I find her column is best used to wrap fish in."

Arthur interrupted. "Where did you say you were from? Some... order?"

"We're with the Order of the Phoenix," replied Lily, but the name didn't seem to mean anything to them as they didn't react.

Mrs. Weasley nodded in greeting. "As you've probably gathered, I'm Molly, and these young hellions are my children, Charlie, Bill and Percy," she said with a gesture towards her respective sons. The boys, noticing Moody for the first time, took a few steps back in alarm.

"These two," said Mr. Weasley, lifting up the baby in his arms with evident pride, "are our newest additions, Fred and George."

"They were named after my brothers!" Mrs. Weasley added with a huge smile. "Maybe you know them? Fabian and Gideon Prewett?"

Lily was unable to stifle a gasp and was relieved when Mrs. Weasley turned away from them at that moment, as she swept the children out of the room and pushed them all up the stairs. "Off you go, all of you! Bill, can you see to it that they're cleaned up and in bed within ten minutes?"

"Right, Mum," Bill replied, pushing Percy and Charlie forward with a loud dragon roar. They ran from him up the stairs, squealing and laughing.

Mrs. Weasley turned back to her guests and eyed them critically. "It's freezing outside," she concluded. "Sit down, both of you," she said, herding them towards two armchairs. "I'll get tea to warm you up, and then you can tell us why you've come."

They tried to decline but quickly discovered that Molly Weasley wasn't one to be dissuaded from taking care of anyone who voluntarily crossed her threshold.

In a few minutes, everyone was seated and tea was poured. Moody took a polite sip, put his cup down and cleared his throat.

Lily focussed on her breathing to remain calm, hating that, in the next moment, this lovely family would have their lives turned upside down.

"I'm afraid we've come at a terrible time with some bad news, Mrs. Weasley," said Moody.

The colour immediately faded from the woman's face, and her husband reached out to take her hand.

"What news?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"It's your brothers," Moody said directly. "They're one of us, part of the group Mrs. Potter here just mentioned. Well, tonight those two courageous young men faced the forces of evil and fought bravely. But, I am so sorry to tell you that... they died. You must know, Mrs. Weasley, that they died as heroes."

Mrs. Weasley shrieked, stricken, and burst into tears. Mr. Weasley gasped and wrapped his arms tightly around his wife. Lily felt helpless. All she could do was watch and listen and erect the mental barriers that would prevent the Weasleys' pain from tearing her up as well. But, this was so hard. This was personal. She knew and loved Gideon and Fabian as well, but this was the time for their grief, not her own. Lily started to shake, buffeted by waves of deep sadness.

Moody continued in his steady, gravelly voice. "I was with them at the end, and it is my deepest regret that I couldn't save them. But I'm honoured to tell you of their bravery, and that this loss will be felt deeply by all of us who knew and respected them. They were two of the best men I've had the privilege to know and work with."

Lily was moved, suddenly aware that this was a ritual that Moody must have had to perform dozens of times as an Auror. She wondered if she'd have the strength to do it nearly as well. Mrs. Weasley was weeping on her husband's shoulder, and Mr. Weasley nodded for Moody to begin.

The old Auror pushed himself to his feet.

"We received information that a wizarding family had been targeted for attack by Vol...er...You-Know-Who. I can't tell you who they were, or why, but I can tell you that your brothers were assigned to monitor their home; their comings and goings. The family didn't even know Gideon and Fabian were there, but they were, every night for the past two weeks. They were under orders to report any Death Eater activity directly to the Ministry. They were not to instigate an attack, just report. But last night..." Moody paused and cleared his throat.

"Early last night, they were watchin' the house and the children were playin' out in the front. Then, Fabian and Gideon saw Death Eaters comin' at the house from two different directions. They were about to send a message, but they were attacked from behind. Luckily, there was only one that jumped them, and the boys dispatched him fairly quick. Despite their orders, though, they knew that the Aurors and the Hit Squad would never get there in time. Of course, being the clever blokes they are," Moody said with a fond smile, "they had a back-up plan.

"Gideon Apparated to the house and tossed up an incendiary device...it created a screen of smoke that surrounded the house. At the same time, Fabian drew their attention away from the house and towards himself by settin' off some firecrackers that lit him up like a torch. While the Death Eaters rushed on his brother, Gideon pulled the kids and the rest of family out the back and away to safety, and that's when he called for me. Fabian was fightin' off five of the bastards by himself until Gideon finally joined him." Moody paused as he reflected on the scene. "When I showed up, there were four dead Death Eaters, the last of the live ones had Disapparated and... Gideon was gone. Fabian was holding his brother, and he was hurt really bad himself. I knew that there was... nothin' I could do, 'cept hear him tell me the story."

Mrs. Weasley's sobs were quiet but steady, and her husband held her, gently stroking her head. Lily willed herself to contain her own anguish at hearing Moody tell the story.

"You should know that he was happy at the end, smilin' in fact. His last words were, 'We saved them, Moody. Gideon was brilliant. I held them off. Now you go after the rest.'" Moody paused. "If anyone has the right to be called a hero, Mrs. Weasley, it would be your brothers."

Moody sat back down and drank his now-tepid tea.

Lily stumbles home just past midnight. James is waiting for her and she collapses into his arms, finally able to release the pain, the anguish and the grief she's been holding in for hours. She sobs for Gideon and Fabian and Molly and Arthur and their little ones. She sobs for all that was lost and for all that will be lost.

James holds her tightly and mutters soft words that, to her ears, are mere sound but resonate with solace. After a time, Lily pulls herself up. She doesn't bother to wipe her face, but looks deeply into James' eyes, reaching for all the love she knows is there, drinking it up with the desperation of one long-parched with thirst. Then, her shaking hands unbutton his now-soaked shirt. He removes her robes and then, her jumper. The rest of their clothes are soon lost amidst a tangle of limbs, fevered kisses, sharp moans. She pushes him down onto the sofa and claims his lips, his arms, his heat, and his heart with abandon.

"Now, James. I need you now," *she hisses into his ear.*

She reaches and he gasps. They join and fill each other with a healing power so strong that it surpasses the magic that sparks violently around them.

In the following few months after his 'exile,' as he called it, from the laboratory, Severus acknowledged that his physical health *had* improved significantly. And, as difficult as it was to be kept away from his Dark potions, a separation that has left him with a painful and lingering ache, he now understands the dangerous, powerful, and seductive power of its Elemental Magic. He would certainly be more careful the next time.

Still, Severus wasn't happy to have been thrown into Mulciber's 'pack of wolves'...or recruits...as he reminded himself to call them. He resented what he perceived to be a demotion of status in the Dark Lord's ranks. He was careful, however, to hide his feelings and work diligently to meet the rigorous demands of his training.

The recruits gathered each day in a large, vacant mansion that sat atop a hill, surrounded by wild, overgrown trees, whose boughs hid the house from prying eyes like so many large protective hands. They were not told, nor did they know, the exact location of the mansion, but had been given Portkeys that were spelled to bring them there for training, or whenever their leaders required their presence. They did not know what went on in other parts of the mansion, since they only had permission to use what must have once been a ballroom, but was now used for training. Their instructors were Antonin Dolohov and Gerald Mulciber.

The room was set up each day to meet the needs of whatever instruction they were to receive. Some days it was filled with obstacles to be used in stealth and attack exercises. Other days, weapons of various types and sizes lay upon tables as they learned to use them in effective ways in battle or to extract information from enemies. Severus was surprised to see that there was also a cupboard filled with potions, and he was eager to examine its contents.

Although Severus had started his training a several months later than the other recruits, it hadn't taken him long to catch up and, in some cases, exceed them. He might not be as nimble on his feet at Cranford, but his aim was always true and he hit his targets more often. He wasn't as physically strong as Goyle, but he was able to counter a physical assault with more finesse. Rosier might know more spells, but Severus' spells did more damage. He may have started late, but he knew he was more than their equal.

Then, in his third month, the recruits began their training in casting the Unforgivable Curses.

The Imperius Curse was the easiest to learn and invoke because the magic that they needed to call upon to cast it successfully lay just under the surface; they all had within them a deep desire for control. The curse forced the object to do whatever they were told and, as they practiced on each other and laughed at the stupid things they made each other do, they felt giddy over how easy it was to master.

On the morning they knew they were to begin their training in the use of the Cruciatus Curse, the recruits entered the training room more subdued than usual, and Severus felt tension sparking in the air.

Wilkes had the terrible misfortune to laugh at one of Cranford's off-colour jokes the moment Dolohov came into the room and missed the flashing gleam in Dolohov's eye as their instructor pulled out his wand and pointed it at Wilkes.

"*Crucio! Silencio!*"

In response to these simultaneous spells, Wilkes collapsed to the floor and the others sprinted backwards in shock. They watched as Wilkes' body mangled itself brutally in pain, his contortions ringing out in a fury of silent screams.

Severus was mesmerised, revolted and curious in equal measure, as Dolohov stood over Wilkes, ignoring the boy's spasms, and looked at them sharply.

"The Cruciatus Curse directs its magic to the object's pain centres," he said, continuing to point his wand at the writhing figure at his feet.

This is how their instructors referred to those to whom the curse was directed; they were *objects*.'

"The curse fires repeatedly throughout the body's central nervous system."

Severus forced his gaze away from Wilkes and tried to attend to the instructions.

"Prolonged exposure to the Cruciatus Curse can result in permanent mental damage, so you need to control its duration. If you want to obtain information, you need to make sure not to over-cast, so the object is not impaired beyond the point of coherence. Control it, and you can provide just enough...incentive...to reveal their secrets."

Dolohov raised his wand to release both spells, and Wilkes moaned, his body continuing to jerk involuntarily as tears washed down his twitching face.

"The pain impulses take some time to recede, so the object will continue to spasm for a period of time relative to the amount of time spent under the curse."

Wilkes retched over himself and the floor. Cranford went to help but he was stayed by Dolohov's hand.

"He'll clean it up himself," Dolohov growled. Cranford retreated quickly.

"Sir?" Evan Rosier asked, raising his hand tentatively.

"Rosier?"

"Why use the Cruciatus Curse to obtain information when Veritaserum is so effective?"

Dolohov stroked his goatee for a moment, considering his reply. Wilkes, meanwhile, had risen to his feet and spelled away the mess. Severus watched him surreptitiously, curious about the after-effects of the curse, while attending to Dolohov's instruction.

"While Veritaserum is, as you note, effective, it isn't always available at the moment one needs it. And, despite common belief, it isn't always reliable. It is often overused by the more zealous of your comrades and ends up killing the object before they can offer anything useful. Or else it fails because it hasn't been prepared properly."

Severus bridled at this, knowing that *his* stores of Veritaserum had been brewed perfectly! But he bit his tongue to keep himself from making the snide retort that was begging to be spoken.

"And, in some very rare cases, the object resists it," added Dolohov. "The Cruciatus, on the other hand, is always available and, if carefully applied, is an almost infallible tool. Any other questions?"

No one had any.

The recruits were relieved when their instructor pulled out a box. They would begin their practice on spiders, Flobberworms and Billywigs. It was easy to hate these sorts of creatures; they were ugly and annoying.

"To cast the Cruciatus Curse," Dolohov barked to his recruits standing at attention, "you have to want the object to feel pain." He looked at them critically. "You may think this is easy, but it isn't. You have to summon, from within yourself, a genuine and clear desire to inflict harm."

Dolohov instructed them to recall images, memories from their past...from home or school...anything that would help to spark their anger and ignite their will to cause pain.

Severus found this easy to do. He simply thought of James Potter and Sirius Black. *A long tunnel and a bone chilling howl. Being humiliated by a lake.* Hatred nearly dripped from him when he invoked the curse, causing spiders and worms to scream and writhe. He never knew that they could make sounds at all, least of all ones that loud.

The second week, Dolohov brought in crates of small creatures: Bowtruckles, Nifflers, and Clabberts. These were good for practice because they moved rapidly, so they had to work on catching them before they could cast the curse. By the end of the week, Severus found it easier and faster to summon his will. He didn't register the first lick of joy when it coursed through him as he watched his Niffler contort in pain.

The third week, Dolohov didn't bring anything with him. The recruits began to shuffle with nervous anticipation. Wilkes looked exceptionally pale and Severus thought he might be sick again.

Dolohov's eyes gleamed as he turned to his class, sending shivers down Severus' spine. "It is easy to inflict pain on a small animal, or on a creature that can't look you in the eye and beg," Dolohov said in a measured tone. "It is far trickier when face-to-face with a human being," A flicker of excitement flared in the older man's eyes. "Most often, that human is an enemy...a Mudblood, a Muggle, or a blood-traitor," Dolohov said with disdain, practically spitting out the words. "But, sometimes, on rare occasions, that human might be a fellow Death Eater."

Severus was amused to see mouths gape open in surprise. He shook his head and suppressed a laugh. How many times had his fellow Slytherins turned on him? He cast a sideways glance at Cranford. Traitors *should* be punished, he thought reasonably.

Dolohov looked at each of them in turn and then asked, "Do I have a volunteer?"

Most of them took a few tentative steps backwards.

The following week, the recruits were on edge and picking fights with each other. Suspicion and resentment were running high after several rounds of practice with the Cruciatus Curse. No one, though, had picked a fight with Severus, who had been the first to volunteer. He was pleased to see that they were a bit afraid of him, a lesson he'd be sure to remember. But they were mostly on edge because this week they were to be taught the final Unforgivable: the Avada Kedavra...the Killing Curse.

As they entered their training room, Rosier quipped, "Well, it's a good chance we won't have to practice *this* one on each other!" The others laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound.

Severus was surprised to find he was highly anxious the first time he invoked the killing magic, and the spider flipped upside down, its tentacles curling inwards. But, by the fourth go on a Niffler, he felt a brief rush of...something indescribable flooding his body. Finally, by the tenth time, he finally recognised that rush as the same heady sensation he had when creating his Dark potions. It was a wonderful feeling, and he welcomed it back with a sense of relief, like a long lost friend: his extremities tingled, all his senses heightened, his heart rate increased, and a joyous euphoria filled his body.

The next day they arrived in the training room to see several crates lined up along the floor and heard the unmistakable whimpering of small dogs. These would be harder than insects and small creatures to kill; these looked at you with sad eyes. Goyle and Rosier, both of whom had dogs or crups as pets, found that they were unable to complete the spell. It only took them one more day...and several rounds of the Cruciatus Curse...to summon up the will to kill the objects of their torment. Severus, on the other hand, looked into their eyes and, for some reason saw Sirius Black looking back at him. The dogs were dead at his feet in an instant. The backrush of magic was intoxicating; chills of pleasure spread throughout him.

"Well done, Snape," praised Mulciber. Severus preened at the rare compliment.

On the last day of the week, Mulciber faced the recruits and Dolohov stood to the side.

"Today will be your final examination in the Unforgivables."

They stood a little taller, proud of having accomplished learning such difficult and important spells, and looked around the training room, a bit surprised at the absence of cages, crates or boxes. Severus guessed that they wouldn't be casting the curses on animals or insects, and he felt his heart pounding in anticipation.

Mulciber instructed them to take a seat around the perimeter of the room. He stood before them, his expression blank and his arms clasped behind his back. "Before you begin your examination, Dolohov and I will demonstrate on two objects each. You will observe carefully. Then, you will be called forward, one at a time. An object has been selected for each of you, and you will cast the Unforgivables in the order in which you learned them. If you succeed, you will be assigned to field missions starting next week. If you fail, you will repeat this sequence of training until you pass. And trust me when I say that you do not want to repeat this course. Do you all understand?"

They all nodded.

The first object was dragged into the room, a derelict Muggle, clearly Stunned and immobile. The recruits around Severus began to whisper excitedly to each other.

Dolohov revived him and waited for the disoriented man to stand. He was elderly, with white, scraggly hair, a filthy, unkempt beard, and the few teeth remaining in his mouth were yellow with decay. The man pushed himself to his feet, blinking with incomprehension at the sight before him. The recruits all leaned forward, watching intently.

"*Imperio!*"

The man went slack-jawed.

Dolohov threw a long piece of thick wood at the man's feet. "Hit yourself with that piece of wood. And laugh while you do it," Dolohov commanded with a sneer.

Mechanically, the man picked it up. It was a bit heavy, and it sent the man stumbling backwards. But he steadied, raised the wood in front of him with both hands and smashed it onto his head. Blood spurted from his brow, and the man emitted a sound that resembled a laugh only to someone who had never heard the sound of one before. He hit himself again and again. Severus felt a tightening in his gut as he watched this demonstration.

Dolohov released the spell, and the man fell to the floor shrieking in pain, clutching his head.

Severus was surprised to find that he felt queasier than he had expected. Perhaps it was just more difficult to watch than to do, he thought.

"*Crucio!*"

The man convulsed in pain, his screams echoing throughout the room. This one was oddly easier to watch, Severus reasoned. Probably because he'd watched his fellow recruits in this state for a whole week.

Dolohov ended the spell and, without a pause, cast the final curse.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

The by-now familiar jet of green light silenced the man on the floor, and he was dragged out of the room.

By the time the remaining demonstration objects had been dispatched by their instructors, the recruits were more than eager for their turn. After watching the repeated onslaught of curses, it made it easier to see these Muggles as the foul objects that they were.

Unsurprisingly, Severus' name was called first, and he walked to the centre of the room and waited. His heart was pounding, and his wand emitted sparks of anticipation. For some reason this made Dolohov laugh. It was the first time he'd ever heard the man laugh.

The door opened, and Severus was startled at the unexpected sight of a woman being dropped at his feet. She was dishevelled, like the other objects, but this one was young, maybe only ten years older than he. Her hair was long and dark brown, in wild disarray, and there were bruises on her face. His musings about her appearance were interrupted, however, when the woman was revived and she clambered to her feet, looking around in a panic. Her eyes fell on Severus.

"Please!" she begged him through flowing tears. "Don't hurt me! I done nothing wrong!" Severus was taken aback when the woman suddenly threw herself at him, clutching his legs. "Sir! Please! I have babies at home that need me!" she wailed. *"Please..."*

Severus grabbed her roughly by the hair and forced her face up to meet his eyes as he pointed his wand in her face *"Imperio!"* he muttered. He released her head with a jerk and she fell backwards, hitting the floor with a bounce. Her pleas quieted and she stared at him blankly. Severus cast his eyes around the room, considering what would impress his instructors the most. Then he decided.

"Accio knife!"

From the weapons table, a long-bladed knife flew across the room, and he caught it carefully by its hilt. He felt the heft of the knife in his grip and hesitated for a moment as he looked into the woman's vacant eyes. *Not a woman. An object. It's an object,* he repeated to himself. He tossed the knife on the floor, and it landed with a loud clang that reverberated throughout the room.

"Remove the clothes above your waist," Severus commanded. The woman's blank expression remained unmoved as she awkwardly removed her blouse and her bra. Her breasts were large and pendulous, and Severus heard the boys snigger. He cleared his throat. "Take up the knife from the floor and carve it into your breast." Severus' voice cracked at the end of this. He'd never said that word out loud before.

There were gasps behind him when she did what she was told. She didn't flinch as the sharp edge of the knife found purchase in the soft tissue of her left breast, and she cut deeply through it from top to bottom. Blood spurted from her wound, splattering Severus and unnerving him so much that he quickly ended the Imperius and cast the Cruciatus in turn without a pause.

The woman, who was still holding the knife in her hand, screamed in deep-throated agony. Her body contracted and contorted so violently, that she unwittingly began to stab her legs and torso repeatedly with the blade. Streams of viscous blood pooled together on the floor, forming a giant red pond.

He ended the spell and watched the object twitch in its own filth. Then, with a deep breath, he tried to cast the Killing Curse... but nothing happened. He panicked for a moment and then realised that he hadn't summoned the will...the powerful magic that was needed to complete the spell successfully. He forced himself to breathe steadily, to be calm. He focussed on the filth on the floor, the foul scents assaulting his nose. It was a mess, something to be banished. He reached deep inside... and the image of his mother, injured on the kitchen floor, abandoning her child to the angry father, came to his mind.

"Avada Kedavra!" he intoned, and in a flash of brilliant, green light, the object stopped moving.

Mulciber steps towards Severus, looking at the now silent and blood-covered object on the floor. "Well, Snape, I'll have to take a few points off for unnecessary damage on the Cruciatus, but you got the job done well enough. Have a seat!"

Severus walks back to his seat unsteadily, his breathing ragged, as Dolohov and Mulciber clean up the mess, preparing for the next examination.

He hears his fellow recruits speak to him, but there is a strange buzzing in his ear and he can't make out their words. Then, the room begins to spin, and Severus feels the familiar and unwelcome sensation of losing consciousness.

"I will not faint!" he berates himself silently, grabbing onto his chair tightly and trying to regain control of his breathing! Master yourself!" he demands. Ever so slowly, the room begins to right itself and return to focus. Glancing at the blood covering his robes and his hands, he shuts his eyes tightly, waiting for the euphoria that he craves to come. And finally, it does, washing over him with relief. But this time, for the first time, a second wave of feeling follows. The acrid, coppery-smell of blood emanates from his body, and the sticky feeling on his hands assaults his senses and he feels sick. This wave rises up and overwhelms him with loathing, the stench of death and horror.

A/N: I acknowledge that the violence in this chapter IS upsetting, hence the warning at the beginning. The methods described here (adapted, of course) are based on research into the training methods of real-life terrorist cells. While they do not train their recruits in the magical Unforgivables, there are plenty of real-life, equally horrific Unforgivables. I also know that JKR would never go into this level of graphic detail, but I want to convey, to some degree the reality and horror of war. Finally, no offence is intended towards animals or women. Having one and being the other, the acts described were as upsetting to imagine and write and they probably were to read. I sincerely hope that this has not turned you off from reading the rest of the story.

My betas were heavily consulted on the content of this chapter and I owe them for more than checking punctuation. Thanks to both celtmama and capella_black.

Descending into Darkness, Part 3: Spring/Summer 1979

Chapter 17 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Descending into Darkness (Part 3): Spring/Summer 1979

Lily

She ran out of the farmhouse's kitchen door, hoping to catch him before he Disapparated. Stepping into the garden, she looked frantically about, her hand shielding her eyes in the bright afternoon light. To her right, she caught a patch of light brown hair turn the corner, heading towards the barn.

"Remus! Stop!" she yelled and dashed after him.

He was just turning into his Disapparition when she grabbed his arm. "No, wait!" she pleaded.

Remus shook her off. "Lily, you could have been splinched," he barked, both upset and angry.

"I don't give a toss!" she snapped back. "Sirius is being an idiot! Don't let him run you off like that, especially since we haven't seen you in ages."

And what she did see was alarming. He had lost a lot of weight in the six months since they'd last seen him. His robes were tattered, and she could tell he'd attempted to clean them, but they were still discoloured and spotty. Lily also noticed fresh, vivid scars peeking out of his robes, just above his collarbone. Remus scowled and wrapped his arms around his thin frame, turning away from her.

"It just makes it harder for everyone if I'm here," he muttered. "It was a mistake to come. Sirius was right about that, at least."

She knew that Remus was trying to shut her out, but she'd had too much experience with him to be dissuaded. "Can't you and I just talk for a bit before you go, at least? Please?" Her plaintive tone forced Remus to look at her.

He shrugged. "Okay. Just for a minute."

She led him up a small hill that overlooked the garden and sat upon a carved stone bench that Hagrid had recently placed below the tall oak tree.

"Sirius wasn't right about anything," Lily began. "He doesn't really believe you've turned against us. It's absurd! No one could honestly think that about you!"

"But how can you be so sure, Lily," he said bitterly. "No one knows where I've been, and since I've been gone, six members of the Order have died. Maybe it's not such a coincidence!"

Lily rolled her eyes. "Don't be daft, Remus. Of course I'm sure! Dumbledore knows where you've been and what you've been up to, and if he chooses to keep it secret from us, then that's his prerogative."

Remus jumped to his feet and began to pace, pulling at his frayed robes in frustration and anger.

"Well, that would be all right and good, except that Dumbledore doesn't know everything I've been up to. He trusts me to get him the information he needs but hasn't thought it important enough to ask for the details of what I have to go through to get it."

Lily considered the implications of what he was saying... and not saying. "It's been horrible for you, hasn't it?" she asked finally. "You've had to face... terrible things alone. I don't think Dumbledore should ask it of you, Remus. It's not right."

Remus stopped pacing. "No, it's not. But I'm the only one who can do it," he said, defeated and resigned. Lily got up and went to him, putting her hand gently on his shoulder.

"Look at me, Remus."

She felt Remus struggle, trying to avoid her eyes, but she wasn't going to let him wriggle away. Not this time.

"Please, for me?"

Slowly, Remus raised his head and allowed Lily to gaze into his haunted, brown eyes. She only lingered briefly, already knowing what she'd find there. In the next minute, however, he was gazing into hers, and she felt him... looking, seeing something within *her*. She'd forgotten he was a Legilimens. The sensation was a bit unsettling. It could have felt harsh and invasive, but it wasn't. With Remus it felt... lovely, and deeply intimate. Lily reached out and gathered him in her arms and after a moment, he embraced her in return.

"Remus, there is not a single, hateful bone in your body or thought in your soul," she whispered as she held him. "And you, of all people, who have faced more hatred and discrimination and hurt than any of us, might even deserve the right to hate in return. Yet you don't. I don't think you could, even if you wanted to."

She stepped back a bit, but he held onto her. There were tears in his eyes, as he looked at her with something like... gratitude? Yearning?

"Lily, I...thank you. I forget sometimes that there are people who know who I really am." He brushed a strand of hair out of her face and touched her cheek gently.

Lily smiled with relief. "You are our friend, and we love you, Remus."

This time he pulled her back into an intense embrace, his face rough against hers. She felt his warm breath first, and then, as he placed a tender kiss on her cheek, the kitchen door banged open. Remus leapt away from her like he'd been hit with a Stunner. Lily was startled as much by the sound as by Remus' reaction.

"Moony!" James called, making his way towards them. Lily noticed that Remus was looking flushed and a bit panicked. It hit her suddenly what he had been about to do, and she mentally slapped herself for unwittingly leading him on. She knew he must be mortified.

"It's all right, Remus," Lily whispered to him. "We're okay, really!" He looked at her, his eyes wide and uncertain.

"Really!" she said with emphasis just as James bounded to Remus' side.

"Moony, please don't take what Padfoot said to heart. Losing our friends here has hit him pretty hard, and he's just angry." James paused, swallowed, and cleared his throat. "And you know how he gets. He always takes it out on those closest to him. You've been away, so that made you a convenient target." James held up his hands. "I know it's wrong, and I've already taken him to task for it. Won't you please come back in?" he pleaded.

Remus wavered and Lily gestured to James to keep going. "There's tea and some tarts," he said with a nervous smile. "From the looks of you, I bet you haven't had a decent meal in ages!"

James tended to run on and on when he was nervous, and Lily was relieved to see Remus smiling at his old friend's attempt to make things right.

Just then they heard the familiar *crack!* of Apparition, and Dorcas Meadowes appeared in the garden. She looked flustered and fairly crackled with energy as she ran towards them.

"Is Dumbledore here?" she asked breathlessly. "I've got to see him right away!"

"He's upstairs in his study, I think," James replied. "Got here a while ago."

"Great! Thanks!" And she sprinted towards the farmhouse.

James looked after her, bemused. "Wonder what that's about?"

"Well, if it's something involving Dumbledore, it's not likely that we'll ever find out." Remus smirked.

James laughed and put one arm around his friend and the other around his wife. "Well, if the old man wants to hide things from us, how about we go and hide all the sweets from him? We won't leave him a single tart!" he said with a crooked grin.

"Give us a minute, James," Lily said with a quick peck on the cheek. "All right?"

"Sure, luv." He nodded, returning the kiss. He jabbed Remus lightly in the shoulder. "We'll be waiting for you, Moony."

Remus gave a brief smile in response as James turned and ambled back down the hill.

He watched James go back into the farmhouse. Lily watched Remus with trepidation.

"Remus..."

"No, Lily," interrupted Remus. "It's not all right. I can't..."

"Can't?"

"I can't do this. I can't be here. For so many reasons."

"Remus! I know you didn't mean it...you've been through a terrible ordeal, you're exhausted...."

Remus turned to her, his eyes so full of pain that Lily gasped to see it.

"But that's just it!" he shouted. "I DID mean it! I wanted... no... I *want* you! I...."

Neither of them spoke for a moment.

"It's for the best, can't you see?" he said, his voice hoarse. "I'll I'll be away for a long while, but I'll send word through Albus that I'm all right. I I don't want you to worry."

Lily could only nod as her heart tugged with a terrible ache.

Remus started as if to say something more, but then stopped. He gave her a small, tight smile, and then Disappeared.

She kneels in the newly green grass and fists a clump of leaves in her hands. The hot tears flow, and her despair for Remus turns to outright anger. She swears at the madness that is tearing apart the world around her, as if the sunlight that shines overhead is a fraud, a mask for the real darkness that is always there, creeping over everyone she loves, ready to consume them all in a single moment.

Watching the sun sink lower in the sky, she calms a bit. No, she thinks. Light pierces the dark. It has to. She'll fight to make sure it does.

After a while, when the sun has retreated behind the horizon, Lily stands and wipes her eyes. Then she makes her way inside the farmhouse to find her boys.

Peter

He sat, waiting nervously in the corridor outside the massive, double oak doors leading to his master's chambers. This was a new place. *I haven't been here before*, he noted absentmindedly.

As always, he'd not seen a single soul when the Portkey transported him to this spot. Peter was a 'secret,' as he'd been told the first time he'd been brought to his master. As far as he could tell, he still was. He knew there were loads of people...Death Eaters...who were in his master's service, but he'd not seen a single figure, masked or otherwise, since the night of his kidnapping.

Unable to sit still, he got up and paced, rubbing and twisting his hands together anxiously. Peter hadn't been able to bring any information recently that his master deemed as 'useful,' and he was growing impatient. Peter didn't like to remember what happened the last time his master was impatient. Unfortunately, his body remembered the pain all too well, and it started to shake.

No! Peter thought, desperate to quell his panic. *Not this time! This time I'm sure he'll be pleased. He will!*

Peter thought it was ironic that he had Sirius to thank for it. Dumb luck, really. Last Saturday afternoon, after Sirius had run off Remus, he had turned on Peter, insulting him more viciously than ever. After flinging back a few well-chosen retorts of his own, Peter stormed out of the kitchen, hating Sirius more keenly than ever. Stomping upstairs, he was passing by the Headmaster's study when he heard voices. Putting his ear to the door he heard Dorcas and Dumbledore speaking. It was even dumber luck that Dumbledore had failed to cast the usual Imperturbable Charm. So, even though the door was closed, Peter could hear their voices clearly.

Not that he understood what they were talking about, of course, but he was smart enough to grasp that it was important. So, like a squirrel gathering acorns, he swept together all the bits and pieces that he'd overheard, ready to lay them at his master's feet.

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"Of course I can't be certain, Albus, but it would make sense!"

"It might, indeed. How better to maintain power if one is immortal...."

"Best of all, I think I know where it is! I should know for certain by next Friday!"

"It's too risky to do this alone, Dorcas."

"Damn it, Albus! It's too risky to send anyone else!"

"My dear, it's most likely protected with curses. There might not be enough time..."

"I'll make sure I've enough time! Listen, I've not come all this way not to see it through to the end! How about I ask Edgar to help me with some curse-breaking spells? He doesn't have to know why."

"I don't know, Dorcas...."

"Albus, just think! We're so close! If we can finally get our hands on the blasted thing we can examine it to see if we're right. And if we are..."

"All right. But you must promise that you'll report to me as soon as you've confirmed its location."

"Yes, sir. I'll do that."

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Peter smirked. He hadn't been a Marauder for all those years without having learnt a thing or two about defying authority, a trait that he knew Dorcas shared in spades. *She's always a bit too keen on doing things her own way*, he thought. Dorcas may have promised to report in, but he noted that she had cleverly *not* promised to tell him where the 'location' was. Or when she might go there.

He was startled out of his reverie when the double-doors opened with a creak behind him.

"Enter."

The familiar high-pitched voice scrapes down his spine like a cascade of sharp nails. Peter's stomach lurches as he enters, and as the doors close sharply behind him, all the air seems to drain out of the room. It is hard to breathe. He does not dare look up, but glancing through his lashes, he can see that his master is sitting in a large wing-backed chair, a goblet in his hand and a fire crackling behind him.

"Come here, my pet," Voldemort says, beckoning Peter forward with one of his long, tapered fingers. "Your report, Wormtail," he commands softly, licking his lips with a rapid tongue flick.

Peter repeats what he has heard and is relieved to see a smile start to etch itself on his master's face.

"You have done well." *His long fingers steeple together, his red-black eyes consider Peter.* "You shall be rewarded for this, Wormtail."

Peter's heart soars, and his soul laps up the words of praise like a famished animal. He stands just a little bit taller.

"Thank you, my Lord!" *he says with happiness, remembering at the last minute to bow obediently.*

Severus

Their cell was responsible for attacking Muggle families. 'Sowing Fear,' was what Mulciber called these missions. The lads enjoyed this duty, and they all had their assigned roles: Severus and Rosier destroyed the interior of the house while their comrades forced the terrified, pleading and weeping Muggles into a basement or another room without windows. There, they played with and, eventually, killed them all. Severus was glad to leave the blood sport to others; they seemed to revel in it far more than he did. Severus never saw the victims at the end; he was the one to cast the Dark Mark into the sky. It was like his personal signature, and he always felt a shiver of pride...of accomplishment...every time he did it.

Then, one very late night in July, he stumbled home, hot and exhausted. His head was pounding, and he felt nauseous, overwhelmed with unfamiliar and confusing feelings of doubt, loathing, and panic. He tore off his bloodstained robes and mask; his lank hair was plastered to his face with sweat. Opening the cupboard, he found a nearly empty bottle of Firewhisky, emptied it, and collapsed onto the sofa. He shut his eyes tightly and tried...and failed...to stop the scene from playing in his mind over and over again.

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Their mission completed, he was leaving the house to cast the Mark. But, before he reached the front door, Severus caught a fleeting glimpse of something moving to his left. He turned and pointed his wand reflexively...and was startled to see a Muggle child, a boy of no more than three, hiding behind a sofa, eyes shut and keening softly.

The fools must have overlooked him when they rounded up the family, he thought, annoyed.

The child opened his eyes and looked up at him, whimpering. Severus was angry at being left to deal with this... oversight. He faltered, uncertain. His first instinct was to keep walking and ignore it, but at that moment, Rosier was there and saw it too. With a snort, Rosier dragged the child screaming and kicking out of its hiding place. He levitated the boy into the air, then, tossing the child up like a ball, Rosier cast a Slicing Hex on its torso. He stopped its descent with his wand just before it hit the ground. He continued to bounce him up and down, laughing at this new game. Blood splattered over them both.

"Bout time we had a chance for a little sport. We never get a turn," Rosier huffed over the child's screams. "Here, Snape. You finish the job." He'd said it as if he was giving him a turn at darts at the pub. Severus hesitated for just a moment, but with Rosier's eyes on him, he focused, summoned the will, and cast the Killing Curse. The child finally fell to the ground with a thud, dead at his feet.

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Severus clenched his fist over his eyes, silently berating himself for his weakness, for being affected by what was just another mission. He ached in a thousand places, his stomach still unsettled. With stars exploding behind his eyelids, Severus hauled himself to his feet with a groan. He was just about to move upstairs towards the bath when a fire in the grate flared green. Severus blinked, taking a moment to realise that it was Lucius Malfoy's head in the flames.

Severus felt his senses sharpen and his body tense.

He hadn't seen Malfoy since that night many, many months ago, when he had completed the *Consentire* Potion.

"Severus," said Malfoy.

"Malfoy," he acknowledged. "It's been a long time."

Malfoy raised an eyebrow and took in Severus' haggard appearance.

"I hear you are doing well, Severus. Our master is very pleased."

He waited for the rest. This was not a social call.

"He has asked that you meet with him tomorrow evening for a very...sensitive mission. He would like to assess your progress for himself and feels this is an opportune moment to do so. Remember, your performance reflects on me, so I expect you to do your best."

Severus nodded and felt as if there were ice running up his arms and down his spine, but took care to shield his thoughts and his expression. "Will you be there, sir?"

Malfoy shook his head and his white-blond hair took on a green tint as it reflected the Floo fire. "No. Our Lord has not requested my presence, and I do not know who will be there, other than yourself. You are also instructed not to discuss this with any of the others, including Dolohov and Mulciber."

Malfoy's head looked down for a moment, and then his hand reached through the flames, holding out a bit of folded parchment. "Here is the information. Memorise it and then destroy it."

Severus took it from him. "Yes, sir."

"Narcissa sends her best, Severus," said Malfoy briskly. "Good night."

And he was gone.

It was late; Severus was tired and felt certain that he was lost. With only his lit wand illuminating the twisted path in the darkness, he swore as he navigated and stumbled over an assortment of hazards, including gaping holes, rocks, and tangling hedges. He had no idea where he was going or what he was supposed to do when he got there. He swore again when his hand caught on an outcropping of nettles and stopped before a thick copse of trees and sucked on the wound.

Out of the darkness came a low-throated laugh, and he threw himself instinctively to the ground in a defensive position. Pointing his wand at a clump of bush in front of him, he incanted, "*Incendio!*" The bush ignited, and the fire cast a flickering glow on a slight figure in Death Eater robes.

"You're on time, Snape. Glad to see Dolohov has taught you one useful thing. Get up, boy!" The voice, dripping with derision, belonged to a woman.

Severus stood, his heart thumping wildly as he moved cautiously towards her. She was not wearing a mask, and her long, black hair fell loose about her face, a striking contrast against her pale skin. As he came closer, he could see that she was regarding him with an amused smirk, and then he realised that he knew her: she was Reggie's 'Auntie Bella.' Bellatrix Black. No. He'd heard she'd married. Lestrangle. Another Death Eater. *A lovely family business*, Severus thought wryly.

"Mrs. Lestrangle. A pleasure to meet you again," said Severus with polite caution. There was something about this woman that told him not to let his guard down.

"We can exchange pleasantries another time, Snape. We have a job to do. Follow me."

She brushed past him and headed into the trees. Severus followed.

There, in the midst of the trees was a small, abandoned cottage. Part of the roof had caved in, and many of its tiles were scattered about the ground. Nettles had grown around the mossy stone of the cottage, and he could see that foliage had made headway into the house through the broken casement windows.

The door was already open, half-off its hinges, and Bellatrix stepped around it and into the cottage. Severus entered behind her.

The cottage appeared to have one main room, with two small doors leading off to others. It was empty, save for a rusty cauldron, the remains of an old iron stove, a broken chair, and several mice that scurried away at their presence. He wondered what this place was, what would happen here tonight, and when the Dark Lord would come. But he contained both his curiosity and anxiety, and carefully Occluded his mind.

After scanning the room, Bellatrix turned to Severus, her long hair swept behind her with a toss of her head.

"We've been given the honour of assisting the Dark Lord with a very important task, Snape."

"May I ask what that might involve?" Severus ventured, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"We are expecting a... guest at this location shortly, and we are to make sure she receives a proper welcome before our master arrives."

"I assume then, that we are preparing a surprise party?" he asked.

Bellatrix smiled widely, and Severus could see for the first time that this woman was the reverse image of her sister: dark where her sister was light, but just as beautiful. She moved towards him and pointed her lit wand in front of his face, examining his features carefully.

The image of a large tarantula came to mind, and he hoped she couldn't hear his heart, which seemed, in his ears, to be beating very loudly. But he didn't flinch.

"Very clever, young Snape." Her chuckle was low and menacing. Her free hand came up and touched his brow. He was drawn into the gaze of her dark eyes as the tips of her fingers moved slowly down the length of his cheek, across his lips, and down his chin, where it lingered for a very long moment. Competing feelings coursed through him. It took a great deal of effort to hold his Occlumency shields in place, but he could not prevent his body from reacting to her touch, the unfamiliar feeling of pure desire nearly undoing him.

She smiled again and let him go, looking satisfied and more than a little smug. He felt the breath returning to his lungs and realised he was a bit dizzy from the lack of oxygen.

"It's time for us to play Hide and Seek," she said, tapping him on the head. Severus felt himself Disillusioned. He looked at his hands but saw only the floor beneath them. Bellatrix incanted another spell, this one unfamiliar.

"That's to make us Undetectable, in case our guest decides to look for intruders," she explained as if she could read his invisible expression. "And, if you're a very good boy," she added suggestively, "Bella might teach it to you." Then, she cast the same spells on herself and instructed Severus to stand in a corner of the room. He did and assumed that Bellatrix had done the same.

Only a short time had passed before he saw the outline of a figure glide silently into the cottage. It incanted a spell, and an arc of yellow sparks emitted from a wand and shot around the room in all directions, clearly trying to detect a presence. In the intermittent glow, Severus could make out that the figure was a female. He wondered what she was looking for, and when Bellatrix would make her move. When the last of the searching sparks dissipated, the woman stood in the middle of the room and began to recite a different sort of spell, one in an odd language Severus had never heard before. As the recitation went on, a high-pitched sound began to reverberate through the room, like a song coming from somewhere far away. The sound drew nearer and grew louder, appearing to pool itself over a spot just in front of the old stove. The woman ceased chanting, but the eerie sound remained, pulsating until an odd glow appeared in the floor. She pointed her wand at the glowing spot, and with another spell, a section of the wooden floor disappeared, revealing a gap. The glow and the sound ceased, and the room echoed with silence once again.

The woman pulled out a small sack, opened it and placed it on the floor beside her. Severus held his breath as the woman leaned over the newly opened space and levitated an object out it. She began to guide it into the sack on the floor.

"*INCARCEROUS!*"

There was a gasp and Severus saw the woman fall roughly. He also heard the object she had summoned fall to the floor with a clunk. Something else skidded across the floor. *Her wand*, Severus thought. He summoned it in the dark, and in the next moment, he felt the thin wooden wand in his hand. It felt warm.

"*Incendio!*"

A torch flamed in Bellatrix's hand, and the room illuminated in a burst of light so sudden it made Severus squint. Adjusting to the brightness, he stood transfixed, waiting and watching as Bellatrix's form reappeared and moved towards the woman on the floor, now bound from head to toe in magical ropes. The woman's eyes were wide, fearful and fixed on Bellatrix, and her breathing was rapid and shallow. Bellatrix, in turn, was examining the woman as if she were considering a particularly tasty treat in the grocery.

"Our guest has arrived, Severus," said Bellatrix, her eyes glittering as she left the lit torch hovering above them. "I think we should offer her a seat. Why don't you find her one?"

Mentally shaking himself to attention, he quickly assembled the pieces of the broken chair that littered the floor into a renewed whole. Bellatrix swiftly re-cast her Incarcerous spell so that the woman was now seated in and bound to the chair. She leaned over and jabbed her wand under the woman's chin so hard that the woman gagged.

"I hope you are comfortable," she sneered. "Our host will be here in just a moment. He has been looking forward to meeting you."

Severus didn't think the woman's eyes could open any wider, but they did now. She looked wildly at Bellatrix and then swivelled her head around until she eyed the object she had come for, now lying crumpled on the floor. It appeared to be a necklace, with a pendant or a locket on it.

"You like nosing about in other people's houses, do you?" admonished Bellatrix with a disapproving frown. She glanced at the necklace but did not move to touch it. "That's very unseemly behaviour for a guest."

Severus logically concluded that the necklace must be very valuable, but assumed that there must be more to it. It would take more than concern about a simple theft for the Dark Lord to be directly involved. This had to be something special.

"And you haven't yet introduced yourself!" exclaimed Bellatrix. To Severus' surprise, Bellatrix straddled the woman and sat down with a firm bounce on her lap, gripping the woman's bound legs tightly with her thighs. Her wand was still held firmly under the woman's chin. Bellatrix leaned over so far that their faces were nearly touching and said softly, "My name is Bella. What's yours?"

The woman tried to back away from Bellatrix's advance, but there was, of course, nowhere to go. Nothing came out of the woman's mouth except a whimper.

Bellatrix frowned petulantly. "That's not very nice. I think you need to be taught better manners!" She leaned over the woman again and caressed her wild, brown hair. Then, seizing a fistful of it roughly, she whispered into the woman's ear, "*Crucio!*"

Severus recalled a childhood picture book of a cowboy riding a wild horse. He watched, fascinated, as Bellatrix laughed wildly while the woman underneath her bucked and screamed and thrashed to the limits of her bonds. Severus gaped, both embarrassed and appalled at his arousal.

It occurred to him that Bellatrix might be mad. *And all the more dangerous for it.* He tucked this insight away to be studied at a later time.

Finally, Bellatrix stepped away and lifted the curse. Ignoring the woman now gasping and twitching in the after-effects of the Cruciatus, she turned to Severus, all business.

"You can do the honours, Snape. Lift your sleeve," she instructed, pointing her wand at his left arm.

Severus complied. Bellatrix twisted it so the side with the Dark Mark faced up and held it firmly. With her wand, she wove an intricate pattern over his Mark. He felt a tingling pull from within the Mark itself, but the feeling was not unpleasant. Then, she muttered a brief spell and dropped his arm.

"He's coming," she said, her eyes bright with anticipation as she turned to stand beside him.

A sudden *Crack!* reverberated in the room, and the Dark Lord appeared. He glanced around the room with an odd smile.

He's been here before, Severus observed.

Then he felt Bellatrix grab his arm, and force him to his knees. He felt chills of excited anticipation.

Faint whimpers and moans came from the woman bound to the chair.

"No... no... get back... tell them... no..."

The tall wizard ignored them all as his eyes fell upon the necklace on the floor. He held out his hand, and with a flick, the necklace snapped into his grasp. He caressed it with a satisfied smile.

"It's still very beautiful," he said to no one in particular and then tucked it gently into his robes with a pat. The Dark Lord took a few steps towards one of the mossy, broken windows and stopped, staring at a spot in front of him for a long minute, as if in meditation. Then, with a start, he turned, and snapped his head to look at the bound woman, who was gasping and shaking uncontrollably.

"Miss Meadows," Voldemort said silkily as he circled her. "I owe you my thanks."

The woman's gasps pitched higher, her face drained of all colour.

"You've shown me that there are weaknesses in my defences that must be rectified," he said, trailing his long fingers across her neck. "As a reward for your capable assistance, our entertainment with you tonight shall be brief. Best of all, you shall have the honour of dying by my hand."

The woman he called Miss Meadows suddenly shut her eyes very tightly. Voldemort laughed.

"There is nothing in that silly head of yours that I don't already know, my dear." Her eyes snapped open again, wild with fright.

"Yes. I know about Dumbledore's folly: the 'Order of the Phoenix' he calls it?" He leaned over the woman, just as Bellatrix had done and spoke in a dark and quiet voice. "I know who you are. I know who the others are... and I know of your movements."

"Traitor!" hissed Miss Meadows with painful understanding crossing her face. It was the first word Severus had heard her speak. Her dismay at the discovery of betrayal was oddly satisfying.

"Of course!" he spat in her face. "That old fool has always misplaced his trust in people. It will be his undoing."

He stepped away from her, and Severus felt the black-red eyes fall on him.

"Snape. Rise."

"Yes, my Lord." He obeyed, keeping his head down, and his voice from wavering.

"A brief demonstration with our guest, if you please. I wish to see a sample of your progress."

Severus felt his mouth go dry as he stepped towards the woman. He looked up at his master, just to make sure he understood the order.

"Yes, Snape. But leave her whole and alive at the end. The final curse belongs to me."

Severus nodded, trying to keep his anxiety at bay. He faced the woman. Although she was still shaking, she met his eyes without flinching, almost daringly.

I will not be your victim! The thought flew like sparks from her eyes and burned into his soul. *You know my name. Think of it. Hear it in your nightmares!*

In the same moment that her unwavering, challenging gaze bore into him, Severus felt himself detach, as if he was floating above his body, watching himself look at the

bound woman in the chair. He felt... nothing. He felt free. His mind now released, Severus calmly unbound the woman and dragged her to her feet, where she tilted in her effort to remain upright.

Severus pulled out the woman's wand from his pocket and flung it on the ground. He noted a look of surprise on Bellatrix's face.

"Pick it up," he heard himself say. "Defend yourself."

Her stony expression faltered. She seemed to be debating whether it was worth the fight. In the end, she summoned the wand to her hand. But even if she weren't already weakened by Bellatrix's curse, she was still no match for Severus.

Without attempting to disarm her, he easily deflected her offensive moves and countered with an impressive barrage of curses and hexes. He made sure to include a sample of his self-invented curses in addition to those he'd been taught. With his audience watching attentively, Severus ended with a final whipping curse that wrapped itself around her body and then uncoiled with a snap leaving her in a panting, bloody mound on the floor, her garments rendered to shreds, her wand and her body broken. But she was still alive, as his master had commanded.

"Well done, indeed," said Voldemort, placing his hand on Severus' shoulder in approval.

Severus bowed and the adrenaline-filled backrush of magic hit him with a powerful surge, pleasure coursing through his body. It had been a while since he'd performed these spells. As the lovely sensations tingled in his extremities, the thought that he should do them more often crossed his mind. He stepped back towards Bellatrix, and she regarded him with an amused smile.

"You enjoyed that, didn't you, Snape?" she asked with a wicked grin.

Oh, yes. It felt very good, indeed. But in the afterglow, he considered her question more seriously. Severus decided that he what really enjoyed was the challenge of the hardest tasks. Proving his proficiency. And the acknowledgement. Yes. He enjoyed *that*, very much indeed.

Meanwhile, Voldemort had forced what was left of the woman back into the chair and immobilised her. Only her eyes indicated that an actual person remained inside, if anyone had cared to look. Standing behind her, Voldemort pointed his wand at an empty patch of the stone wall in front of them, and transfigured it into a mirror. Then, reaching into his robes, he pulled out the necklace and held it above her head. He considered their reflection in the mirror for a moment and smiled as if he liked what he saw.

"Since you went through so much trouble to find my family heirloom, Miss Meadows," he said, meeting her gaze in the mirror, "I think that you should have the honour of trying it on." The woman's eyes were swollen and her body was frozen, but Severus could swear that she tried to move. Even after all that had already been done to her, he felt terror emanating from her like an open furnace. And yet, he was impressed that she had not begged or cried. He could almost respect her for it.

"It is, as you correctly surmise, cursed; spelled so that I am the only one who can touch it safely. But it would please me to see you wear it. I believe it will look beautiful on you."

Voldemort placed the necklace on the woman's neck and clasped it from behind.

Immediately, there was a hissing sound, and the smell and sound of flesh burning filled the small space. It was coming from her neck and chest where the necklace and the dangling locket touched her skin. Immobilised, the woman could not move or scream or respond. She could do nothing except watch herself die, her agony reflected in the transfigured mirror. The detached, floating feeling came over Severus again, and he observed that the curse was crawling under her skin like fire, charring the flesh black as it spread. They watched in silence for a long while, until Voldemort removed the necklace, and the woman, finally released, slid off the chair in a heap, dead.

Voldemort casts several spells over the necklace and holds it out towards Bellatrix. She steps towards it cautiously.

"I have rendered the necklace inert, and it can now be handled," *he says, tossing it to her.* "It is your responsibility to protect this until you receive further instructions from me. Your life depends on it, Bella. Do you understand?"

Bellatrix stands proudly, clutching the necklace to her breast protectively, like a child. "I am grateful for the honour, my Lord. I will guard it with my life."

"And take that," *he says with a dismissive wave toward the body on the floor,* "to Dumbledore's doorstep. He'll no doubt be missing her."

Lord Voldemort turns to him. "Snape, report to your laboratory tomorrow for an important assignment. I require a very special potion."

His heart swells with pride and excitement. "Yes, my Lord. I will be there," *he says, kneeling at his master's feet. With his head bowed, he allows himself a small, triumphant smile.*

Severus feels redeemed.

A/N: My heartfelt and endless thanks to my hard-working betas, celtmama and capella_black!!!

Descending into Darkness, Part 4: Autumn 1979

Chapter 18 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Descending into Darkness (Part 4): Autumn 1979

Severus

At first, the rush of Pleasure washes over him each and every time. It is joy and release and peace. Its promise compels him to reach for it again and again. But, over time, the touch of Elemental Magic gives up its joys less and less and starts taking more and more.

Killing, mutilation, destruction. Curses, potions, deadly Dark magic. Pulling at him. Devouring him.

Time collapses into itself; one mission becomes another, becomes another. His soul and his magic fall into an abyss together. He is both stronger and more deadly, but doesn't even notice that he no longer seems to have any real... feelings.

Eventually, the Pleasure abandons him altogether, but in its retreat, his craving for it escalates. He just *knows* that if he works hard enough, it will come back. But now it's *worse* because he can see the Pleasure just ahead of him, tantalising him like a teasing woman, beckoning him forward while drawing steadily back, always just out of reach.

Just one more time and it will come back. It will.

He no longer cares about acknowledgment. His skill...well...that remains intact. He survives because his skill is dependably instinctive. The Magic won't let go of that part of him; it needs Severus to be effective in order to be fed. And Severus feeds it well.

He's been assigned to Travers for a special mission and told to bring a dose of the *Consentire* potion. There is the briefest flare of actual feeling: it's... anticipation and... pride. Yes, he's quite proud of this potion, one of his best creations. And now he's been asked to test it.

Travers and his team have easily broken through the protective shields surrounding the house, and the family has been restrained with a minimum of resistance. A man, a woman, and their two children, a boy of around ten and a younger daughter, have been bound and surrounded by a half-dozen masked Death Eaters. The daughter is crying, and the boy looks angry. The man is speaking softly to his children. The woman seems to be the primary target. They call her 'McKinnon.'

"You've been quite a nuisance to our master, McKinnon," says Travers. Severus can't identify the other Death Eaters, but he recognises Travers by his voice.

"See here!" says the man with as much indignation as he can muster. "We haven't done anything to you or your *youmaster*." He clenches his teeth at this last word. "Leave us be!"

One of the Death Eaters casts a Stinging Hex at the man who yelps in pain. This gives the others ideas, and they all begin to cast Stinging Hexes at the McKinnons. A cacophony of screams echo around the room.

When the hexes stop, the woman painfully raises her head.

"If it's me you want, then take me. Leave the rest of my family alone."

It's false bravado, Severus assesses clinically, sensing her terror. *No one would really choose to die for another.*

"Marlene! No!"

"Mum!"

Travers responds by roughly pulling the witch away from her family, unbinding her and grasping her arm so tightly that she yelps.

"Well, Madam, I think this should be a family affair. We have some special games planned!" He throws her to the floor. "Do you know 'Follow the Leader'?"

The woman doesn't answer, and one of the Death Eaters grabs her daughter, twists her arm violently behind her back, and points a wand at her head.

"Have you heard of it?" Travers repeats calmly.

"Please let her go! I..."

The Death Eater twists her daughter's arm, and Severus hears it break before the girl's screams shatter the room.

"YES!" she shrieks as tears flow down her face.

"Good!" Travers says lightly, gratified. "Well, in our game, you get to be the leader, and the others," he says with a gesture towards her family, "will follow!"

Travers signals Severus who pulls out a phial from his robes and crosses to the woman who is struggling with all her might.

"NO! I *won't!* I..."

But her pleas turn into a gargle as two of Travers' men force her mouth open. Severus pours the draught down her throat, careful to make sure she does not choke.

He steps back to observe, cataloguing her reactions in his mind. He feels foolish for forgetting to bring parchment and a quill to write it down.

First her skin flushes red, then it pales. Then her eyes dilate and contract in rapid succession. Beads of sweat pop at her brow. She begins to wheeze, gasping for breath. After several minutes her appearance and breathing return to normal. She looks around at them, wondering what has happened. Severus looks into her eyes and finds her grasp at the hope that it's gone wrong. Severus knows otherwise.

"You can begin," Severus tells Travers who gives the signal to his men.

Travers rips her robes, and they fall to the floor, exposing her body, clad only in undergarments.

The first Death Eater steps forward, casting a Slicing Hex on her arm. She shrieks as blood pours from the wound. Then, at the same time, her husband, son and daughter shriek as well. They all clutch their arms where blood is pouring from their wounds, each one identical to their mother's.

The woman looks at her family, horrified as understanding dawns. "*Oh, no... stop... leave them...*" she pleads in pain more terrible than her physical wounds.

Travers, even behind his mask, looks impressed. "Next one," he says.

One by one, the Death Eaters take turns casting curse after curse at Marlene McKinnon and, by extension, her family. Her pain causes their pain. Her blood spills their blood.

Severus is pleased. The *Consentire* surpasses his expectations.

This will be a highly effective and useful tool in the Dark Lord's arsenal, he concludes.

In the end, Travers and his men kill what is left of the McKinnon family. Severus watches. *It is their mission, after all,* he concedes. But Travers, feeling generous, does permit Severus to cast the Dark Mark. It induces only a hint of the Pleasure he craves.

It will have to do, he thinks, shuddering with frustration and longing.

Peter

My master has been generous with his rewards. I'd have had to work for months to earn what he's given me! It was unfortunate about Marlene. She was always very nice to me. But it was necessary. What else could I do? He's expecting more and more, and if I don't give him something useful, he'll turn on James. I can't risk his even thinking about James. It was so lovely of Lily to invite me to dinner. When was it? Several months ago? I don't know why I can't remember. Their new house is very nice, even if it is small. I think I'm going to be able to move to a nicer place soon! Yes. Dinner was nice. Except for Sirius. Too bad that he had to come too. I DON'T have to put up with his insults any longer. He can't treat me like I'm dirt, especially when he's so vicious and untrustworthy. He's not good for James! It's too bad James and I haven't been able to get together much recently. Maybe I'll invite him and Lily over for dinner one night. Wonderful idea! Don't know why I didn't think of it sooner!

"Peter..."

Just the three of us! That would be lovely!

"Peter!"

I'll be able to break out that wine from my new collection....

"PETER!"

"What?" He realises he's lost himself in his thoughts in the middle of his dinner date with Alicia and notices his hand clutching a fork with a piece of lamb attached to it, hovering in mid-air.

"Where were you just now?" She looks put out with an expression that he thinks does not look very attractive.

"Nowhere! I mean I was here. Eating dinner." He pops the lamb into his mouth just to prove it. It's gone cold and therefore difficult to chew.

Alicia wipes her mouth with the cloth serviette and puts it down by her plate with a sigh.

"I can't do this, Peter."

Peter finally swallows the lamb. "Do what?"

"Go out with you anymore."

He looks at her, blinking, trying to understand what she is saying. They've been going out since...well, since *that* night. It's been nice having a woman to be with. She is good fun, and Peter enjoys making her laugh. She has a very nice laugh. And the other parts of her are, er, certainly nice too! But they hadn't become *serious*. Which is just fine, since Peter is very busy with work, the Order, unpredictable calls from his master....

No, she'd never understand that, he thinks with an involuntary shudder.

"Why...why do you say that?"

She pinches the bridge of her nose and looks at him with a sad shake of her head.

"You really are clueless, aren't you, Peter?"

He bristles at this and pouts.

"It was fine in the beginning. You were good fun then! But in the past while you've become, well, odd."

He feels like a fist has gone right through his chest and grabbed hold of his heart.

"Odd?" he squeaks.

Alicia takes a deep breath, resolved. "Yes, odd. You go off into these mental reveries for ages at a time. You twitch and jump at the slightest noise. You're edgy all the time. You've blocked me out of your life, Peter. We're growing apart, not together."

Peter is flabbergasted. He really doesn't think he'd done any of those things.

"I'm not. I mean, we're not! We're good together, aren't we?"

She leans back into her chair and shrugs. "I used to think so, Peter. But I don't anymore. You clearly don't want more from this relationship. In all this time, I've never even met this famous 'best friend' of yours. James."

Peter feels his face get warm. He doesn't want to share James with anyone. Except for Lily, of course. That can't be helped. But no one else.

"Well... I... things have been very busy," Peter says evasively.

She regards him coolly. "Yes, I imagine you have. My point precisely." She stands up and pulls her satchel over her shoulder. "Let's try and keep things amicable at work, eh?"

He nods mutely, more confused than before.

"Good night, Peter." She turns on her heel and walks out of the restaurant.

Lily

"Just stay home, Lily! You're no good to anyone if you get sick! If you don't Floo Esmé to beg off today, then I will!"

James is glaring at her, hands on his hips. She laughs.

"What's so funny? What's wrong with being concerned about my wife?"

"There's nothing wrong with it," she says with a smile. "You just look like your mum."

He scrunches up his face and flings the back of his hand against his forehead. "You wound me, woman."

In the end, she agrees to stay home. She has been feeling more tired than usual. Lily realises she's not had time to herself for ages.

"What will you do?" James asks as he puts on his cloak. He's meeting Sirius to work on one of their new inventions that Dumbledore thinks will be helpful to the Order.

She helps him with the clasp. "Today I shall be a lady of leisure. Magazines, romance novels, Floo calls to gossip with the girlfriends, bon-bons...."

He rolls his eyes and kisses her goodbye, but she does not let go, her lips lingering a bit longer on his than usual. He responds, forgetting for a moment that he has somewhere to go.

"Not fair, Mrs. Potter," he mutters as she pulls him closer.

She pretends to pout. "Well, I thought if I was skiving off, maybe you could too. We haven't had much time to ourselves lately." She says this last bit with a suggestive raise of an eyebrow while reaching behind him to grab his....

James leaps back. "*Really* not fair!" he gasps, and she smiles innocently. "How about I come home early? We can have the whole evening together. I'll bring home curry, all right?"

"You're on, Mr. Potter." He's just about out of the door when she calls out after him.

"And ice cream! Chocolate!"

Lily is tucked under one of her mother's hand-made quilts with a cup of tea and some toast.

She sips her tea as her fingers trace the stitching in the quilt. She loves this quilt. It is all the more special because it was made without a smidgen of magic. Lily herself picked out the many soft browns, golds, and greens from her mother's fabric stash and watched her mum cut up and sew the pieces back together, stitch by stitch. Slowly, the individual patches came together to form an intricate pattern of stars, triangles, and circles. It was made with love, and Lily feels wrapped in her mother's care. It is magical in its own way, she thinks.

She hasn't told her parents much about the war, but she's worried about them. Dumbledore has placed protective charms around the Evans' house, and Lily has told them to limit their travels. She's glad Petunia is out of the house, having recently married and moved to Surrey. But she knows they are a target and feels helpless to do anything to change that fact. She pulls the quilt tighter around her shoulders as she feels a chill pass through her.

Lily awakens several hours later, surprised that she's nodded off. She's never been one for taking naps. Rising from the sofa, she feels dizzy and wonders if she has the flu. Lily decides to do a quick diagnostic spell. The one that Dorcas taught her.... Thinking of Dorcas brings tears to her eyes, and she fights to not think of what happened. How they found her outside the gates of Hogwarts. What they did to her....

NO!

Where is my wand? She wipes her eyes.

She finds it in the kitchen and mentally scolds herself for not having it on hand like she should. Again. A good leather strap for her arm to hold her wand would be useful. She'll have to remember to ask Moody where to get one.

She suddenly feels dizzy again and makes her way to the toilet.

James comes home a bit after five o'clock, bearing sacks with their dinner. Lily is sitting at the kitchen table, nursing another cup of tea when she hears him.

"Guess what?" she says, nervously turning her teacup in its saucer.

He says nothing as he puts the sacks down on the table and sits next to her.

"What?" he says, but she can tell he's distracted.

"James?"

He pulls his hand through his hair and tugs, making it stand straight up.

"I, um, have news," he says.

"Me too," she says.

They look at each other, seeing anxiety, sadness, and fear.

"Who is it?" Lily prompts.

"The McKinnons," James says, his voice cracking.

Her heart breaks in a million pieces. The tea cup clatters in its saucer. "*Who...?*"

"All of them," he answers, slumping in his chair, head in his hands.

There comes a point in the relentless onslaught of carnage, brutality, and loss when those in the midst of the fight must set aside their devastating pain, lock it away to be dealt with at a later time. But for now, they hold each other and allow themselves a brief moment of terrible, heartrending grief.

After a while, tears spent, James asks "Your news?" Her head is on his shoulder. The feeling of his hand stroking her hair is soothing.

"I'm pregnant." He doesn't say anything, and she's afraid to look up. Fear flutters and then clenches in her chest.

Finally, James pulls her back and looks at her with a curious expression. She doesn't look into his eyes too deeply, though.

He starts to speak but words don't come out. He clears his throat and tries again.

"Are you certain?" he croaks.

She nods and finds she is shaking.

"I'm afraid, James. This is such a terrible time to have a baby...."

"NO!" he says so vehemently that it startles her. "It is the perfect time to have a baby, Lily!" He gathers her in a tight embrace. "Merlin, to bring life into the world is exactly what is needed right now!"

She pulls back again, her face wet with tears. She has to make sure....

"Do you think we'll manage it, James? Isn't it too dangerous?" She wants to believe him so badly...that this is a good thing to happen. That they're not risking too much. She can barely imagine losing James without adding the worry of endangering a child!

"Of course it's dangerous!" he says, wiping her face with his fingers. "But life, Lily! We've created a child...our child! We're being given a gift, can't you see? It's a ray of light in the middle of the darkest night. He'll be our hope!"

Lily laughs. "He?"

James blinks. "Of course, he's a he. Potters always have sons!"

"How wonderfully chauvinistic of you, James," she says, rolling her eyes but feeling lighter than she had. "But isn't that an awful lot to pin on a baby? 'A ray of light?' 'Hope?'" she teases.

He stands up and takes her in his arms. His smile lights up the room. "All right. He can just be a baby then. Our baby."

They hold each other, laughing and crying for a while. She relishes the feel of James, his spirit and his physical presence, and wonders how she could have ever imagined a life without him. He is sometimes still incredibly pompous and stubborn as a crusted cauldron, but he is also fiercely brave and loyal to a fault. Most of all, his love for her remains strong and unwavering, and she's grateful; it keeps her afloat.

"You'll be a wonderful dad," she says, running her fingers through his untameable hair.

He pulls her close, leaning in for a kiss, but her hand suddenly grabs a fistful of his hair.

"Ow!" he yelps, bewildered and a little frightened.

Her piercing glare implies incipient danger.

"You *did* remember to get the ice cream," she growls. "Didn't you?"

A/N: For those of you who are still reading my story after this very long and difficult chapter, you deserve medals of honour and a lifetime supply of chocolate! Heck, you are such a small group, I want to invite you all to my house for dinner! Thank you all.

Of course, my heartfelt and endless thanks to my hard-working betas, celtmama and capella_black!!!

Following Protocol: March 1980

Chapter 19 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

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Following Protocol: March 1980

Lily

"Mornings are the worst."

"That's for certain. But it's easing up a bit now that we're more than half-way there."

"Have you felt it kick?"

"Amazing, isn't it? He's going to be a strong one, for sure!"

"I don't know if I'm ready, though. Aren't you scared?"

"Yeah, a bit. I don't know much about babies and such...."

Lily rolled her eyes at Alice. "Can you two blokes talk about anything other than the babies?"

The two couples were enjoying a rare evening out together at The Treacle and Tart in Diagon Alley.

"I agree," said Alice. "We're the ones who have to carry them around all day, so it would be nice to talk about something else for a change. Even Quidditch would be better!"

"Anything to accommodate the mums," said James with a smile. He turned back to Frank. "So, will yours be Keeper or Chaser?"

"The wee one feels like a Keeper to me," Frank said with a thoughtful nod. "Deft hands."

The women moaned. "It's no use, Lily. They're obsessed."

"Ignore them. How long 'till Moody pulls you off patrols, Alice?" asked Lily, taking a sip of her pumpkin juice.

"As long as I'm feeling all right, pretty near until the eighth month, I reckon," replied Alice. "Of course, I'm not doing a lot of rolling around, if I can help it!"

"If you keep throwing those amazing Three Point Blocks, you can keep the baddies at bay sitting down with a drink in your other hand!" added Frank, clearly proud of his wife as he cuffed her lightly on the shoulder.

Alice cuffed him back. "You should hear Mother Longbottom go on about me working, Lily. She's been having heart palpitations at the thought that I'm not sequestered away, hiding my embarrassing pregnancy."

"She's just a bit old fashioned," said Frank in a feeble defence of his mother.

"Old fashioned!" Alice retorted. "She's completely nineteenth century, Frank! That HAT!" Alice shuddered as they all laughed at the image of Augusta Longbottom's famous vulture-topped, feathered hat.

"James' parents are pretty close behind," added Lily as James stared at the ceiling. "I know they are SHOCKED and APPALLED that I'm continuing to work. They think it must be some sort of Muggle abnormality."

"Lily!" said James, not able to avoid being pulled into this conversation. "They can't help being their age. And you know they love you."

"Yes, I know they do, even if I will always remain a bit of a mystery to them."

"Here's to the grandparents!" said Alice, holding up her own glass of pumpkin juice. "May they be available to mind the babies whenever we need them!"

They all raised their glasses. "To the grandparents!"

"Speaking of minding babies," said Frank, "you know my Uncle Algie and Aunt Enid? They've already said they'd love to look after the little one. Maybe we can leave both babies with them sometime for another evening out!"

Alice and Lily looked at each other, horrified, then burst into gales of screaming laughter.

After dinner, they strolled along Diagon Alley, which was mostly deserted at this late hour. The early spring night was still cold, so they huddled together for warmth, enjoying this singular night free of worry.

Until they saw Sirius' Patronus.

Easy laughter turned to silent alarm as they watched it amble towards them, finally slowing as the shape of a large dog circled James before evaporating into the night air.

James look confused. "TenPin Alley? Where's that?"

"I know where it is," said Frank. "It's not far from here."

"Is Sirius in trouble?" asked Lily, who already knew the answer by the expression on her husband's face.

Frank had already started to move. "Follow me." They pulled out their wands and followed.

Aside from the better known Diagon and Knockturn Alleys, there were dozens of other lanes, alleys and streets that comprised London's magical community. How they all managed to fit within Muggle London continued to amaze Lily as she followed Frank through places she'd never set foot in before.

"Should we notify the Aurors?" asked James as he jogged next to Frank.

"Let's get a lay of the land before we call in for back-up," he replied. "We don't want to rush into something without knowing what we're facing."

They moved silently through the maze of streets until Frank stopped them, his arm outstretched.

Lily noted a gas lamp-lit sign above them that read *TenPin Alley*.

They spread out, keeping their backs against the buildings, which seemed to be mostly warehouses or storage-type facilities. Luckily, aside from the one lamp at the head of the street, it was completely dark.

"There are some old rumours about TenPin Alley," whispered Frank as they neared the end of the street. "Some say treasure used to be buried here, but none was ever found. Others say there's an underground river and that some nights they can hear the sound of rushing water."

"What in blazes is Sirius doing here? And how are we supposed to find him?" hissed James.

Lily had gone ahead and gestured for the others to follow her. When they drew together at the end of the street, which appeared to be a dead-end, they stared in amazement at the sight that greeted them.

"I'd say some of those old rumours might have something to them," Alice said softly.

The street appeared to have caved in. Probably recently, Lily reasoned, judging by the way pieces of the road and pavement were still falling into the giant precipice below their feet.

At a distance of nearly fifty metres below them, they could see what appeared to be an underground room. It clearly wasn't just a hole in the ground, as the room appeared to be covered in some sort of finished stone. Frank chanced a *Lumos!* to glance into the cavernous space and then quickly extinguished the spell.

"Don't get too close to the edge," warned Frank. "We don't want to make this hole any larger and take us down in a larger collapse." They all stepped back, following Frank's more experienced lead. "I'll Apparate down...the floor seems solid enough. If it looks clear, I'll signal you lot to follow me."

A few minutes later, they stood, back-to-back, far below the streets of London, their wands shooting out beams of light. It was an astonishing sight. It was a room covered in marble with several large indentations in the floor at scattered intervals along one side. Large Greek-style columns flanked the edges and the centre of the room, with some having collapsed in the cave-in, with their large, decorated finials broken and scattered around them.

"This was an ancient bath," muttered Lily as she shined her light along the floor. "Just like in the city of Bath." She'd been there on several occasions with her family on holiday and easily recognized the design. Her companions looked puzzled.

"The ancient Romans who lived here built these...that's where the town of Bath got its name. Muggles go and visit them. There must have been a spring here at one time," she added, moving her wand around to see if there was any evidence of water. "If there was, it's dried up long ago."

Alice's wand picked up the entrance to another room, and she had just started to move towards it when Frank stopped her.

"Stay together."

Slowly, they stepped through the rubble to make their way into the next chamber, which looked much the same as the first. This one, however, had a circular stairway in the middle of the room.

"James," said Lily, "do you have your mirror? We have no way of finding Sirius if he's down here. He could be hurt."

"It's at home," he muttered. "I can pop there and back in just a minute, though!"

And before anyone could say anything, he'd Disappeared.

Suddenly, a loud explosion erupted below their feet. The room jolted as pieces of the ceiling above them began to crack.

"Run!" yelled Frank, who led them down the staircase just as the heavy stone above them gave way and came crashing down. Frank cast a Repelling Charm at the mouth of the stairs, which prevented the larger pieces of stone from hitting them, but it didn't completely stop the dust and dirt of the cave-in from swirling about them at the bottom of the stairs, and they gagged. Fortunately, the opening above them wasn't completely sealed off, permitting some air to filter through.

"*Aguamenti!*" chanted Frank, who poured some water into each of their mouths, so they could rinse out the dirt.

"Everyone all right?" he asked as he spit out some dirty water.

"I wouldn't recommend that as an after-dinner drink," said Lily, coughing up some more dirt.

"Hey! Lily! Are you all right?" the panicked voice of James shouted from above.

"We're fine! Down in here!" she called up to him.

James levitated away the stones that were blocking the staircase. He ran down quickly, and pulled Lily into a rough embrace. "I can't leave you alone for a minute before you find some trouble, can I?"

He brushed some dirt out of her hair with his fingers.

"So what was that explosion about?" asked Alice as she paced around this new chamber. "And what is Sirius doing down here?"

"Sirius and explosions are not a good combination," agreed Frank.

"I'll find out," said James, who pulled out a small mirror from his robes and looked into it. "Padfoot!" he called.

Lily looked over his shoulder and saw Sirius' face appear. She sighed in relief to see him.

"Prongs?" Sirius closed his eyes and sighed as well. "Be careful," he said in a whisper. "There are Death Eaters, about two dozen, I reckon."

"Where are you? Are you all right?"

Sirius had that *'I've made a mess of things'* look on his face.

"I'm fine. I can guide you to me, if I can remember how I got to this little hidey-hole. You might want to, erm, notify the Aurors."

James turned around to see that Alice had already Disappeared. "Done, mate. What's going on? What is this place? Why are you here? Why didn't you Disappearate out of...wherever it is you're at?"

"I can't Disappearate because...well...I'll tell you later. And bugger all if I know what this place is. It's a rabbit-warren of chambers and passageways. Above and below. Stretches for ages. Some look like an abandoned series of vaults. I'm pretty certain that Gringotts is their target. This seems to be an important mission. I... er... just happened to... stumble into things. They don't know I'm here. Yet. But...."

"But, what?" asked Frank, whose eyebrows had taken up residence in his hairline.

"You'll have to go through them...to get to me."

"Sirius?"

"Yes, James?"

"You know that if the Death Eaters don't kill you, I'll have to, right?"

Sirius smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, mate. I know."

"Right," started Frank, taking command. "You and Lily move towards Black. I'll wait here for Alice and company. Leave a biscuit trail so we can follow, but don't move on them until we've reached you. Understand?"

Sirius led them through a series of rooms, up stairs, down stairs, into passageways where polished marble became rough-hewn stone and Greek columns gave way to medieval archways. Lily transfigured odd bits of stones into very small, but inedible, facsimiles of chocolate biscuits, leaving a trail behind them. She had shared this idea at an Order meeting, cribbed from one of her favourite children's stories.

They were just about to round into a new chamber when voices floated up from below.

"All together on this one."

"REDUCTO!"

Another explosion rocked through the room, and Lily and James ducked. Luckily, only small bits of dust fell upon them from above.

"Well done! I think we're nearly there!" said one of the voices.

"James!" hissed Sirius. "Hurry, man, they're nearly on me!"

"Where are you?"

"You're just behind them. Look down and you'll see a niche just past where Voldy's gang is gathered. It's on the right. I can hear them moving the stone they've just blasted."

Crouching low, they found themselves on a type of balcony, an elevated platform that looked down on the room below, where, as Sirius had said, a group of wizards were moving large chunks of stone. In the midst of the debris, to the right, they could make out a slight depression in the wall. They couldn't see their friend, but assumed he was hidden in the shadow. The Death Eaters weren't in their usual robes and masks, not expecting company this evening. They were, however, nearly upon the place where Sirius must be hiding.

"We see it, Padfoot. Can you Disillusion yourself?" James asked.

He didn't reply, but the image of Sirius in the mirror slowly evaporated.

"I hate that feeling," the disembodied voice of Sirius muttered.

"Our turn, now," said James. He tapped his wand on Lily's head and then on his own. In seconds, they could see only the shimmering outline of each other.

"Shouldn't we wait for the others?" Lily asked, her heart pounding so strongly she thought it might give them away.

"We will, but let's wait down there. We'll be in better position, just in case we need to move to get Padfoot out before they get here."

Lily nodded, then felt silly since James couldn't see her. "They're making so much noise that we can easily Disapparate down... to that raised platform," she said, pointing to their destination point.

"Right. Meet you there!"

Just as they reappeared on the platform, they looked up to see the shadows of Frank, Alice and a troop of Aurors, including Alastor Moody, cluster above them. Checking to see that the Death Eaters in front of them had their attention focused forward, Lily sent a small flare of red sparks from her wand to indicate their position. She saw Frank give them a 'thumbs-up,' acknowledging her signal.

One after another, the Aurors above quietly Disapparated to locations around the chamber, still unnoticed by Voldemort's men.

Lily heard James whisper, "*Sonorus*," and then his magnified voice echoed thunderously around the space.

"GOOD EVENING, GENTLEMEN."

The Dark wizards turned with startled yells, brandishing their wands, but they couldn't identify a target. Some began to fire random Stunning spells, but the Aurors had hidden themselves well.

"WE'RE SO SORRY TO INTERRUPT YOUR FINE WORK, BUT I'M AFRAID WE MUST ASK YOU TO LAY DOWN YOUR WANDS."

Lily didn't know whether to laugh or throttle him. The Death Eaters threw erratic spells, hitting no one.

"I SEE. NOT GOING TO COOPERATE, EH? *NOW!*"

At James' prompt, a flare lit into the air, and the Aurors attacked.

James helped Lily jump off the platform, and they both lay flat on the ground as spells flashed overhead. They removed their Disillusionment Charms; it was more dangerous to be invisible in the midst of a battle.

"I'm going for Padfoot," James whispered to Lily. "Cover me."

She pressed a quick kiss on his lips. "Be careful, you madman. I love you."

"Likewise, Mrs. Potter."

James scuttled off in a crouch, and Lily began to lay in Shield Charms around him. One of the Death Eaters spotted her and fired off a Stunning spell, which Lily easily deflected. She sent a Body-Bind spell in return, which hit its mark. Lily monitored James' progress as she saw that several of Voldemort's men had escaped into the tunnel they had just opened, and others were Disapparating. There were about ten or so of them remaining, who were still fighting the Aurors furiously. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that James had Sirius, both heading back towards her. Oddly, Sirius seemed to be resisting and screaming. He was yelling something about Regulus, his brother, but she couldn't make out the words.

Lily ran to help when she saw a Death Eater incant a spell that erupted from his wand in a bright, blue light, aimed directly at James. She screamed a warning and fired an Impediment Jinx that deflected the full force of the Death Eater's spell just before it hit her husband. At the same time, hearing her scream, James pulled back. Their combined actions averted the direct impact of the unknown spell, but it still hit James in his side, throwing him backwards to the ground. Lily felt ill, as if the curse that hit James had hit her as well. She ran blindly to his side while Sirius covered them.

There was blood everywhere, and James looked very pale. "Thanks for the warning, luv," he gasped.

"You'll be all right, James," Lily said, pushing aside her panic as she moved her wand over his wounds. She had to staunch the bleeding until she could get him to St. Mungo's. *He'll be all right*, she repeated to herself.

When the fighting ended, there were five captured and two dead Death Eaters. The others had escaped, but Voldemort's effort to compromise the security of Gringotts Bank had been thwarted. James had been hurt the worst; the Aurors had suffered only minor injuries.

It wasn't until the next day, after James' condition had stabilised at St. Mungo's, when, sitting at his bedside, they finally heard the story of what had happened from a very chagrined Sirius Black.

"I got a message from Reggie," he began, rolling his wand between his hands. "He said he needed my help, but not to tell anyone. He said he'd be at this spot in TenPin Alley and that I should meet him there. When I got there, he was in a panic. He'd only expected only one or two others to be with him that night, but it turned out that a huge number of Death Eaters were coming. He told me to leave, that I was in danger."

"Did you know Reggie had taken the Mark, Sirius?" Lily asked gently.

He shook his head. "I suspected, though. He was frantic when I saw him. He told me he needed help to...to get out. I think he'd hoped I could make it look like I'd taken him by force."

"But why didn't you call for back-up then, mate? We would have helped!" James looked like he wanted to punch something.

"I know! I should have, but then a group of the bastards showed up and opened that crater in the street. Reggie had to go with them. I couldn't just leave him! So I followed. I...I guess I'd hoped I'd be able to get to him without anyone noticing. I could have, too, if another group hadn't arrived afterwards. They were coming up close behind me. I only just had time to hide and hope that I could pull Reg out of there. He saw me... knew where I was hiding, but made sure that anyone who came close was distracted. Then, when the fighting began, he got dragged into the tunnel and... was gone."

Sirius dropped his head into his hands. "I couldn't help him. He finally came to me, after all these years, and I failed him." He looked up at James. "Even worse, I put you all in danger. My other brother nearly died because of me."

No one said anything for a while. Lily felt her heart constrict with his pain and regret. She wanted to lash out at him, scream at him for his impulsiveness. But she couldn't.

"Sirius, you love your brother, and he knows it. I'm sure he'll try to contact you again. And this time we can be there to help."

"Listen, Padfoot," said James, "you did throw a nice wrench into Voldemort's plan for Gringotts. That wouldn't have happened if you hadn't stumbled on them the way you did. Just think of the chaos if they had succeeded. I bet the Dark Bugger is right livid just about now!" He managed a smile, wanting to cheer up his friend. "And I'm going to be all right, too. So it's all worked out, yeah?"

Peter

He was so angry that the soup he was carrying sloshed over the sides of the bowl, soaking the bread that lay next to it. As he mounted the stairs up to James' room, Peter took no notice of the mess, as he was too busy mentally cursing Sirius' recklessness and stupidity.

That bloody arrogant, wanking arse will get us all killed. How can James be so blind? He has to see how dangerous he is!

While James was recovering well from the injuries he sustained during the battle in the caverns, Lily had still placed her husband under enforced bed rest for at least another week. Today, however, she had to attend both an important meeting at the Ministry and a pre-natal check-up at St. Mungo's. So, skiving off work, Peter volunteered eagerly to help make sure that his best friend didn't escape his confinement.

Peter entered the room, and James swung his legs gingerly over the edge of the bed.

"Has she left, Wormtail?" he asked, holding his side with a wince.

"She has, but before you try moving, have a bite to eat first." He waited until James had put himself back into bed with an exaggerated pout.

"If I stay in this bed one more minute, I may have to blast some furniture," he moaned as Peter put his lunch tray in front of him.

"Good thing, then, that you don't have your wand."

"What!" James swivelled to look at the bedside table where his wand should have been, then leaned back against the headboard, squeezed his eyes shut, and clenched his hands into fists.

"That damned, meddling woman!" he shouted to the ceiling.

"For better or for worse, eh, Prongs?" said Peter with a forced smile as he pulled up a chair to the side of James' bed.

James sighed in resignation, picked up a now-soggy piece of bread and bit into it. "S'even worse w'ormones."

"Sorry?"

James swallowed. "Being pregnant makes her even more impossible. She can be normal one minute, and the next, she's a raving lunatic. She'd make a Hippogriff run for cover." James slurped some of the soup. "Honestly, Wormtail, sometimes she scares the pants off me."

Peter laughed. "I heard she did some serious damage that night."

James nodded, tucking into his soup. "If Voldemort has any brains, he'll stay far away from my wife. She's like a vengeful Greek Goddess...one step towards her and he'll never know what hit him."

Peter chewed on the inside of his cheek and did not respond.

"If it hadn't been for Lily...." James stopped eating and visibly shivered. "Well, I certainly wouldn't be here eating this very delicious soup. What did you put in it, Wormtail?"

"If it hadn't been for *Sirius*, none of you would have been put in that situation in the first place!" Peter shouted, pounding his fist on the arm of the chair.

James looked up, startled by this sudden outburst. "Well, thanks to Sirius, we did manage to prevent a major disaster," he argued.

Peter stood and began to pace, agitated.

"Really, James! He could have helped without going off half-mad, like he *always* does, and put you all in mortal danger! With both Lily and Alice pregnant! He's a menace!"

James moved the tray to the side. "It's not like he meant for any of that to happen, Peter. He didn't expect that there would be an army of Death Eaters there! How was he to know?"

Peter sat down at the foot of the bed. He had to make James see.

"But that's the point! He didn't know! He didn't follow protocol! He should never have gone down there alone in the first place, without letting anyone know. He doesn't think, James! He never thinks before he acts. It's been that way since school, but...but the stakes are so much higher now."

James sat back and crossed his arms, competing emotions playing across his face.

"Moody already lit into him about it. Padfoot's on probation for a month. I'm sure he won't do something like that again."

"James," Peter sighed, "do you really believe that?" He held his breath, watching his friend struggle.

"No," James finally replied with dismay. "I suppose not."

Peter sighed in relief.

"But that just means we'll have to help him before he does," added James, perking up. "Save him from himself, as it were."

Peter groaned and dropped his head into his hands. James was just hopeless when it came to Sirius.

"He feels terrible about what happened," James continued in earnest, "and despite everything, he's our mate, Wormtail. He'd do the same for us, you know that!"

Hopeless.

It had been a particularly trying day at work, after a long night at the Farm searching for some misplaced potions ingredients, followed by a summons from the Dark Lord. Peter was in a foul mood and just wanted to get home, tuck into a good dinner, and crawl under his covers. His mood worsened when, just as he Apparated to the alley beside his flat, he heard his name whispered in the darkness.

He whipped out his wand, his back against the wall of the building in the alley. "Who's there?" Peter hissed. "Show yourself or I'll blast you halfway across London!"

A figure staggered forward. "It's me, Peter.... I...I need... help!"

The shadow crumbled to the ground and lay inert. Peter moved towards it cautiously, kicking its wand out of the way before he turned the figure over.

"Lumos!"

It was Regulus Black. He was a mess. His face and hands were ragged and filthy. His clothes were torn and bloodstained. Peter hadn't seen him since leaving Hogwarts, but the boy's resemblance to his brother was unmistakable.

Peter was torn. He didn't know why Reggie was here or what he should do. Leaving him in the alley seemed to be a bad idea, as he'd come to his senses eventually and perhaps make a scene in front of the house, drawing unwanted attention Peter's way. Reggie had said something about needing help. The boy was obviously in trouble, but why come to him? Instinct told him it was somehow related to the Dark Lord. He had heard a rumour that the boy had become a Death Eater, but as Peter was still in secret service himself, he didn't know if it was true. But if it was... well, Peter always needed new information to appease the Dark Lord, so perhaps Reggie could be useful.

His mind made up, he Disillusioned the unconscious boy and set about getting him into the flat.

"Drink this."

Reggie Black squinted through his deeply shadowed eyes as Peter poured some of the Strengthening Solution down his throat.

"Can you sit up?"

Reggie nodded and looked cautiously around the room as he tried to right himself.

"You look half-starved. Here, eat this."

Reggie took the proffered bread with shaking hands and devoured it. Peter had guessed right...he hadn't eaten anything in quite some time.

Peter watched as Reggie sated himself on the bread and cheese.

"Anything stronger?" Reggie rasped as he held up the Butterbeer bottle.

"Sorry, mate," Peter lied, "all out at the moment." The boy had a fever, and he didn't want to add alcohol into the mix.

"S'all right," the younger man muttered as he downed the drink in one long gulp. Reggie sighed and leaned back on Peter's sofa. "So tired... hungry. Thanks."

He looked like he wanted to sleep, but Peter wanted to get his information and the boy out of his flat as quickly as possible.

"Reggie, what's happened? Why are you here?"

His question seemed to prompt Reggie back to some semblance of focus. He sat up and lunged at Peter.

"I need to talk to Sirius!" he gasped. Peter winced at the foul stench coming from the boy, pushed him away, and got to his feet, putting some distance between them.

"Why do you need to talk to Sirius?" he asked, his curiosity aroused. Peter knew that the brothers hadn't spoken in years.

"Help me. He...he can help. Get away. Dark Lord."

Some of the pieces of this puzzle clicked together in Peter's mind as his eyes travelled to Reggie's left arm. From beneath the ragged folds of his sleeve, he could just see the outline of a snake's tail peeking through.

"You've been in hiding, haven't you?"

Reggie groaned and wrapped his arms about himself. "Can't do it anymore... must get away."

"You want to escape from the Dark...You-Know-Who, and Sirius can help you get away, is that it?"

Reggie nodded weakly.

"Why not go to Sirius directly, though? Why come to me?"

"No owl. Don't know where Sirius lives... too dangerous."

Peter wanted to hex the boy for being an idiot. No one escaped service to the Dark Lord, as he well knew. The fool's life was forfeit.

Out of the blue, Reggie barked a short, harsh laugh, startling Peter. "Thinks she's so high and mighty. Bitch! She'll pay for it when *he* finds out."

Peter blinked, confused. "What? Who's high and mighty?"

But Reggie was lost somewhere in the fever of his own mind and didn't respond to Peter's question.

"Showing it off to us... so *proud*!" Reggie's face twisted into something resembling a smile. "Switched it, though," he whispered with a snicker.

The snicker turned to giggles, which grew into a fit of hysterical laughter that abated as quickly as it had started. Peter was growing alarmed.

"Reggie..." Peter started, but Reggie's babbling became more convoluted.

"Looked the same... she took the *wrong* one! He'll read it and know!" He started to laugh again, a terrible, rasping sound. "I have it! Real one! Hid it!"

Then, suddenly, Reggie snapped back into reality and looked at Peter with desperation. "Please... tell Sirius! Please!"

He's gone mad, stupid bugger. Probably for the best.

"Sure, Reggie. I'll tell him. Will an owl find you?"

Reggie's body slumped in relief. "Yes. Thank you, Peter," he replied before falling into the oblivion of sleep.

Severus

Two *pops*! broke through the quiet of the night, the sliver of moon overhead casting its milky image on the sea below.

Apparating to the designated spot, Severus and Travers moved into a defensive posture, back-to-back, wands out.

Sensing they were alone, they moved apart and took cover behind a clump of trees, one of the few on this sparsely vegetated cliff overlooking the seaside resort town of Scarborough.

"I came here once with my dad and mum," said Travers idly as they waited. "Nice swimming, but a bit crowded in the summer. Too many Muggles."

Severus didn't respond, his patience with his fellow servants of the Dark Lord having worn out long ago. He felt no camaraderie with these men or the few women in the ranks of his master. He had long ago ceased to feel much of anything other than exhaustion, impatience and irritation. He no longer paid mind to the hollowness that had taken hold of his body and soul. He did his work and did it well, and his reward was the approval of his lord and master. Sometimes this approval took the form of women thrown his way after his master had finished with them, like a well-chewed bone left by a stronger dog to the weaker ones. Sometimes he was rewarded with a few days to himself where he gratefully retreated to his grandparents' cottage overlooking the Channel. Severus also noted, with whatever remnants of pride he had managed to retain, that his master was requesting his presence with more frequency, leading Malfoy to conjecture that Severus might soon be asked to join the Inner Circle.

"He and his brother used to come here as well." Travers was still speaking.

"Who?"

"The traitor and his brother. He thinks he's meetin' his brother here," Travers said with a chuckle. "Poor bastard."

Severus frowned. He'd been called to the most recent meeting between the Dark Lord and his troops, and the experience had not been... pleasant. Voldemort was livid that his plot to undermine Gringotts had been foiled. Adding to this failure was the capture of two of his senior officers; Dolohov and Karkaroff had both been taken and now sat useless in Azkaban. Wilkes and Rosier were dead. Now there was a defector in their ranks. Even though Severus had not been involved in the Gringotts mission, his Master had taken out his displeasure on all of them. Painfully.

Afterwards, he'd gathered information about the battle in bits and pieces, and it wasn't long before he'd learned that both Lily and James Potter had not only been in the battle, but were instrumental in the defeat of the Dark Lord's forces. He was surprised to feel... something... in response to this news. An actual feeling appeared to have seeped through his state of perpetual numbness. Alarm? Happiness? Concern? He couldn't even recognise what it was, but something stirred within him. Hatred for his former school nemesis, he finally reasoned. But he was also curious. How had they come to be there? He knew that Lily worked in the Department of Mysteries, of course. Was James an Auror? It didn't make sense. A soft *pop*! however, pushed these questions aside. There was work to be done.

"Sirius? Are you there?" called a rasping voice.

Severus' eyes widened beneath his mask. *Sirius?*

Without stepping into the clearing, Travers had aimed his wand at the approaching figure.

"Petrificus Totalis!"

Severus and Travers moved in on the figure, now lying rigid, prone in the grass.

Regulus Black? A traitor? No. Deserter. He was not surprised that the boy wouldn't have the stomach for it. Stupid fool. A part of him thought he might have been able to talk the boy out of it years ago, had he thought to do so. *Well, too late now. Get on with it.* There was protocol to be followed.

Severus cast a simple binding spell, and just as Travers lifted the Petrificus, the boy began to scream.

"WHERE IS SIRIUS? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH HIM?"

Travers' wand flicked a Slicing spell on the boy's torso, and blood began to spill as he screamed again, this time in pain.

"Traitor!" sneered Travers. "Your brother couldn't make it. We've come in his stead."

Regulus continued to scream, and Severus incanted, *"Silencio!"* The screams continued, silent in the night air.

Travers nodded his thanks to Severus and continued his taunting.

"Such a beautiful view of the ocean. I hear you used to play here as a boy. Nice to be able to see it again before you die, I'd imagine."

As Travers levitated Black towards the rocks, Severus found that his heart was racing wildly. This physical reaction surprised him. He'd lost track of the number of people who'd died at his wand, and he'd ceased caring long ago. So why was killing this one any different? Why was he having this reaction now? When he caught up with Travers, the boy was now on the ground at the edge of the cliff. Severus restored his voice, which was now whimpering.

"You have been deemed a traitor to the Dark Lord, Black," intoned Severus. "In recognition of the service you once provided, you are permitted to share your final words before your death."

"Snape? Is that you?" Regulus gasped.

"Final words, boy. Get to them," barked Travers.

The boy crawled to Severus' feet and looked up at him, tears now pouring down his face. "Please, Snape. I know it's you. Don't do this. Please!"

Severus felt nauseous as the boy begged for his life. He kicked Regulus in the stomach, and the boy fell in a sprawl on his back. Gasping for breath, he spat out blood, staining the rock beneath him.

"You want my last words? Fine," he wheezed and, with effort, raised himself to make sure Severus could see his eyes. "You can kill me, Snape, but at least I'll die free of the bastard with my soul intact, which is more than you'll ever be able to say!"

"Avada Kedavra!"

Regulus Black lay quiet. Severus found he was shaking and turned away. Fortunately, Travers set himself to work, turning Black's body into a child's sand bucket, and didn't notice when Severus fell to his knees and heaved up the contents of his stomach.

"That's a nice bit of transfiguration, if I do say so, myself," said Travers, looking pleased. Then he picked up the pail by its handle and, with a turn, hurled it out over the cliff. They were too high above the water to hear the small toy splash into the surf below.

It was Tuesday, just after noon, and Severus sat in a dark corner of the Hog's Head Inn, nursing a glass of whisky under his hooded cloak. The day was dreary and wet, but despite the warmth of the liquor, Severus could not shake the cold from his body. He glanced across the room towards the portrait of the man and the horse, remembering the first time he'd come here to meet Malfoy. He lowered his head and took another sip of whisky. No, he wouldn't allow himself to peer down the lane of what-might-have-been. It was way too late for that. But now, maybe now, he might chance upon a slightly new path.

The murder of Regulus Black had opened his eyes to a terrifying truth that he'd almost missed: that he was just a hair's breadth away from the edge of the abyss, brought to this point by his addictive need for the powerful, seductive Dark Magic. That Magic, even now, stood next to him, ready, waiting to push him gently, irrevocably, into a free-fall pit of madness. He could already smell the fetid odour of it; its tendrils reaching up, ready to wrap its fingers around his mind and soul. But for Reggie's hateful 'last words,' he might already have fallen. Instead, it was as if someone had shoved a torch into his mind, lighting up what had gone dark, bringing one solid moment of clarity into the hell his life had become. What it would always be. For, unlike poor Reggie, Severus knew that there was no escaping the Dark Lord's service. But, despite the loss of his soul, he still, thankfully, had his mind. And holding fast to that one small part of him that he still recognised as Severus Snape, he had devised a plan, a way to remove himself from the Dark assignments that would certainly lead him into final insanity.

A week after the events on the cliff overlooking the sea, Severus had been in Hogsmeade to pick up a packet of crushed Carabine spine, a highly restricted ingredient he needed for a new potion. The transaction was completed quickly in a covert and silent, dark alley hand-off, leaving Severus a bit of time before he had to head back to his laboratory. He had just settled into a table at the Three Broomsticks when a boisterous and unruly crowd of Hogwarts students burst through the door and poured into the establishment. Annoyed at the intrusion, Severus was about to leave when his attention was diverted by the easy-to-eavesdrop conversation underway at the adjacent table.

"Galfrith is such a pathetic wanker!"

"We've never had a decent DADA teacher!"

"Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"The position is cursed! No one has ever held it for more than a year."

"Don't be daft. It's just that all the good teachers are probably all fighting in the war. Why waste them teaching students when they could be used to fight You-Know-Who?"

"I've heard that Dumbledore's already looking for someone new for next year. Galfrith's given notice."

"There you go! Cursed for sure!"

"My Aunt Sibyll told me Dumbledore's interviewing her next Tuesday afternoon at the Hog's Head."

"For the DADA job?"

"No, Divination. My mum doesn't think much of Auntie as a Seer, but I don't know. She is a bit dotty. And Dumbledore wouldn't meet with her if she wasn't the real thing."

Severus' pulse quickened. The pieces of a plan fell together in his mind all at once, like the creation of a well-crafted spell. Teaching at Hogwarts. The Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. *He* could be that teacher. He could set himself in position at Hogwarts as the Dark Lord's spy. While Voldemort had spies within the Ministry of Magic, he was certain there was no one in place at the right hand of his master's most hated enemy.

So he proposed this plan and was surprised that his master was favourably disposed to the idea, agreeing to the tactical advantages that it would provide. If Severus could manage to win the spot, then his master would be very pleased to have a spy at Hogwarts.

He would 'accidentally' run into Dumbledore here at the Hog's Head. Severus hadn't seen the Headmaster since he'd left school, so he thought a more informal encounter would be useful before filing a formal application for the position. He had a pocketful of sweets ready, just in case.

Just after one o'clock, the entrance door of the Hog's Head swung open, and the unmistakable form of Albus Dumbledore entered, his enormous magical presence filling the room. Severus had almost forgotten the depth of that power and was instantly reminded why his master considered this wizard his greatest enemy. He watched as the Headmaster had a few quiet words with the barman, whom, he noted, held up four fingers. Dumbledore nodded and then ascended the staircase behind the bar to the rooms above.

At a quarter past one, Severus' curiosity began to tug at him as he wondered about the interview in progress above him. Looking around, he noted that the barman wasn't at the bar, and without a second thought, he got to his feet and made for the staircase. He cast a Silencing Charm upon himself to quiet his ascent. On the first floor, he noted rooms numbered one to three. At the landing on the second floor, the number "4" was etched onto the first door.

Now that he was here, he realised he wasn't sure how to proceed. He hadn't intended on eavesdropping on the interview, but now that he was here, he supposed it couldn't hurt. He'd listen for a bit, return to his table downstairs, and greet the Headmaster as he was leaving.

Kneeling down so his head was level with the keyhole in the door, he was surprised to actually hear voices and wondered why Dumbledore hadn't put an Imperturbable Charm on the door. The woman's voice was high and fluttering. Dumbledore's tone of voice conveyed to Severus that he was forcing himself to be polite. He clearly wasn't interested in hiring this woman. Severus smirked.

Being a spy is much more fun than raiding and pillaging.

Then something very strange happened inside room number four. The high, fluttery voice of the woman changed. It dropped into a deeper register and rasped as if clawing through air. As he listened, the words etched themselves into Severus' mind as if they'd been written there with a quill:

"THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES.... BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES... AND THE..."

"BOY!"

Severus' heart nearly stopped in shock as he leapt to his feet to meet the angry and haggard face of the Hog's Head barman.

"I ought to wring your stupid neck, invadin' someone's privacy like that!" the older man yelled. Severus, who had faced an angry Lord Voldemort, was suddenly struck dumb in the face of this man.

"Well... I... er... was just..." he spluttered.

At that moment, to make an abominable situation even worse, the door behind him opened, and Albus Dumbledore appeared.

"Mr. Snape? What are you doing here?" asked the old wizard, looking astonished to see him.

Time seemed to stop for a moment as Severus took in his surroundings and the terrible predicament in which he now found himself.

Inside the room, the woman, rousing herself from the trance she'd been in (for surely that had been an actual prophecy he'd heard), stood and glared at him as if he'd caught her in a compromising situation, her eyes huge behind her spectacles and her many arm bracelets jangling as she clasped her hands to her breast. In the doorway, the Headmaster wore an expression of mixed confusion, suspicion, and alarm. Behind him the barman fumed, looking ready to toss Severus, bound and gagged, into the lake.

Severus was trapped. His future ruined in a stupid, ill-conceived moment of idiocy worthy of a Gryffindor.

A fine spy I'd make, if I manage to cock up such a simple plan!

"I beg your pardon, sir," Severus began, trying to pull his scrambled thoughts together. "...I must have taken the wrong set of stairs. But when I heard your voice, sir, I thought I might take the opportunity to speak with you..."

"A rather odd way of coming to speak with me, Severus. Why not schedule an appointment?"

He knows I'm lying! But...

"I thought to take advantage of... the moment, sir, to speak to you about the position..."

"Let me toss him for you, Albus!" barked the barman.

"I think I can manage the boy, Aberforth. Give us just a minute before I hand him over to you, eh?"

The barman sneered at Severus one last time before turning and heading back down the stairs.

The Headmaster turned to the woman in the room. "I do apologize for the interruption, Sibyll. I'll be back with you in just a moment, all right?" The woman tossed her head with a great sniff of indignation and floated back down on the tattered sofa. Dumbledore closed the door behind him and turned back to Severus. They didn't speak for a moment, and Severus was careful not to make direct eye contact with the Headmaster.

"What will you do now, my boy?" Dumbledore finally asked, pain clearly visible in his ancient eyes.

He always knows. This thought pulled at Severus like an ache.

"I apologise, sir. I seem to have interrupted a very important meeting."

"It would seem so. You must go?"

Odd that it was a question.

"Yes, sir. I...I suppose I must."

Dumbledore nodded sadly. Just as Severus turned, the Headmaster put his hand on his shoulder.

"Sir?"

"There may come a time when you'll need my help. I hope you'll think of me, Severus. Please remember that."

Severus swallowed roughly, then turned and left as quickly as he could, the words of the Seer and the Headmaster ringing in his ears.

A/N:

Latin-based etymology for "TenPin Alley": *balieum* a bathing place plus *cuniculus* an underground passage/rabbit warren. "Balicone" Alley was its original name, based on the combined Latin derivatives. Then it became "Cone Ball" Alley. The image of this name led to its current designation. I made this up.

The switching-the-necklace-before-it-ever-got-to-the-cave theory comes from the always-clever JOdel, the very prolific Red Hen. I think it's the best of all the theories I've read. So I used it! You can read "Raiders of the Lost Horcrux" here:

<http://redhen-publications.com/Horcrux.html>

Thank you, J!

Hugs and many, many thanks go to my shiny betas: songbook99 and capella_black!!!

Precarious Defences: June 1980 - June 1981

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

Precarious Defences

~*~ *June 1980* ~*~

Severus

It was very, very small, reddish in colour after a high-pitched screaming fit, and sported a shock of white-blond hair atop its surprisingly pointy head. Its tiny fists were pounding rhythmically into the mattress of its little cot, demanding something it wasn't getting quickly enough. Yes, this child was certainly Malfoy's son; Severus had seen *that* expression on the elder Malfoy's face on more than one occasion.

"Isn't he beautiful?" gushed a tired, but still ravishingly beautiful, Narcissa Malfoy.

Severus suppressed an urge to squirm in the leather armchair he was sitting in, uncertain as to the appropriate wizarding protocol for responding to the presentation of a newborn pure-blood. And with Malfoy watching, he didn't want to get it wrong.

"Who is he...Draco... named for?" He decided that asking an alternative question would be the best strategy under these unfamiliar circumstances.

Malfoy sat by Narcissa's side in their summer parlour, besotted in a way Severus had never seen before. He stroked his wife's hand, staring at the infant intently, as if it might vanish if he dared to look away, even for a moment.

"My father wanted to name him after *his* father," said Malfoy with a bit of hesitation.

"I refused to allow my child to be named after a man-eating plant!" scoffed Narcissa with a small, dismissive wave of her hand. "He's named after my favourite cousin on my mother's side." She smiled at her husband. "It's enough that he looks like a Malfoy, my dear. When he grows up I'm sure he'll have all the witches vying for his attention. Just like his father."

Malfoy preened and kissed her hand. "He should be as fortunate as I, to meet the perfect witch."

Severus began to twitch in discomfort at this appalling picture of a domesticated Lucius Malfoy. While he didn't doubt that the Malfoy loved his wife, Severus also knew that the man kept a string of mistresses at his beck and call. That, and the fact that Malfoy was a brutal murderer and frequent despoiler of lesser women, made it hard to reconcile the man he knew with the fawning husband and father that sat before him.

"Lucius, we have a guest that you need to attend to," said Narcissa, pushing Malfoy away gently. "Forgive my husband, Severus. You'd think he was the first man to ever sire an heir!"

"None of them can hold a candle to either you or the child," sniffed Malfoy. "You're both mine and, therefore, superior to them all."

Narcissa laughed. "Of course, my dear. I can hear them all keening with envy as we speak!" She stood and reached into the cot to pick up the baby, who had fallen asleep. "You two carry on. I'm going to take Draco upstairs. Will you be staying for dinner, Severus?"

"Thank you, Narcissa. I'd be delighted to join you... if you don't think I'd be intruding on your family celebration."

"We consider you part of our family, Severus. You know that. Why, you're practically an uncle to our little Draco!" And, as she left the room, she gave Severus one of her dazzling smiles...the kind that, after all this time, still made him catch his breath and go weak in the knees.

"She is lovely, isn't she?" remarked Malfoy after she'd gone, regarding Severus with amusement.

Severus felt like he'd been caught wrong-footed. "I only have the highest regard and respect for your wife, Lucius!" he spluttered in self-defence.

"Relax, Severus," Malfoy said with a satisfied smirk. "I don't mind that my wife is the envy of other men any more than they might admire one of my newly acquired paintings or a rare vintage wine. It's a compliment really." Lucius stood and made his way across the parlour to the table where a crystal decanter of brandy and several glasses were set. He poured the amber liquid into two of the glasses and handed one to his former protégé.

"Our master has been speaking highly of you," he said, settling himself in the armchair next to Severus. He crossed his legs and regarded Severus through the glass in his hands. "Very highly indeed."

"Has that proven beneficial to you, Lucius?" Severus knew that Malfoy would only relay a compliment if there was something in it for him in exchange.

"It has, of course," acknowledged Malfoy. "But I mention it because you deserve the recognition and our master's pleasure."

"I'm honoured to be acknowledged." Severus felt his heart skip a beat, but schooled his features to remain impassive. Since he had provided Voldemort with the words of the overheard prophecy, Severus had been well rewarded. But now, gazing levelly at his mentor, he realised the greatest reward was in holding information that Malfoy wasn't privy to...and he could see that Malfoy wasn't happy about it. For the first time, Severus felt the advantage in their relationship and found that he relished it immensely.

"It appears that you are about to be raised into the Inner Circle, Severus. My congratulations." Malfoy raised his glass in salute.

Severus raised his own glass. "Thank you, Lucius. Of course I owe my success entirely to your support. You know I will always be in your debt, even as we work side-by-side to support our master."

Malfoy smiled and nodded with a glint of something like jealousy flaring in his eyes. Their glasses came together, the sound of crystal meeting crystal ringing a bit too harshly in the parlour.

Dinner that night was a formal affair, as was the custom in Malfoy Manor. Severus recalled his visit here on that long-ago Christmas holiday and the feel of the elegant robes he'd worn for the first time the night before the Malfoys' engagement celebration. Tonight, Narcissa was looking resplendent in pale green silk and was chattering on about a charity event for St. Mungo's.

"It seems that little Draco will have lots of schoolmates when he starts at Hogwarts! Christina McNair and I were at the hospital last week to meet with the Director about the

upcoming benefit. We passed through the pre-natal ward, and there were so many pregnant witches who looked ready to deliver!"

Severus stopped chewing for the briefest moment. Then he swallowed the bite of codfish. He wanted to ask for names, but he knew there was no way to do so without arousing suspicion. Luckily, Malfoy came to his aide.

"As long as they are producing more pure-blood wizarding stock," Malfoy sniffed. "Our numbers are dangerously low."

Narcissa nodded. "Of course you're right, dear. Although most of our sort don't go to hospital. So, I suppose the ones I saw weren't in our circle... though they may have been pure-blood." She pondered this conundrum with an unattractive furrow in her brow. "It is rather hard to tell from the looks alone." She waved it away with a small wave of her fork and then suddenly brightened.

"Oh! I do know one was a pure-blood! I saw that woman who married that Longbottom chap. What's her name? Anne? Agnes? Severus, I think she was in your year."

"Alice," Severus replied evenly.

Narcissa beamed. "Yes, Alice! And you'll *never guess* who she was with!"

Severus felt the hairs on the back of his neck go up. Malfoy rolled his eyes, but proceeded to indulge his wife's love of gossip. "Who would that be, dear?"

"That Mudblood, Lily Potter!" she announced with a satisfied grin. "Alice must have been there to help that Potter woman," she said, as if she'd just solved a puzzle. "Augusta Longbottom would never allow her daughter-in-law to be in the care of an ordinary Healer." Narcissa sniffed as she cut into her fish. "Actually, I'm surprised Augusta permits their friendship at all."

Malfoy was scowling. "The Potters are too high-born to snub. They must be appalled that their son and his Mudblood wife are nothing but crass, publicity-mongering trolls." Malfoy tucked back into his meal, and Narcissa continued to chatter on, but Severus had ceased listening.

. . . *BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES.* . .

Severus' mind began calculating feverishly. Lily was pregnant! The attempted kidnapping... the battle in the caverns... twice defied, not 'thrice'... seventh month... end of July. It could be *either*...the Longbottoms had been with the Potters both times. Both were due... soon. It wasn't an exact match, but... Severus knew that Voldemort was actively seeking out those who might fit the prophecy. Would he turn his sights to Lily? She couldn't be, though. It didn't fit. As long as she wasn't foolish enough to attempt to thwart the Dark Lord a third time! But this was *Lily*...as stubborn and relentless as *he* was. And she was married to *Potter*.

His heart froze. She was in certain mortal danger. And he was at fault.

"Severus, dear, are you all right? You look ill!"

Narcissa's voice penetrated through his panic, and he raised his head abruptly to see both Malfoys staring at him: Narcissa with curiosity and Malfoy with suspicion.

"My apologies, Narcissa. I just recalled that I left something out in my laboratory that isn't properly stored," he lied.

"It's not like you to be careless with anything in your laboratory," drawled Malfoy. "But you do look concerned about... something."

"Well, there's nothing to be done about it now, Severus," Narcissa reprimanded lightly. "The soup is divine. Don't let it get cold!"

"You're right, of course," Severus said with a weak smile. "Nothing to be done about it at all."

~*~ **September 1980** ~*~

Peter

It was late afternoon at Phoenix Farm, and the heat of the day was oppressive. The air hung in a thick, damp mass, coating everything and everyone with its heavy moisture. Even Cooling Charms or the shade of the oak trees provided little relief.

Peter sat at one end of the large farmhouse kitchen table reviewing the inventory of food stores, pouring himself glass after glass of chilled pumpkin juice. Nothing, however, seemed to staunch the flow of sweat pouring off his brow. Emmeline Vance and Sturgis Podmore sat at the other end of the table, having just returned from a meeting with Albus Dumbledore.

"I know a few of the kids that Albus mentioned," said Emmy. "I'll set them up for meetings to gauge their interest in joining us."

Sturgis sighed. "Even if we get them all, it's not going to be enough, Emmy. With Lily and Alice out of commission for a while, and so many of us...gone... we're losing ground." He ran his hand through his hair, making it stand on end. "I don't know how Albus can remain so positive."

Emmy reached out to smooth his hair back down with an affectionate smile. "I think he's chuffed about the new babies." Her elbows on the table, she plopped her head onto her hands. "Two of them in as many days! I can't wait to see them," she said dreamily, looking down the table.

Eyeing the pitcher near Peter, she pulled out her wand. "*Accio pumpkin juice!*" She poured a glass each for herself and Sturgis. "Hey, Peter!"

Peter jumped and squealed, "WHAT?"

Emmy laughed, and Peter frowned. "Sorry to startle you, Peter. I just wanted to ask if it's true that the baby looks just like James?" Her smile fell suddenly. "It's so sad about James' parents, to lose both of them so close together."

Sturgis nodded. "It's not uncommon among very old wizarding couples. When one dies, the partner often dies shortly after."

"At least they got to see their grandson before they died." She sighed and then turned back to Peter. "How was the christening? Is it true that Sirius is Harry's godfather?"

Peter felt a hardening in his throat, as if something large was stuck there. "No, I couldn't make it to the christening. I haven't *seen* the baby yet, and yes, Sirius is the boy's godfather."

"You don't look very happy about it," noted Sturgis. "In fact, you've been right out of sorts for ages now, Peter. Is everything all right?"

Peter stood up and slammed his fist on the table, sending the glass by his hand hurtling to the floor where it shattered, the juice soaking into the wooden treads. "I'm just fine!" he yelled. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

"Peter!" shouted Emmy, who stood up as well. "We're just concerned about you. You've no cause to be angry with us!"

Peter closed his eyes, trying to calm himself. He was so tightly strung that he couldn't seem to stop himself from snapping. "I'm sorry, Emmy. It's just that I've been under a lot of strain at work on top of... everything," he said with a gesture that indicated the Farm and the Order. "I'm going outside for a bit. It's too hot in here." He turned and stormed through the kitchen door.

Peter walked quickly towards the copse of trees that surrounded the Farm, pushed forward by the sudden urge to find a quiet, shaded place to hide from everyone. By the time he realised he was in the midst of the densely packed forest, he was breathing heavily. Dropping to the ground, he pulled out his already soaked handkerchief in a futile attempt to mop his balding head.

The truth was that he hadn't been invited to the christening. He'd found out afterwards, when James apologetically explained that they'd decided to keep things quiet and small. Only Sirius, Dumbledore, and Lily's parents had been there. Peter could tell that James felt bad about not inviting him. And James was so upset about his parents at the time that Peter didn't have the heart to remain angry with him. But it was the fact that Sirius had been asked to be the baby's godfather. *That* had stuck in his craw like a Billywig sting, and it *hurt*. As he considered how this could have come about, it suddenly came to Peter that it was probably all Sirius' doing. Sirius had probably *insisted* on being named Harry's godfather and put James and Lily on the spot. Most likely, being the decent sort, they couldn't refuse.

Then he thought about yesterday, and his stomach lurched into his throat. Yesterday he'd been summoned to his master and was given explicit orders to *'keep track of the Potters' movements'*. He hadn't dared ask why, nor did he really want to know. What he *did* know was that his attempts to keep James...and now his son...safe were going to become more difficult. The two worlds Peter had worked so hard to keep apart were now drawing dangerously close together. Somewhere deep within himself, Peter could feel that something vital was beginning to tear, its edges fraying more and more ragged.

Then, from high above, a surprisingly cool breeze swirled down between the trees and gently kissed Peter's forehead. He breathed into it deeply, in a moment of blessed relief. *No*, he thought in a moment of clear resolution. *I can't fail now*. Not now. It was more important than ever that he pull himself together. To give nothing away. To protect all that was dear, regardless of the cost. He was a Gryffindor, he reminded himself. He could do this. He would.

~~~ **June 1981** ~~~

Lily

She'd been so excited to escape from her restrictive confinement in yet another house that wasn't her own. Today, she'd have the luxury of time to herself; to go to Diagon Alley and then to work for a bit. Since Harry's birth, she and James had been forced to move frequently from one safe house to another. They rarely saw friends, and she'd had to curtail her work to oddly scattered days, such as today, to prevent their enemies from detecting a pattern in their movements. James was at home all the time, and as much as she loved him, she'd learned that, indeed, there could be too much of a good thing. Thankfully, Harry was a dream. The baby rarely fussed, and James adored everything about taking care of his son, even the messy bits.

The worst of it, Lily thought, was that Dumbledore would not reveal to them the reason they needed to go into 'deep hiding', as he called it. He'd only said that Voldemort had targeted the Potters, and it was both for their protection and the protection of the Order that they had to do so. It didn't even help that the Longbottoms had supposedly been targeted as well and were in similar straits; it was deemed too dangerous for the two families to be together. Even communications between them had been curtailed, for those could be easily tracked. But Lily would never be satisfied until she knew more. Voldemort had lots of enemies, and many of them could be targets, but *they* didn't need to be in hiding. This included most of the members of the Order! Finally, after repeatedly turning the situation over and over in her mind, the only link that made sense, the only thing that connected the Potters and the Longbottoms together in any unique way, was their children. Lily felt certain that it was something about Harry and Neville, not their parents, that had drawn Voldemort's 'special' attention. If only she could figure out why.

But as she stepped into Diagon Alley on this lovely, bright summer's day, with Sirius' two-way mirror tucked into her robes (*Just in case*, as James had said), Lily's bubble of excitement on her day 'out' was shattered by the shock of what she saw. Usually bustling with shoppers and families strolling the Alley or eating outdoors at Florean Fortescue's, the street was nearly abandoned. Like a malevolent being, Fear itself had embraced the wizarding enclave, displacing the population as it coursed relentlessly down the streets and alleys, weaving through abandoned or destroyed shops. There had been multiple Death Eater attacks on Diagon Alley in the last several months, and assuming that more would follow, no one felt safe there. The few people Lily did encounter were skittering about furtively, their faces covered by hoods, eager to conclude their business and be gone as quickly as possible.

The wizarding world was in chaos. As part of Voldemort's efforts to enlist new recruits by force, the number of attacks on magical families had increased at a relentless pace, finally exceeding those on Muggles. The Ministry of Magic was holding its government together by only the most tenuous of threads, and then only due to the financial support of Gringotts, where the Goblins were as happy to wring profits from the beleaguered Ministry as they would from anyone else. But, despite this monetary aid, which helped to maintain the government's essential services...the Floo Network, the Law Enforcement Division and others...the basic economy of their world was in shambles. Terror of what lay outside their doors kept everyone at home, and because people stopped going to work, shortages were widespread. Since people only spent their Galleons when they had to, many businesses collapsed when their customers disappeared. In some cases, families were starving; others only survived on whatever food they could manage to grow themselves. Distrust and paranoia were rampant. Everyone and anyone might be an enemy. Worst of all were the terrible rumours that children...those who'd joined Voldemort's ranks...were attacking and killing their own parents. People whispered...for it was too terrifying to speak of it out loud...that afterwards, they would proudly cast the Dark Mark above their childhood homes.

While Lily had read about these horrors, she hadn't seen the living proof of them until today. Struggling between feeling bereft and furious at what Voldemort had wrought, Lily left Diagon Alley, grimly abandoning her plans to shop, and made her way to the Ministry of Magic and her Division. She had some personal research of her own to continue, and she was eager to return to it.

*I may not be able to save the wizarding world* she thought with grim determination, *but I can try to save those I love.*

---

**Severus**

It was *her*.

A moment before, her hood had fallen away, and the sunlight reflected so brightly off her gleaming red hair that the air around her seemed to shimmer. She was standing next to a boarded-up shop, unmoving but for the turn of her head, taking in the devastation around her. He didn't reflect on the horror that crossed her face or the fact that he'd been part of the most recent raid that had worsened the devastation. All he could think about was a sudden, compelling urge.

*Warn her.*

He had no idea what he might say, but as she left Diagon Alley, he followed her, as if possessed. He was briefly frustrated that he couldn't use the Ministry of Magic's employee's entrance, but he knew where she worked. He'd find her there.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Lily."

In an instant, her back was up against the corridor wall outside the Department of Mysteries and her wand was pointing at him.

"Who is it?" she hissed. "Reveal yourself or every Auror in the building will be on this floor in less than five seconds."

He stepped out of the crevice where he'd been waiting and removed the Disillusionment Charm.

"I need to tell you..."

She tilted her head as she tried to discern his form. But she clearly recognised his voice.

"Severus?"

Suddenly, he found his feet had forgotten how to move, and his tongue went numb. He'd known terror first hand at Voldemort's feet, but hearing her speak his name seemed to have rendered him paralysed and speechless.

She moved towards him, still cautious as she trained her wand on him. He managed to hold his hands up to show her he was unarmed.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in a hushed voice, knowing that hidden ears were everywhere.

The part of his brain that controlled movement and speech seemed to kick back into gear.

"I can't be seen speaking with you."

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why? What do you need to tell me?"

"You are in danger," he whispered. "Your...your son is in danger."

She closed the gap between them in a second and grabbed the front of his robes, pulling his face close to hers. Her eyes bore into his. Those eyes, searching and demanding, tore into him without mercy, grabbed that hardened wall around his heart, the one he'd constructed so long ago to shield him from the depth of his feelings for her, and shattered it into dust.

"How is Harry in danger? Tell me!" she demanded, her voice low and fierce.

He'd never felt as vulnerable as he did in this moment, her presence and her need and his feelings for her more potent than any Veritaserum he'd ever brewed. Only his well-honed instincts of self-preservation prevented him from telling her everything.

"I...I can only tell you to protect yourself and your son. The Dark Lord is watching and waiting."

"The...'Dark Lord'?"

He saw her piece the information together in her mind, and in the exact moment when the truth clicked into place, she stepped away from him as if he were contaminated.

"Oh, Severus. No."

The stricken look on her face sliced through him like a hex. He deftly turned his pain into anger.

"You can pass judgment on my choice of career later, *Mrs. Potter*," he growled, "but that doesn't change the fact that I'm risking my neck to give you this information."

She looked at him curiously and nodded. "What is Voldemort waiting for?"

He winced at the mention of his master's name, not seeing the moment when she stepped back towards him and took his hand into both of hers.

"Severus, you have to tell me! Please!" His attention was wholly riveted on the feel of her hands on his. They were softer than anything he'd felt in years. He could feel the pulse at her wrist. He noted that she bit her nails. Then he saw and felt the tears that fell upon them. He looked up to see her face, wet and fearful. He fought every urge that screamed to embrace her, to kiss the tears away. He was terrified. He was furious.

He pulled himself out of her grasp roughly and stepped back away from her. "You and your foolish husband have played the hero against the Dark Lord too many times! You've brought this on yourselves. Potter's need to seek attention will get you all killed. Just... stay out of sight." He turned to leave.

"Wait! Severus..."

"Forgive me," he muttered through clenched teeth. Then he Disillusioned himself once again and fled from her as fast as he could.

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My endless thanks go to my wonderful betas, capella\_black and songbook99.

## Crossing the Line: August 1981

*Chapter 21 of 24*

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

*This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.*

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

### Crossing the Line: August 1981

#### Peter

Phoenix Farm had never looked so festive or felt so light-hearted. Today, for one day, Albus Dumbledore had given over their headquarters to celebrate the first birthdays of two of its children. As if it could obliterate the mayhem and tragedy that had become a routine and heart-wrenching part of their daily lives, the members of the Order of the Phoenix had thrown themselves into creating the most elaborate birthday party they could muster for little Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter.

Peter had put himself in charge of coordinating the event, determined to make it memorable. The farmhouse had been festooned with colourful streamers and pinwheels that spun overhead. Garden pots had been transfigured into small carriages that the children could ride. Hagrid had somehow transported several unicorn foals to delight the older children. The gravelled pathway that led to the barn had been covered with a lush, green lawn and shielded to permit an area that was safe for crawling babies. Flowers and blooms of every type and colour from Dorcas' garden...for it would always be called Dorcas' garden...were on display everywhere. Emmy Vance had led the effort to produce a table that groaned with food and drink and replenished itself magically throughout the day.

By early afternoon on this brilliantly sunny Sunday, the farm was awash in the voices and laughter of children and adults alike. With everything running smoothly, Peter picked up two bottles of beer to seek out James and Lily. He found them in the barn where little Harry was perched atop the knee of Albus Dumbledore and shrieking in laughter as he tried to catch the magical ribbons the Headmaster had conjured and floated tantalisingly just out of reach. The baby laughed hardest when one of the ribbons tweaked his nose, and the adults who were watching laughed along with him. Peter brightened as he saw James look over, smile at him, and move through the small crowd in his direction.

"Wormtail!" James said enthusiastically, clapping him on the back. "You've outdone yourself, mate! Everything is *brilliant*!"

Peter beamed at his friend's appreciation and handed James one of the bottles. "It was nothing really. You lot needed a day out of hiding more than the little tykes needed a party. I was happy to do it." They tapped their bottles together in a silent toast and drank.

"I was surprised that Albus permitted it," said James as he looked in amazement at the throngs of people milling about. These included not only members of the Order, but their children and some special friends, who had been personally escorted to the farm by the Headmaster himself.

"We were all taken aback when he proposed it," agreed Peter. "But Dumbledore thought it would help beef up morale. Besides, the old man has put up so many additional layers of protection around the Farm for today, I was surprised any of us could Apparate here at all!"

"It has been... hard on us, you know," James said wistfully, looking over at Lily. "Being cooped up, isolated and all. Lily hasn't been able to see her parents or her friends. So it's really wonderful to have this one day..." His voice trailed off, and Peter, noticing James' eyes becoming glassy, shifted awkwardly.

"It looks like Annette is ready to pop soon!" Peter said to change the subject, indicating the very pregnant woman chatting with a beaming Lily Potter.

James nodded and brightened as he looked over at his wife and her old school friend. Peter was amazed that no matter what happened, James seemed unable to remain sad or disheartened for very long.

"Lily is over the moon that she's here! Annette married that Lovegood bloke last year, and Lily was so put out we couldn't go. I hear he's an editor at the *Prophet*. It's too bad Helene couldn't come, though; she's on the continent working with Gringotts. France, I think." James turned back to Peter. "Did you hear from Remus? Is he coming?"

None of them had heard from Remus in months.

Peter sipped his beer. "I don't think so, Prongs. I'm worried about him."

"Me, too," James concurred. "Has Albus said anything?"

Peter shook his head. "He'll only say that he's 'working on an assignment' and that he's 'fine.'"

"But you don't believe him?"

"I...I don't know, James." In truth, Peter suspected that Albus Dumbledore's version of the truth varied, depending upon who was listening and what he wanted them to know.

"What do you think about this nonsense that Sirius is pushing about Moony?" asked James, clearly vexed.

For some reason, Sirius had been going on about how he suspected that their old friend might be a spy for the Dark Lord. Peter knew it was ridiculous of course, but he wasn't in any position to disavow Sirius of this notion. James, however, was a different story.

"Padfoot is tossing pure hippogriff dung!" Peter snorted, happy for the opportunity to denigrate Sirius. He took a long draught of the beer.

James nodded. "It's rubbish, of course. Moony couldn't be a spy anymore than you could, Wormtail!"

As if the beer had gone down the wrong way, Peter erupted into a fit of coughing.

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Several hours later, the sun still shining low in the summer evening sky, Peter sat among his friends on the freshly-conjured lawn. They had just finished a scrumptious picnic dinner, and he was basking in the lovely feeling of contentment that had settled upon them all. Leaning back on his elbows, he observed Lily chatting quietly with Annette and Alice as she leaned against James. James was talking with Sirius, his hand on Lily's knee. The birthday boys, now covered in chocolate cake, were crawling around and ignoring each other, as babies tend to do. Peter watched as baby Harry crawled in his direction.

"Hello, young Mr. Potter!" said Peter, wiggling his fingers in greeting.

When Harry got to Peter's side, he sat up with a little roll on his nappy-covered bottom and considered him with piercing, green eyes.

Peter leaned over so he was eye to eye with James' son and ruffled the boy's black hair, which, like his father's, was thick and black and stuck out of his head in every which way.

"Eyes like your mum and hair like your dad, eh, Harry?"

"Da!" chirped the baby, as if to say he liked being compared with his father. Peter, who hadn't any experience with babies, was encouraged by the child's response. He reached out and took the tiny hand in his own and shook it.

"I'm pleased to meet you, little Harry. My name is Peter, and I'm your dad's best friend!"

"Eter!"

Peter beamed in delight. The boy could say his name! Emboldened, he got to his feet and scooped Harry up in his arms. "There's a good boy!"

Instantly, baby Harry burst into tears and began to scream and arch his back sharply, causing Peter to nearly drop him in surprise.

Within seconds, Sirius was there. The baby continued to scream as he pulled away from Peter and reached for his godfather through his tears.

"Here now, Harry!" said Sirius as he plucked the baby out of Peter's arms. "Uncle Sirius has got you."

Peter reddened, upset and confused at this rejection. Indeed, Harry quieted at the sound of Sirius' voice and, tucking his head under his godfather's chin, sucked on his thumb. Peter had a sudden urge to knock the self-satisfied look off of Sirius' face.

Lily appeared at Peter's side and hooked her arm through his, leading him away. "Don't think anything of it, Peter," she said consolingly. "Harry sees Sirius all the time, and he's only just met you. Babies startle easily."

Peter pulled a face. "Well, if I could see you lot more often, then I wouldn't be a stranger to the boy now, would I?"

Lily sighed. "I know. It isn't fair, is it? I hate that we have to live like this and wish I could change things. We're lucky, I suppose, that Albus permits Sirius to know where we are. It's best for us right now."

"Is it?" he said, not caring if he sounded like a petulant child himself.

"What do you mean?"

"Is it best that Sirius is allowed to know where you're hiding?" The look of puzzlement on Lily's face egged him on. "Do you really trust Sirius with your safety? With the safety of your son?"

"Sirius would never do anything to put us in harm's way!"

Peter thought he detected a note of uncertainty behind her words. "He wouldn't do anything deliberately of course," he said, trying to sound more reasonable. "But you know how impulsive he is, Lily!"

She furrowed her brow as she considered this, but then she shook her head. "No, Peter. Sirius would rather die himself than do anything that stupid." She looked at him quizzically. "Do you really believe Sirius is that unreliable? I know how he gets under your skin sometimes and that, well, you are a bit jealous of him."

Peter felt his jaw opening and closing for the lack words in response to her comment. He felt his face flush, as if he'd been caught doing something embarrassing.

"Well, er, yes, he does sometimes," he said, recovering a bit. "But you still shouldn't put your faith in him blindly. What if he's captured by Death Eaters? How long do you think he'd last under torture?" He ignored Lily's wince. "Or if he goes off on a bender at some pub? All I'm saying is that Sirius has made some mistakes in the past and he might do so again. You and James should just... think about it. All right?"

"All right, Peter," she said, giving him a hug. "I'll talk with James about it. But you know how he is about Sirius."

Peter scowled. He knew only too well.

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## Lily

A few hours ago, she'd kissed her husband and son goodbye under the pretence that she'd be away for two days to visit her parents, whom she hadn't seen since Harry's christening ceremony over a year ago. Well, she hadn't lied completely. Yesterday, she *had* been with her parents in a tearful reunion, sharing lots of tea, biscuits, and pictures of Harry. But late last night, with Sirius' two-way mirror in her robes once again, and a twinge of guilt and heaviness in her heart, she had Apparated to the Ministry of Magic.

She should have been scared, or at the very least, nervous. For, despite her careful preparations and research, she was not at all certain that the 'experiment' she was about to embark on might not prove fatal. And, if she was lucky and survived, she could still lose her job if anyone discovered what she had done. But Lily was calm as she assembled everything that she'd carefully squirreled away over the last few months, secure in her belief that she had to try. At first, taking this risky step had been only a possibility. But since her odd run in with Severus, possibility had turned into certainty after he'd warned her. She had to do it...for Harry.

When she first began to read Perenelle Flamel's research notes, it had been out of curiosity to learn more about the long-term effects of working with Elemental Magic on another Empathic. Flamel, as Esmé had noted on Lily's first day at work, had founded their Division in order to further her understanding of the magical properties and the power that came from the complex magical element that most people called 'love'. Over the time that the founder had worked there (Lily found, to her surprise, that she had done so for over one hundred years!), Flamel had amassed an enormous number of bound notebooks that comprised a significant part of the library's vast collection. Whenever Lily managed to find some free time, she'd run down to the library and skim through them, feeling a kinship with this brilliant and innovative witch.

On a recent visit, shortly after the Potters were forced into hiding, Lily had been perusing the Flamel-filled shelves when she noticed a notebook that was noticeably slimmer than the others. Most of the books tended to be rather fat volumes, crammed full of notes, sketches, thoughts, experimental procedures and findings; the thin one caught her attention. Taking it to her usual desk in the corner of the library, she pulled back the cover of the notebook and saw, scrawled on the top of the first page, the words '*Self Harvesting*'. It didn't take her long to read it, and when she'd finished, she read it again, this time taking copious notes.

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The room Lily had picked was very small and non-descript, but fit for the spells she needed to cast. It had a long, wooden workbench along one stone wall and a small desk and chair tucked up against another. The flagstones on the floor were rough, uneven, and very cold under her bare feet. She wore a simple cotton shift, and the gooseflesh that ran up and down her arms owed as much to her anticipation as it did to the chilled air in the room. Everything in the room was simple and organic, just as it would need to be for a normal harvesting. It was critical that there was nothing in the environment that might contaminate the element in its journey from the person to containment.

Lily sat at the desk and, looking at the various objects in front of her, pulled the small photo towards her first. An image of herself looked back at her, smiling and waving. James had taken it at the Farm shortly after their wedding. She smiled back at her photo-self as she remembered that afternoon when they were still so blissfully ignorant of the terrible days to come. She turned over the photograph and, dipping her quill in the inkbottle, scratched a note to her son:

*Remember, dear Harry, I'll always be there for you. Just look deep within... with love.*

Spelling the ink dry, she placed the photo in a small envelope and wrote on its front:

*Petunia, please give this to Harry when he's a bit older. I love you, L.*

She penned another letter to Albus Dumbledore, explaining what she was about to do. She thought that if something happened to her, or to James, he'd know how best to use the information. She placed the envelope, along with the photo, together with Dumbledore's letter into another envelope and addressed it to the Headmaster.

Another letter was to James. This one was harder to write. She'd prayed to all the deities that this letter never had to reach its destination. If it did... well, he'd understand, of course, that she had to do this to protect their son. Tears came now, blotching the parchment on the desk, making it unusable. Lily wiped her face, vanished the ruined one, pulled out a fresh parchment, and wrote:

*If this letter finds its way to you, then you will know by now what I have done. Dumbledore will explain it all to you, and when he is finished, I hope that you will forgive me. I know in my heart that if you could have done so, you would have done the same to protect Harry, or me. While my heart would have broken, as I'm sure yours has done, I would have understood that it was necessary. Lean on your friends, for they love you so much. You are a strong man, James. Be strong for our son. My love is yours forever, Lily.*

Her hand shaking as she put the quill to rest on the desk, she closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe deep, even breaths. While she had expected that this would be hard, she still had to struggle to keep her heart and her head clear.

After a few minutes, Lily had finished writing a final, quick missive to her supervisor and bound all the envelopes together into a spelled inter-office satchel that was made of dull, brown leather with wings on either side of the opening on top. She cast a charm over the receptacle that would cause Esmé to find it upon her death and, opening the door, she sent it winging off to Esmé's office.

Lily re-sealed the door and stepped into the centre of the room to begin. First, she pointed her wand to the floor below her feet. "*Scourgify!*" The dust of years coalesced into a single, whirling spiral and then evaporated. Next, she pulled the cotton shift over her head and tossed it onto the desk, then cast a cleansing spell on herself, feeling the tingling magic scatter over her naked body as the spell did its work like a million tiny pinpricks. Next, checking for the orientation of the space, she created directional runes with her wand, and shimmering, golden markings soon appeared in the air, hovering just above the ground to denote east, west, south and true north.

Still standing in the centre of the room and assured that the runes glowed constant, she retrieved a phial from the workbench. Inside was a derivative of a Calming Draught that she had created specifically for this moment to ensure that her body and mind remained as still as possible during the procedure, yet keep her alert enough to complete it. She had tested it previously and knew it would work as expected. Drinking it, the Draught took effect very quickly, and the warmth of the mixture spread throughout her torso and her limbs. She felt her mind relax and was relieved that her senses, as they had before, remained sharp and focussed.

Finally, summoning the small, golden, heart-shaped locket, Lily lowered herself to the floor and lay flat upon it, her head aligned with the northern rune. This was the unknown. While Flamel had written about live harvesting, she had stopped short of attempting it on herself or on another human. So, Lily could only guess what the impact of the procedure would be on a living Donor. Would she survive? And if she did, would her ability to love be altered in some unknown, terrible way? Profoundly grateful for the effects of the Draught, Lily held the unlatched locket in one hand, extending her arm straight up in the air. Then, pointing her wand above her left breast, she concentrated to summon her magic and chanted to invoke the harvesting spell that would retrieve that Elemental Magic from her own heart.

Something hot shot through her like a burning shaft of fire. She wanted to cry out, but she continued to chant and didn't move. She repeated the chant three times. Each time, the fire flashed through her. After the third time, she felt something tug from within her. At the same time she could feel resistance from her wand hand, something that did not happen with regular Donors. Perspiration beaded at her brow, but she maintained her concentration on the effort. The magic was pulled so taut, she thought she had failed. It wouldn't let go. Then, she felt a small rip within her the moment it left her body. She paused for only a moment to register that it hadn't hurt and she was still alive. Slowly, moving the wand that held the element, she brought it to meet the locket and chanted the final encapsulating spell. A bright red light flashed around the locket with a high-pitched hum, and the locket snapped closed. The light blinked out, and the only sound remaining was of Lily's blessedly beating heart as it thumped loudly in the pulse beneath her ears.

Clutching the locket in her hand, she brought her arms slowly down to her chest, afraid to move too quickly. She closed her eyes and thought of James. Harry. Her parents. Tears pricked her eyes as she felt her love for them flow through her, stronger than ever. Flamel had been right: the Elemental Magic of love could not be depleted.

*It worked. Thank the gods, it had worked.*

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As she took the lift up to the Atrium, Lily checked her watch. It was five o'clock in the morning. Although she hadn't slept, she felt awake and alert from the dose of Strengthening Solution she had taken. And the feel of the golden locket that pressed against her breast provided a measure of both comfort and hope. Whatever happened to her now, those she loved would be protected.

The lift door opened, and Lily stepped out. A few early risers were moving about the Atrium in a way that suggested they desperately needed some coffee. One or two were standing near the golden grille, reading the morning *Prophet*. Lily turned sharply to her right and smacked right into a witch, who fell unceremoniously onto her backside as a sheaf of parchments she'd been carrying flew into the air like confetti.

"Oh! I'm so very sorry!" exclaimed Lily, who bent over the witch to help her stand.

"My dear!" muttered the witch, a small, older woman with elegant, purple robes. "One must always be vigilant about one's surroundings!" She got to her feet and straightened her robes.

Looking at the woman, Lily blanched with embarrassment and anxiety. Standing before her with an impressive scowl was the Minister for Magic, Millicent Bagnold.

"Minister! Of course, you're right! Let me help you with your papers!" Lily Summoned the scattered parchments into a manageable pile and handed them back to the Minister, who was regarding her with a stern expression and pinched lips.

"What is your name, girl? In which department do you work? I assume you work at the Ministry, given the hour."

Her stomach clenched. Would she be reported to Esmé? How would she explain what she'd been doing here?

"I'm Lily Potter. I work as an Unspeakable, Minister."

"Well, well... two for the price of one! This is our lucky day, gents!"

Acting on instinct, Lily jumped in front of the Minister with her wand out and turned to see a small group of wizards surrounding them, faces obscured by the hoods, and their wands pointing menacingly. The Minister looked at the men as if they were misbehaving schoolboys and pushed Lily aside. "Put those wands away this instant! The Aurors will be called!"

But before she could act, voices called out quietly, "*Expelliarmus!*" and the two witches' wands flew into two outstretched and unfriendly hands.

At that moment, the lift behind them opened, and the wizards surrounding them surged forward to push both women inside. "If you want to remain alive, I'd suggest you both shut your mouths and follow our instructions," one of them said in a quiet, low voice.

The lift door closed. Lily was clutching the Minister's hand, and her mind raced. Although not in their usual robes, she knew these men were Death Eaters. They had come for the Minister. Why? If they'd wanted her dead, they'd have killed her...and Lily, too...in the Atrium and then Disapparated. Then, remembering the dissolute state of Diagon Alley, it came to her: kidnapping the Minister for Magic could totally devastate what remained of the precarious wizarding government. Lily's heart thumped rapidly as her mind tried to sort out what...if anything...she could do about it.

The hooded wizard nearest the Minister poked her with his wand. "How about an express ride to your office, Minister?"

Lily could see Bagnold start to protest, and she squeezed the Minister's hand in warning. Without reacting, the Minister stated in a clear voice, "Level one, Offices of the Minister for Magic. No stops, please." In recognition of her voice, the lift began to rise. No one spoke as it rose without stopping on any of the floors between the Atrium and the Minister's offices.

Her one chance would come in the moment the lift doors opened. The Death Eaters would have to step out first, with Lily and the Minister last. Lily put her free hand behind her back and shifted slightly so that she would be ready to reach into her robe pocket and pull out the small, two-way mirror. It would activate at her touch, and she'd have to turn it so as to reflect the scene in front of her. And then she'd pray that James would be able to hear and see...and then send help.

Used to only descending in the lift one level below the Atrium, the journey up to the Minister's Office...especially at wand point...seemed to take forever. Finally, the lift slowed, then stopped, and the door slid open. The wizards stepped backwards out of the lift, and as Lily shifted, she retrieved and palmed the small mirror.

"What do you want with the Minister?" Lily asked loudly as she stepped out into the corridor.

"Shut it, Mudblood!" The wizard closest to her pulled back his arm and, with a grunt, slapped Lily roughly with the back of his hand. She stumbled back, nearly losing her grip on the mirror, and tasted blood dripping from her nose.

The Minister pulled out a handkerchief from her robes and pressed it into Lily's hand. "There's no call for that!" she admonished. But Lily could feel Bagnold shaking.

More rough hands pushed the two women forward. Then, from ahead, Lily heard shouts and saw the flashing of red and green lights of spells hitting their targets.

"Got 'em both," called out one of the men. "Easy as catchin' pixies!" he cackled.

The Minister caught her breath. "Jones and McDougall!" she gasped. "My guard," she whispered as a look of pain crossed her face.

"Move on now. Time to go!" They were prodded to continue down the long corridor towards the Minister's office, but the small witch stopped in her tracks, pushed aside the man who stood nearest to her and placed fisted, angry hands on her hips.

"And why do you think I'd go anywhere with any of you, you ill-mannered cretins?" Bagnold demanded in her most regal, Ministerial voice. Lily had to admire the woman's refusal to be intimidated. If it didn't hurt so much, she would have smiled. She also realised that the Minister had figured out, as Lily had, that the Death Eaters wanted them taken alive, so stalling for time was their best...and so far...their only strategy.

"Because the Dark Lord wishes an audience with the Minister for Magic," sneered one of them. "And you, Potter," he added, stepping towards Lily, running his wand down the side of her face, "we don't know why he wants you, but he's been looking for you for a very long time." His breath was foul, reeking of whisky. Lily turned her head and tried to step away, but she was caught by the wizard standing behind her, who held her immobile as the one in front came closer. "Pretty thing, too," he added. She could see gleaming teeth behind a wicked smile, but she couldn't make out any other features. "Perhaps as a reward for bringing him such a prize, our Lord will let us have you when he's done."

"Why would you want to sully yourself with a Mudblood, Death Eater?" spat Lily, hoping to prolong the conversation and avoid getting to the Minister's office and her open-Floo connection.

"Let's not dally, you fool. Play with her later!" barked another of the wizards ahead of them.

Lily and the Minister were now being physically dragged along the corridor, getting closer and closer to her office.

Suddenly, dozens of sharp *Cracks!* filled the corridor, and Lily lunged at the Minister, knocking her to the ground and against the wall and covering the older woman's body with her own. Shouts and blasts echoed around her until she heard the welcomed sound of a familiar, deep voice by her ear. "Come with me. Stay low." It was Frank Longbottom, called to duty to assist his fellow Aurors, probably by James' Patronus.

"Come on, Minister. Frank will cover for us!" said Lily with relief, even as deadly spells barely missed them both.

They ran at a crouch until they turned into a different corridor and shoved into an empty office.

"All right, Lily? Minister?" asked Frank, who looked abashed at being in an office with the Minister for Magic.

"Thank you, young man," said Bagnold with a nod of her very dishevelled head. "I'll make sure you receive a citation for this. Well done!" She reached out her hand, and Frank shook it, turning crimson.

"Just doing my job, Minister," he said with a small smile. Then he turned to Lily. "Best talk to James. He's a right mess."

*James!*

The mirror had practically glued itself into her palm, and she loosened her grip and looked into it. The Minister for Magic watched her curiously.

"James!"

She saw her husband's panicked face and heard Harry crying somewhere behind him.

"Lily! Are you all right? Is the Minister safe?"

Tears now spilled from her eyes, and her heart filled.

"I'm fine, James...."

"You look dreadful!"

Frank, who'd poked his head out of the door for a moment, stepped back in and spoke into the mirror.

"All's well here, mate, thanks to you two. We caught a neat dozen of the bast...I mean Death Eaters. Sorry, Minister. Lost two of her guards, though."

"Is it safe for me to go out?" the Minister asked Frank briskly.

"I believe so. Stay by my side, though."

Bagnold nodded and turned to Lily. "I'll make sure you get a commendation as well, young lady. Even though you did knock me over. Twice!"

She turned on her heel and followed Frank out the door. Lily turned back to the mirror. "James, is Harry all right?"

She could see relief flood his face. "He's just mad 'cause I've not given him his breakfast yet. And I think he misses his mum. Can you come home now?"

Lily laughed. "I'll be there in two shakes of a crup's tails. Do you think you can magic me up a cup of coffee, Mr Potter?"

"I think that can be arranged, Mrs Potter. And then you can explain to me what in blazes you were doing at the Ministry when you were supposed to be with your parents," he said with a suspicious lift of his right eyebrow.

"I think that will require two cups, James." She sighed. "And some biscuits. Chocolate ones, please."

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## Severus

At one time, he thought it would be all he'd ever want. To gain entry into the Dark Lord's Inner Circle would be the culmination of all his work. To achieve the pinnacle of esteem, the perks of power, and his master's recognition. The ability, most of all, to remove himself from the front lines of Voldemort's war against the light, harbour what remained of his sanity, and repair, if he could, the corruption that Dark Magic had rent on his soul.

But since his few minutes with Lily, when the piercing of his heart had revealed that he still had one, the façade of what he had believed was his dream had fallen away like so many patches of snow melting into the earth on a warm, spring day. And today, as he stood among the others of the Circle, surrounding the Dark Lord, the stark, harsh,

and terrible truth of what his life had become was now clearly visible.

*Dante's ninth level of hell must have looked something like this,* he thought with rueful bitterness.

They had gathered this time in a cave, and the oppressive summer heat was still suffocating even at this late hour, made worse by the Death Eater robes that they were required to wear. They had stood, unmoving for the past two hours as the Dark Lord paced and ranted about traitors, the incompetence of his servants, and the spectacular recent failure to kidnap the Minister for Magic. Now, it was easy for Severus to hear the madness in his voice and see the inhuman flash of red in his eyes. The calm and charismatic leader was still there, of course. Voldemort could wield it like a wand, easily seducing the unwary like a spider enticing flies into his web before devouring them. But the voice that used to enchant was now repulsive to him. He abhorred the man he used to look up to. He was permanently trapped in the achievement of his heart's desire. The irony of this did not escape him. Nor did the fact that he now had to rely on his Occlumency skills to an even greater degree to prevent these traitorous thoughts from reaching the Dark Lord. If he wanted to survive, he could never, ever let his guard down.

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The mission he'd been assigned to lead was stranger than most. Muggles were the target, which was not strange, but the fact that they were to attack in broad daylight and remain invisible throughout was. Severus didn't see the point, but he wisely refrained from sharing this opinion.

The target was a Muggle football game in a town called Bedford. As they flew in a Disillusioned group over the stadium, Severus could see there were thousands of people in attendance on this Saturday afternoon. The intent was to inflict the greatest amount of damage with the least amount of effort. Do the job and get out. They flew lower, and the players on the field came into view, looking like so many multi-coloured Jobberknolls.

"Don't see the point of running about the ground, just kicking the ball. What's the fun in that?" asked Goyle, who was in formation to Severus' left.

"The fun comes next," drawled Cranford's voice to his right.

Severus ignored them as he identified their target. He directed them to a wooden, overhanging roof that covered half the stadium seats, and he felt the *swoosh* of robes fly past him. He couldn't hear the spells, but within seconds, the roof had burst into flames. Falling embers lit up the seats below, and the blaze spread out in both directions very fast. Severus heard whooping sounds behind him, and they all dove down to prod the fire on.

As he descended, Severus was hit with a rush of acrid smoke and the smell of burning flesh. The crowd was screaming, trying to flee the seats before the fire reached them; people trampled each other trying to escape. The smoke disoriented Severus, and as he touched down on the field, he cast a Bubble-Head Charm on himself. Streams of people swept past him, and the fear in their eyes took him by surprise. A cry of someone young reached his ears, and he looked to his right to see a large man step on a child's head, crushing it as he ran, never looking back. Severus began to run himself, his head pounding, his broom plastered in his grip. He stopped at the sight of a young woman on the ground, her clothes torn, cradling an old man with long, white hair, his eyes now staring blankly, unseeing; her keening screams pierced through Severus like a knife. He ran in another direction, to where he saw a mob of people gathered in the stands, the flames licking towards them, closer and closer. Remembering that he had his broom, he mounted it and kicked off into the sky, where he could see the crowd trying to break through a locked gate. Without thinking, he pointed his wand at the chain and yelled, "*Diffindo!*" The chains gave way, as did the gate, and the crowd poured through it. More children and old men were being trampled as they ran, and Severus, without thinking, started to pick up the smallest ones and fly them out of the stadium to safety. Adrenaline...and something else that he didn't stop to think about...was pushing him to save the very people he'd come to kill.

It was the sight and sound of flashing lights that brought Severus to his senses, as he realised that his comrades were picking off the Muggles, killing them as they escaped the stadium. Moving through the crowd, he was able to make out the shimmering, Disillusioned outline of Goyle just ahead of him. Severus made his way towards the portly wizard, who was laughing gleefully as he aimed at a young man carrying a child. They both fell dead in the light of a single spell.

"Goyle," he rasped.

"Bloody good job, Snape!" exclaimed Goyle.

"Be off, the lot of you. I'll be along shortly."

Goyle nodded in understanding, and Severus raised his wand to shoot off their signal to retreat. In the chaos, no one took notice of a flock of large, dark birds that suddenly appeared high over the stadium and moved as one towards the east. Severus, however, returned to the stadium to see what he could do to help rectify this new horror that had been wrought by his own hands.

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He barely remembered returning to Voldemort to make his report, and only vaguely recalled that his master had been pleased. Severus didn't remember Apparating to Hogwarts at all, how he got into the school, or how long he'd been standing before the gargyle that guarded the Headmaster's office. It was the soft voice of Albus Dumbledore behind him that finally shook him from his stupor.

"Mr. Snape, what has happened?"

Severus turned to look at the Headmaster, but he only saw the dead eyes of the old man on the field. He blinked a few times until Dumbledore came into focus. Severus knew he must look a sight, covered with soot and dirt and blood.

"I need your help," he rasped. The smoke had scorched his throat when his Bubble-Head Charm had worn off. "I can't do it... have to help... have to stop...." Severus felt a tinny rush of air in his ears and the colours around him fade to grey. He swayed and grabbed the Headmaster, but could not stop himself from falling.

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It took some effort to open his eyes, which felt like they'd been glued together. But when he did, Severus found himself in a bed in the Hogwarts' hospital wing with Madam Pomfrey hovering over him with her wand.

"Whatever have you been up to, my boy?" she huffed. "You had some pretty nasty burns. Lucky for you I'd returned early from holidays.

"He's awake now, Headmaster," she said, turning her head to the front door, then whipping it back to her patient quickly. "You are not to MOVE until I say you can, do you understand me, young man?" Feeling oddly like he was back in his third year, Severus nodded weakly. The matron disappeared, and the Headmaster sat down beside his bed and leaned forward.

For a moment, Severus entertained the fantasy that his life over the past three years had been a dream. That he was still a student at Hogwarts, and he'd just been in another scrape with Black and Potter. But the look on the Headmaster's face belied that fantasy, confirming that every bit of it had been real. The old man's eyes were cold, and his lips were pressed thin and hard as he considered his former student.

"If you want my help," the Headmaster said finally, "you'll have to tell me everything. Are you prepared to do that?"

Severus froze. He wasn't prepared. There was no way to give voice to the atrocities he'd committed. He couldn't do it.

"I know that you're a Death Eater, and I know that you've come to me to seek a chance at redemption. It is not in my power to redeem you, but I did offer to help. That means you must choose, Severus, between what is right and what is easy. You must choose to trust me."

He felt the words screaming in his head, but they would not come. Too many years of distrusting the Headmaster could not be overcome in a single instant, and an overwhelming sense of shame had taken hold of his tongue.

Dumbledore sat back in the bedside chair. "You'll stay here a few more days. When Poppy is ready to release you, you can come to see me or you can return to your master. I'll not stop you from leaving, nor will I turn you over to the Aurors." He stood with a huge sigh. "Get well, Mr. Snape." He began to leave, but stopped. "The password, should you need it, is '*Acid Pops*'." Then he turned his back on Severus and left the hospital wing.

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Three days later, Poppy provided him with a fresh set of clothes and sent him off with a clean bill of health. "Be off with you! I don't want to see you back here again, do you hear me?"

Once again, he found himself standing by the stone gargoyle. Severus had made his choice. He'd tell his story to Dumbledore. He'd live with the voices of the men, women and children that he'd killed screaming in his head every night for the rest of his life. He'd turn spy on Voldemort. He may be damned to hell, but he wasn't going alone. He'd take them all down with him.

\*\*\*\*\*

A/N: My version of the stadium fire was based on the real-life 1985 fire that swept through the Bradford City Stadium in Bradford, UK, killing over 50 people. Some of the descriptions in this chapter are based on an uncredited report posted on [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk). If any readers were personally affected by that tragedy, I hope I have not offended.

My humble thanks to two wonderful women who gave their time and attention to beta these chapters and help me to improve them: [capella\\_black](#) and [songbook99](#).

Art is by [anemonesque](#).

## Fidelius: October 1981

*Chapter 22 of 24*

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

*This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by [anemonesque](#).*

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

### Fidelius

~\*~ **Sunday, October 11** ~\*~

Lily

"That's *not* a real word!"

"Is too!"

"Is not!"

"My mum used it all the time," said James defiantly.

"Right. Use it in a sentence."

"There are *Beriwiggles* infesting the rose bushes.' It's a magical insect. Little and red. With long antennae. Nasty things that squirt sticky stuff."

Lily scrunched up her nose in frustration. James was ruthless when he cheated at Scrabble. "I *know* you are making that up, and you know that my copy of *Fantastic Beasts* is packed away so I can't verify it."

James cocked his head, smirked in his most infuriatingly arrogant way, and turned his palms face up, inviting her to concede the word.

"FINE!" Lily nearly tore the parchment as she marked down his ill-gotten, fifty-seven points. "How could I have married a reprobate like you, James Potter!"

"If a 'reprobate' means charming, sexy and brilliant, I think the answer is self-evident!"

Lily picked up a small pillow from the sofa they'd been leaning against and smacked him with it. His glasses went flying.

"That's for being a cheeky sod!"

James got on his hands and knees and began to crawl towards her. "You are a marked woman, now, Mrs Potter," he hissed, an evil grin stretched across his face.

"James..." She scooted backwards.

"There is no escape!" In a single leap he landed on Lily, pushed her to the floor, and pinned her there with his body. "You know the punishment for sore losers, don't you?" he growled.

Lily started laughing, shrieking, and squirming to try and push him off. "No! Don't!"

"Look at my pitiful prey... hysterical before I've even begun to do... THIS!" Both hands attacked her torso, all ten fingers flying in a coordinated attack. She screamed at his unrelenting tickling assault until tears ran from her eyes.

"You WIN! Stop!" she shrieked breathlessly.

"Say that I'm the best Scrabble player of all time!"

"Best! James! Stop!"

He rolled off of her, both of them laughing and gasping for breath. Lily looked behind her at the stairs.

"I can't believe we didn't wake him up from his nap," she said, wiping her face with the bottom of her tee shirt.

"He's just being considerate, giving his mummy and daddy a bit of time to themselves."

Lily glanced at her husband, prone on the floor, looking more deliciously dishevelled than usual.

"Very considerate, indeed," she nodded. "After all, parents need play time too." With a push, Lily rolled herself over to land astride James' lap, her hands splayed on either side of his face.

James reached up and ran his hands through her hair, which fell about him like auburn curtains. The late afternoon sunlight filtered through the covered window, creating a golden glow around her. "What shall we play next, Mrs Potter?" he asked softly, his voice deep and resonant.

Lily bent down to brush his cheeks, nose and forehead with light, feather kisses. "This game is called 'Lily ravishes her husband'." With a wicked grin of her own, she claimed his lips, and his responsive moan vibrated through her body.

A high-pitched vibration shot through the room, indicating the protective spells on their home had been breached. It was followed by a single knock on the door.

"Bugger," muttered James. "Rotten bloody timing! Who could it be?"

Lily had scrambled to her feet. "My wand! Where-is-that-stupid...?" she muttered, attacking each of the sofa cushions until one of them coughed up her wand.

Just before James could cast the revealing spell on the front door, a wispy mongoose Patronus waddled into the living room.

"It's Alastor," James sighed with relief as he opened the door. "You could have warned us you were coming, Moody. I nearly had a heart attack!"

"Sorry, boy," said the grizzled Auror as he stepped inside. "Didn't have time to send an announcement. And you're too young to have heart problems."

Lily gave Moody quick kiss on his scarred cheek. "No matter, Alastor. We're delighted to have company, *aren't we*, James?" One eyebrow lifted in warning as she caught James' petulant scowl. "Would you like some tea?" she asked, leading him to the sofa.

"No, thanks." He pursed his lips and shifted a bit, looking extremely uncomfortable. Lily had seen *that* look before; she felt a shiver of cold run down her back.

"What's wrong?" The words caught in her throat. The air was suddenly thick with apprehension and fear.

"James. Lily. You...er...might want to sit down."

They both sat on the sofa, and Lily felt James take her hand and hold it tightly. "Go on," said James.

Moody seemed to find a stance that suited him and put his hands behind his back.

"Last night, we caught word from the Muggle authorities that a bomb had gone off in London, near a military barracks. Most of the injured were men from the barracks. But, two 'civilians', who just happened to be driving by, got caught up in the blast as well. The Muggles, with a bit of help from the MLE, have just identified them. Your parents, Lily...."

Lily didn't hear her own strangled cry, nor did she feel James' arms wrap around her. She didn't hear the rest of what Alastor said either. All her senses seemed to have imploded at the same time and found it was suddenly hard to breathe. *Not mum... dad... not them... can't be possible....*

"Lily, shhh..." she heard James' voice reach her and felt his hand stroking her head. It was as if her insides had been ripped from her body. She felt like she might faint, but James' strong and steady arms kept her present. Heart-wrenching sobs finally broke from within her and went on and on and on.

After a long while, only silent tears flowed. James and Moody were talking quietly.

"Was it Voldemort?" she heard James ask.

"We checked the area for magic and it was... inconclusive. The Muggles say it was a typical IRA job, but that hasn't been verified either."

"But, for all the injuries, the only two to...that weren't military...it seems so unlikely to be random. Do you think it could be payback from the kidnapping attempt?"

"Could be. But we might never know for certain. In the end, Potter, I don't think it matters as to the 'who and why'."

"Petunia!" said Lily in a sudden panic. From within the fog of her grief, she remembered her sister. Lily sat up, grasping the handkerchief that James was handing her. "I have to go to Petunia!"

"The Muggle police will have already notified her, Lily," said Moody gruffly. "I'll take you to see her, whenever you're ready. Neither of you goes out without Auror protection from now on. Direct orders from the Minister herself. She's put all her resources at your disposal, as a special favour to you, Lily."

Lily nodded and tried to clear her head, which felt like it had been stuffed with cotton. "James... Harry?"

James kissed her gently. "I'll be here with Harry, love. Don't worry about us. Go to your sister. We'll be all right."

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~\*~ Tuesday, October 20 ~\*~

Severus

Dawn was just breaking when Severus Apparated to Hogwarts' entrance gates. The air was crisp, and he felt the icy chill of the morning stab through him despite the warmth of his robes. He pocketed his mask and strode wearily through the school gates and towards the castle. He'd wake Albus to tell him the not-unexpected news and then have time for a quick shower and breakfast before classes. Fortunately, the first of these was his N.E.W.T.-level Potions class, so he'd not have to exert himself too much. They, at least, weren't likely to blow up the classroom.

Though his body was tired, his mind was awlirl, not only with the events of the previous evening, but with the sudden turn his life had taken in the past two months. He

grimaced as he thought how he'd ironically achieved his goal after all: to turn spy and teach at Hogwarts. Except that he was teaching Potions instead of Defence, and he was spying for Dumbledore, not the Dark Lord.

~\*~

Dumbledore was nearly as harsh a taskmaster as Voldemort, for all that he used that infuriating twinkle instead of a Cruciatus. In making his final choice, Severus had knelt before the Headmaster in the hope of saving what was left of his accursed soul. Dumbledore had made it clear, however, that it would take some time before Severus could fully earn his trust. Though, what would he would be required to do to earn that trust, Severus did not yet know.

Surprisingly, the most terrifying moment of his new service came, not in reporting back to the Dark Lord for after he turned spy for Dumbledore as one might expect, but in stepping in front of his Potions class for the very first time, teaching a group of fifth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins. Severus had seen and done terrible things as a Death Eater, but facing these children...who stared at him with curiosity, suspicion and expectation...was truly terrifying.

*I'm not much older than they are,* he thought in a panic. *I don't know anything about teaching. I don't even like children!*

Then he saw the red and gold flash of a Gryffindor scarf being unwound from the neck of boy with curly, brown hair. When the unsuspecting student took out his wand, Severus was lit with an unexplainable spark of fury.

"Put that wand away, you stupid boy," he snarled loudly, his voice resonating through the dungeon classroom. "There will be no foolish wand-waving in this class."

His face must have looked fierce because the students all jumped as if they'd been hit with a Blasting Curse. Their eyes were wide with... fear?

"I didn't know we wouldn't be using wands, sir," the student responded in his own defence, his voice wavering a bit, but still strong.

Severus swooped down to tower over the student, who cringed below him. "Nor did you know that you would, Mr. Stebbins. Had you waited for instructions, it might have served you better. But Gryffindors are not especially noted for following rules, are they? Ten points from Gryffindor!"

Stebbins cowered in his seat, ashen-faced, and the Slytherins all snickered. A sudden feeling of understanding and triumph came over Severus. *I suppose I might manage this after all.* He masked his smirk as he turned with a swirl of his robes towards the blackboard. With a flick of his own wand, the ingredients and instructions for the potion lesson appeared on the board in a near facsimile of his own spiky handwriting.

*I might be forced to serve two masters, but these young fools will have to serve me* he mused, turning back to the class.

"Everything you need to create the Draught of Peace is on the board. It is likely to be on your O.W.L. exam. Begin," he snapped. Severus nodded in satisfaction as the students scampered like a horde of frightened spiders to retrieve the ingredients from the supply cabinet.

~\*~

Severus cradled the blissfully hot cup of tea in his hands and took a sip. He closed his eyes, relishing the feel of its warmth spreading through his chilled body. Dumbledore sat at his desk, waiting patiently.

Severus finally met the Headmaster's gaze and ignored the pain that seemed to tear at his throat as he uttered the words, "It is as we feared, sir. Voldemort has decided it is the Potter boy."

The ancient wizard barely nodded, his sharp blue eyes revealing nothing. "Do you think he'll move quickly?"

"Despite his efforts to locate them, I don't believe he knows where they are hiding. I expect that he'll strike the moment that he does."

Dumbledore sat back and steepled his fingers, lost in his own thoughts.

After a few minutes, Severus broke the silence. "Sir," he began, trying to excise the panic from his voice, "can you protect them?" He pictured Lily as he'd seen her at the Ministry, her fear etched into his heart. A hollow feeling of desperation came over him.

Dumbledore glanced up to meet Severus' gaze, but Severus did not attempt to block his thoughts and feelings from the Headmaster. It had been one of Albus' requirements of service.

A warm smile appeared on Dumbledore's careworn face. "We will try our very best, my boy. With your help, we will try to keep them safe from harm."

Severus reddened; his shame at putting the one person who had shown him true friendship in mortal peril was close to the surface, and he knew that Dumbledore could see it.

Thankfully, the Headmaster did not comment further, but stood instead. Severus followed. "Go now. Get ready for your day."

He nodded and turned to leave, when a bundle of something shimmering lying on a table near the door caught his eye. Severus moved closer and reached out to touch it. Then, just as suddenly, he pulled his hand away as if it had been burned. "It's Potter's," he whispered in recognition.

"Yes," said Dumbledore in a matter-of-fact manner, "it is James' Invisibility Cloak. I asked to borrow it for a while."

Severus continued to stare at the cloak; memories of Potter using it to torment him flashed through his mind in a series of unbidden images.

"I want you to keep it for a while, Severus. You may have need of it."

Severus stepped away from it and turned back to the Headmaster.

"I don't need his blasted cloak," he growled, the hatred of his enemy afresh in his heart.

"This isn't the time to indulge in childhood enmities, Severus," scolded Dumbledore sharply. "Take the cloak."

Severus glared at the Headmaster, then scooped up the cloak and stuffed it into a robe pocket in a single movement. "Protect her," he said brusquely as he departed from the Headmaster's office.

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~\*~ **October 21** ~\*~

Peter

He wasn't scheduled for a shift at headquarters, but a shipment of supplies had arrived that day, and Peter thought it would be a good idea to get it sorted out sooner rather than later. So, Apparating to Phoenix Farm after work, he was surprised and delighted to see Lily feeding Harry at the large dining table as he stepped into the farmhouse.

"Hello, Peter!" Lily said brightly as she spooned some mashed carrots into Harry's open mouth.

"Where's James?" Peter asked.

"He's...."

"It feels so bloody wonderful to get some fresh air!" James exclaimed as he entered the farmhouse, the door banging closed behind him.

"... here!" finished Lily, waving Harry's spoon towards the door.

James peeled off his outer cloak and hung it on a rack. Seeing Peter, he rushed over and crushed him in an exuberant embrace. "Wormtail! It's so great to see you!" Peter couldn't breathe until James let him go. James thumped him heartily on his back. "We didn't expect you here tonight, mate!"

Peter was flushed and pleased with his friends' enthusiastic greeting. "I didn't expect you either, Prongs! Did you get released for good behaviour?" he quipped with a beaming smile.

James nodded. "About time, too!"

Eyeing Harry critically, James spelled away the orange, gloopy mess from his son's face before lifting him up to nuzzle at his neck. This set Harry off in a squeal of laughter, who retaliated by snatching his father's glasses off his face. Lily reached over in a practiced move to deftly pluck the spectacles out of his chubby hands.

"Dumbledore permits us to come to the Farm at odd times," explained Lily as she took Harry from James and set him on the floor. "It's the only place we can escape to. If we didn't have the Farm, I think that James and I would go mad, probably forced into hexing each other out of frustration." Peter watched Harry grab the leg of a chair, trying to lift himself to a standing position. The effort failed and he fell back on his bum with a light thud. The child frowned and stared at the chair in frustration.

James nodded in agreement. "I hate having to sit around all day doing nothing," he said, a scowl clouding his face. "At least when I'm here I can help out a bit and not feel like a bloody layabout."

"Well, you've come at a good time! I could use a hand sorting out a delivery. Care to help?"

James was about to respond when the farmhouse door opened and Albus Dumbledore stepped inside, casting a glance over the assembled friends.

"Peter, I need to have a word alone with Lily and James." His tone was clipped, all formalities oddly...and noticeably...absent.

James shrugged, and Lily gave Peter a wan smile. The Headmaster stared, and Peter stifled his disappointment at being left out...again.

"Not a problem," he said, his smile falsely bright. "I'll just head to the back room and get to work."

He turned on his heel and left. Once in the storeroom, he stared at the boxes that were piled on top of each other but suddenly, he didn't much feel like sorting anymore. He wanted to know what was going on. So, in an instant, Peter changed into his Animagus form and scurried through a hole in the wall. This was not the first time that he had used these secret places to eavesdrop on important conversations, and he turned in and out of hidden passageways until he came to a small opening in the wall that divided the main room and the kitchen. From here he could see and hear very well.

Dumbledore was seated with Lily and James at the table. Lily was rocking Harry, who had fallen asleep with his head resting on her shoulder. Her face was pale.

"Are you certain?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so. A new location has been found. You must go there immediately."

James pounded his fist on the table and Harry jerked in response, but did not wake up. "Damn it, Albus. What's the point of this endless running and hiding? If he wants us, let's call his bluff. Tell him where we are, and we'll be ready to fight him when he shows up!"

Dumbledore appeared to be considering how to respond to this. "I understand your frustration, James, but there is more to the situation than you are aware of. I must ask you to trust me."

Peter noticed Lily clutching a locket around her neck. "We'll go this time," she said. "But how will another move help us?"

"This time, we'll invoke the Fidelius Charm," Dumbledore answered quietly.

"Have a Secret-Keeper?" asked James in a surprised whisper.

"What is the Fidelius Charm?" asked Lily apprehensively.

"A Secret-Keeper is bound by the Charm to protect a secret," explained James. "In our case, the secret would be our location. It affords a greater level of protection in that only the Secret-Keeper can reveal it. Those who do know can't say, and anyone who knew our location beforehand will not be able to recall where it is after the Charm is cast."

Dumbledore nodded. "James is correct. And I would like to ask you to allow me to be your Secret-Keeper."

"Can we choose?" asked James.

Lily looked at James in surprise. "Is there a reason you don't want the Headmaster to do it?"

James set his mouth in a thin line. "Sirius will be upset if I don't ask him. I...I'd like him to be our Secret-Keeper."

No one responded to this right away, and Peter started in alarm.

"I know that Sirius is as good as a brother, James," said Dumbledore, "but I'd like you to think about this."

"I think that he's right, James," said Lily slowly, reaching out to touch his arm. "I love Sirius, but I'm not sure that he is the best choice."

"Why not?" James asked, pulling his arm away from her roughly.

Lily tried to think of an answer that didn't provoke James' automatic and stubborn defence of his best friend.

"I just think that the Headmaster would be the better choice."

James got to his feet and looked between the other two with a defiant glare. "If we have to invoke the Fidelius, then *insist* that Sirius be the Secret-Keeper!"

Lily looked to Dumbledore, but the Headmaster raised his palms in acquiescence. "All right, James. If you insist, then it shall be so."

"Then I insist that Sirius tell Albus our location after the Charm is cast," said Lily, equally defiant as she glared back at her husband.

James nodded in agreement and returned to his seat, placated for the moment.

"I will work with Lily to teach her the Charm," said Dumbledore. "I'd like it done as quickly as possible."

Lily scrunched up her face to calculate the time. "With moving and all, I think we can do it on Saturday. Will that be all right?"

"That will have to do." The old wizard stood and gestured for Lily to follow. "Come with me into my office, Lily. This won't take long to learn."

~\*~ **October 23** ~\*~

Peter's palms were sweating as he knocked on Sirius' door, and his heart was beating to a fast and steady rhythm. Doubts kept creeping into his head, and he struggled to squash them.

*No, this is the right thing to do. This plan has to work. Everything depends on it. Everything.*

The door cracked open, and Peter saw Sirius' surprised expression.

"Wormtail?"

He'd been to Padfoot's flat only one other time, with James. He'd never come on his own. "It's been awhile, Padfoot. I thought we might catch up!" He knew it sounded lame, but he pulled out a bottle of Ogden's from his robes, and Sirius' face brightened.

"C'mon in then, mate!"

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Convincing Sirius that he wasn't fit to be the Potters' Secret-Keeper was so much easier than Peter could have imagined. As soon as he'd got Padfoot to slip and tell him about the Fidelius Charm, it was proof enough to demonstrate how unreliable Sirius would be with the secret to the Potters' location. Sirius' own well-entrenched pit of guilt over his numerous past misdemeanours, aided by a half-bottle of whisky, was all it took for Sirius to suggest that perhaps it would be a better idea if Peter were to be their Secret-Keeper instead. No one, Sirius had said, would think to suspect someone like *Peter*!

"I don't know, Padfoot," said Peter with false hesitation. "I'm willing, of course, but James is pretty certain that he wants you. How would you convince him?"

Sirius waved his glass. "Leave it to me, Wormtail. I can convince James of anything."

Peter looked doubtful. "So, I should just show up with you tomorrow? Don't you think we should tell them in advance?"

"Yes! No! That's brilliant!" exclaimed Sirius. "You'll already be with me when I go." Sirius leaned over as if conveying something secret. "No, we don't want to tell them anything beforehand. It'll be harder for them to refuse if you're already there," he whispered and then broke into a wild laugh. "Trust me, Wormtail. You'll be their Secret-Keeper before the day is done." A sudden, worried look stole over his face. "Do you think that they'll let you tell me where they live, though?"

Peter reached over to take the empty glass out of Sirius' hand. "We'll ask James and Lily, mate. I'm sure they'll want you to know. I wouldn't worry."

Sirius smiled with relief and lay down on the sofa and yawned. "That's good, mate. You're a great friend, Peter. This will be for the best, I know it." He was asleep within minutes.

"Yes, Sirius. I agree. This is absolutely for the best."

Peter poured himself another shot of Ogden's and sat back in Sirius' armchair, feeling rightly smug and satisfied.

*That's right, mate. We'll make sure that James and his family are finally safe.*

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~\*~ **October 24** ~\*~

Lily

She left James and Sirius to hash it out with each other, going upstairs to put Harry down for his nap, timed so he'd sleep through the Binding ceremony. They'd both been shocked when Sirius arrived with Peter in tow, and Lily was more than a little impressed at Sirius' reasoning for wanting to let Peter be their Secret-Keeper. It was the most thoughtful and responsible action she'd ever seen him take, although she suspected that Peter might have helped.

*No matter*, she thought, surprised at her relief. *It's still a good idea.*

When the shouting ebbed to conversational levels, she returned to the living room, still stacked with boxes. They hadn't fully unpacked from their move to Godric's Hollow, a lovely small village in southern Wales. Dumbledore had told them that the eponymous 'Godric' was, indeed, her school House's namesake, and that there were still some magical people scattered about the area.

Lily noticed that Peter was standing awkwardly off by himself, trying to stay out of the line of fire.

"Peter, come sit with me while these two prats sort themselves out," she said, patting the sofa.

Peter sat down next to her, and Sirius looked smug as he crossed his arms. "James has finally seen reason, Peter."

James looked at Peter, running a hand through his hair, a sure sign of agitation. "It's not you, mate. I do trust you, you know."

Peter preened. "I know you do. I expect we just took you by surprise, is all."

"Yeah. Well. I suppose we should all get ready then," James said without enthusiasm. He turned to Lily. "Can Padfoot stay? I want him to know. Peter will tell him after. Is it all right, Lily?"

James' pleading brought to mind a vision of Harry in a few years, trying to wheedle favours from her, and Lily smiled. "Of course he can stay. We want you to be here, Sirius."

Both men looked relieved.

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After showers and a charm to ensure they were thoroughly clean, Lily, James, and Peter were clad in the simple linen shifts and outer robes with short sleeves that Dumbledore had provided. They stood together in the living room, barefoot. Sirius watched from the sofa.

Lily positioned Peter and James so that they faced each other and instructed them to cross their arms to take hold of each other's forearms, forming the symbol of infinity. Lily positioned herself next to where their arms intersected and placed her wand at the point of their joining. For a few moments, they closed their eyes and breathed deeply, feeling their magic flow from one to the other in conjunction with the beating of their hearts and the breath of their bodies. Then Lily began to chant.

*"Est vinculum unitatis.*

*Ex abundantia cordis, os tacita voce loquitur.*

*In spiritu et veritate cognito celanda est."*

Lily felt a surge of magic flow from her, through her wand and to the connection made by the two men in an infinite loop, growing stronger each time it passed round. A light yellow glow emanated from their conjoined arms.

"Peter Pettigrew, do you swear to loyalty?" James asked.

Lily noted a slight dip in the flow of energy, but it righted itself instantly.

"I swear to loyalty," Peter replied.

The glow intensified to a bright orange.

*"Ex loquitor, ex anima, ex spiritu, protecto fidelitate sit!"*

The light exploded around them in a shimmering burst of red and gold.

*"Consummatum est."*

The light receded and Lily stepped away. Slowly, as if it were difficult to do, Peter and James released their grips, and their arms fell back to their sides. They sank into armchairs, dazed.

"Well. That was bloody awesome," said Sirius, who had been watching from the sofa.

Lily gave Peter and James each a goblet of fresh, cold water. Then she drank as well, feeling horribly parched.

James pulled Lily to his lap and hugged her. "You were brilliant. Flitwick'd be damned proud."

"So how does this Fidelius work, anyway?" asked Sirius, who was looking about the room as if surprised he could see it.

"I think that if you were to leave and try to come back, you wouldn't be able to find the house, or us," explained Lily. "Can you tell us our address?"

Sirius thought and then said, "Sure! You live at... at...."

They all looked at each other and burst into laughter.

Sirius looked sheepish. "I guess it worked, then."

Lily turned to Peter. "Tell Sirius our address."

Peter looked at Sirius with an unreadable expression. "The Potters' live at number twenty-five, Beacon Lane, in Godric's Hollow."

"Twenty-five, Beacon Lane, Godric's Hollow. Got it!" Sirius smiled, clearly relieved to be in possession of this information once again.

Lily stood and retrieved a bit of parchment and a quill and handed them both to Peter. He looked at her quizzically.

"For Dumbledore. Write down our address."

She thought she saw a scowl cross Peter's face, but then he nodded, took the parchment and quill, and wrote out their address. When he was done, Lily sealed it with her wand and handed it to Sirius. "Will you see that Albus gets this, Sirius?"

Sirius tucked the parchment in his robes and patted it. "Done, lovely Lily!" he said with a wide grin. "So, I'm famished. Have you any food in that new kitchen of yours, or should I pop out for provisions?"

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Several hours and many cartons of Chinese takeaway later, Sirius and Peter left. Harry had been fed and bathed and tucked into his cot. Standing over their sleeping son, James and Lily held each other and gazed at Harry.

"It's a blessing that he's too young to know we're in the midst of this terrible war," whispered James. "All he knows is that we love him." He sighed deeply. "I wish that was enough to keep him safe."

Lily's hand reached for her locket. "It is enough, James. It's all he needs."

\*\*\*\*\*

A/N:

Real life fact: On October 10, 1981, a bomb attributed to the Irish Republican Army exploded in London, England, killing two civilians and injuring forty others outside Chelsea Army Barracks.

I know squat about Latin. But thanks to the University of Notre Dame's online Latin/English Dictionary, and helpful corrections by Agrarrevolution (*thank you!!*), here's my version and supposed translation of the Fidelius Charm:

*Est vinculum unitatis.*

This is the bond of unity.

*Ex abundantia cordis, os tacita voce loquitur.*

From the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks in silent voice.

*In spiritu et veritate cognito celanda est.*

In spirit and truth, knowledge shall be secret.

*Ex loquitor, ex anima, ex spiritu, protecto fidelitate sit!*

From the mouth, the heart, and the spirit, there shall be protection through loyalty!

*Consummatum est.*

It is completed.

Oh, and of course, we all know that Scrabble is a wizarding game, thanks to Martian HouseCat's fic by the same name.

My endless thanks to both capella\_black and songbook99, betas extraordinare!

## All Hallows Eve: 1981

*Chapter 23 of 24*

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

*This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.*

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

All Hallows Eve: 1981

Halloween evening at Hogwarts was, as usual, a lively, festive event. Enormous, extravagantly carved pumpkins filled the Great Hall. Illuminated Jack o' Lanterns floated above the House tables. Bats swooped overhead, and the house-elves outdid themselves by preparing a sumptuous and memorably scary feast. The ghosts, appreciating that this was a holiday honouring *spirits*, preened more than usual as they floated about. At the staff table, Albus Dumbledore smiled broadly as he watched the first-years, enjoying the sight of their faces lit up with excitement and wonder as they entered the Great Hall for their first Hogwarts Halloween.

It was also Severus' first Halloween at Hogwarts as a teacher. He'd never much cared for the usual holiday hoopla as a student, and he cared for it even less now. But protocol demanded his presence, and so he waited for the Headmaster to begin his welcoming speech, hoping that it would be shorter than usual. Severus was feeling strangely restless, although he wasn't sure why. He looked forward to finishing dinner quickly and retiring to the quiet of his quarters and... Severus groaned, remembering that he was scheduled for corridor patrol later this evening. He thought longingly of the glass of brandy and book that waited for him by his fire. Both would have to be postponed a bit longer.

\*\*\*\*\*

Peter grumbled as he straightened his flat and thought, not for the first time, how nice it would be to have his own house-elf. He didn't know why Sirius had invited himself over, but he couldn't find a reasonable excuse to stop him from coming. *The less I see of Sirius, the better*, he grumbled to himself. Magically cleaning the dishes that had piled up in his kitchen sink, he wondered when he would be called to his master's side next and how richly he would be rewarded for handing over his *friend*. He smiled, feeling smug. Perhaps getting a house-elf wasn't such a far-fetched idea after all. Yes, perhaps they'd *all* finally be getting what they deserved!

\*\*\*\*\*

James and Lily had taken great care to decorate their small home in Godric's Hollow for the holiday. They wanted to make it a memorable occasion to banish, for one night, the perpetual gloom that surrounded them. James had worked hard to carve the pumpkins, and Lily had conjured colourful wisps of smoke that wafted about the living room like small ghosts, making Harry laugh in delight.

James was sitting on the sofa, gazing intently at his son, who was occupied with practicing his standing up and falling down, with more of the latter and less of the former.

"What position d'you think he'll play?" James called out to Lily, who was in the kitchen fetching two more Butterbeers.

She rolled her eyes. This was one of her husband's favourite topics. "I'm sure he'll follow in your infamous footsteps and bring glory to Gryffindor someday," she replied as she entered the lounge, handing James his drink and sitting down beside him. "But I think Harry's keener to try walking before he gets on a broom."

"I can't wait to see him play though," James said with a happy sigh.

Harry had pulled himself to a standing position with the aid of an armchair. Cautiously, he let go of the chair and slowly turned around. His face shone with delight and surprise at finding himself still upright.

"Harry!" shouted James with glee, nearly upsetting the contents of his glass. "Good boy! You've done it!"

Harry beamed at hearing his father's praise and took a tentative step towards James.

Lily and James gasped and held their breath.

Harry didn't fall down, so he took another one.

"James! He's...he's walking!" Lily squealed.

James knelt down on the rug and held out his arms eagerly. "C'mon, Harry! You can do it, son!"

Wobbling, but determined to reach his father, Harry inched forward, step-by-step, his own chubby hands outstretched, until their fingertips touched. When they connected, James picked up Harry with a loud *WHOOP!* and threw him into the air. Father, son and mother laughed and clapped and hugged each other, joyful at Harry's simple yet astonishing accomplishment.

"Just brilliant, son!" said James as he nuzzled Harry's head. "Your first steps on Halloween! That should make it easy to remember, won't it?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Peter had just finished cleaning his bathroom when he heard a tapping sound. He stepped into his living room and saw a raven...*his* raven...fluttering in the night sky behind the glass. Peter's heart flew into his throat. He opened the window, and as soon as he took the object offered, the owl flew off. Peter stared at the Portkey in his hand...a child's rattle...and his mind began to race.

*Tonight. It's going to be tonight. Yes! This will be perfect. Sirius is coming. I'll leave him a note. It will work. Tonight!*

He quickly changed into some clean robes, then scratched out a note for Sirius and affixed it to the door. Sirius would see it, let himself in to the flat, and wait for him to return. Everything ready, Peter picked up the Portkey and tapped it with his wand. *"Take me."*

A tug, a lurch and a spin later, Peter found himself standing in a cave, softly lit by several cauldrons filled with spiralling fire. Looking around, and hearing the distant sound of waves crashing against rock, he recognised it as the same cave he'd been brought to that very first time. Typical of his summonses to Voldemort's side, no one was there. Peter waited, pacing back and forth, as jittery as a hexed pixie.

"Wormtail."

Peter spun on his heel, startled, and then flung himself at his master's feet. "I am at your service, my Lord. And I bring important news!" he added rapidly, excitement in his voice.

"Indeed? You may stand."

Peter scrambled to his feet and raised himself to his full height, mustering all his nerve and waited for permission to be granted.

Voldemort conjured a chair and sat down, his gaze level with Peter's. "Tell me your important news," he said finally.

Peter cleared his throat, trying to ignore the fact that his mouth had gone dry. "The P-Potters!" he proclaimed. It didn't come out as confidently as he'd hoped, though. "I know who their Secret-Keeper is, my Lord!"

Voldemort sat up sharply and hissed, "The Potters? Who is it that holds their secret?"

Peter took a deep breath and spat, "Sirius Black, my Lord." His pent-up hatred for Sirius unleashed itself in a torrent. "The blood traitor is a fool and easily manipulated. I'm sure the secret can be easily taken. In fact, I have arranged for him to be at my home tonight. At your command, he can be apprehended this very evening!"

There was a long pause as Voldemort considered this news. Peter waited, breathless.

"You give up your friend easily, Wormtail," the Dark Lord said slowly.

Peter snorted. "He is *not* my friend!" he said, his voice full of derision. "He is untrustworthy and dangerous. I give him to you gladly!"

Peter felt elated, as if freed from a heavy burden he had borne for so long. Sirius, who had belittled him for years, whose arrogance Peter despised, who had placed James in danger time after time, had to be *stopped*. The only solution, Peter was certain, was to make sure Sirius could do no more harm. Tonight...thanks to Peter...James would finally, truly be safe! Tonight, Sirius would be taken by Voldemort's servants and killed. Peter felt triumphant.

Voldemort regarded him with a curious expression.

He is *pleased*! Peter returned Voldemort's gaze with a proud smile, welcoming his master's approbation.

At once, as soon as Peter looked into those dark, red-tinged eyes, he felt the fingers of his master's mind brutally thrust into his own with alarming speed and force. Peter panicked, realising too late that he was trapped. He tried to look away but found he was frozen in place, unable to move, held prisoner in the grasp of Voldemort's Legilimency. Flashes of images flew by, one after another.

*Peter with Sirius and Remus at James' parents' house, riding the motorbike. Toasting Lily and James at their wedding. Dinner with Alicia. Peter at Phoenix Farm and the children's birthday celebration.*

Rough fingers continued to tear through his memories and feelings, searching, discarding. Digging deeper and deeper and deeper.

*No! Stop!* Peter tried desperately to block the assault, but his efforts were feeble and useless.

*Peter eavesdropping, hearing Dumbledore's plan to invoke the Fidelius Charm. Peter at Sirius' house, sharing whisky. Peter's arms intertwined with James'. A brilliant red glow. Lily's voice, 'Consummatus est...'*

"NO!"

The force of Voldemort's spell ending released him violently, sending him crashing to the ground, where he shivered, overwhelmed by the abrupt attack. He suddenly felt sick.

*What have I done!*

"It seems I misheard you, Wormtail," said Voldemort, in his most menacingly quiet manner. *"Who did you say is the Potters' Secret-Keeper?"*

Peter opened his mouth to speak, but the ability to summon words had deserted him. His mind scrambled frantically, trying to escape this nightmare. But then, as he saw the edge of Voldemort's lip curl, he realised with sickening clarity that there was no way out; he was trapped firmly in a web of his own devising. As he dangled helplessly before the spider contemplating its prey, Peter knew that any hopes he had harboured, any future he had imagined, had been shattered in one single, horrible moment.

Voldemort waited for an answer, his gaze unwavering.

Peter trembled, tears springing from his eyes. "I...I am the P-Potters' Secret-Keeper, my Lord," he rasped, the pain of saying these words tearing through him.

Voldemort stood and slowly advanced on Peter. "And who else knows this secret, my pet?"

"S-Sirius... and Dumbledore."

Voldemort was now so close that Peter could see the glint in his eyes.

"And now," Peter felt a gust of warm breath feather across the side of his face, "tell me where I can find them, Wormtail." The voice was silken. Peter felt it stroking him encouragingly.

For one fleeting moment, Peter thought to refuse. To die protecting James. But, in the next moment, he knew he could not do it. He was not brave. He would never be able to withstand the torture that would come before dying. He was a coward and a traitor.

Tears began to flow unfettered, and his heart broke with a resounding crack as Peter handed over the man he loved above all others, condemning him to certain death.

"The P-Potters live at twenty-five, B-Beacon Lane. In G-Godric's Hollow."

Peter collapsed, sobbing, on the damp floor of the cave. He felt his heart and his mind seize in a pain that he could not stop. After a time, he felt himself being lifted up by his master's hands. "You have done well, Wormtail," Voldemort said gently, stroking Peter's head. "You have made a great sacrifice and your efforts will be rewarded. Tonight, if you wish it, I will grant you the Mark."

Peter heard these words as if through a fog and he looked up, confused. "The M-Mark?" he spluttered.

Voldemort stood and pulled Peter to his feet. "You have been a loyal servant, Wormtail. I would like you to take your rightful place by my side. Will you take the Mark?"

*The Dark Mark? I don't want to be a Death Eater! But... I can't go back. I can never go back. I have nothing. They'll know I'm a traitor. Voldemort is all I have....*

He felt himself teeter on the edge of madness, his mind and emotions tossed together in a chaotic whirlwind. But within the vortex of his escalating hysteria, Peter instinctively grasped hold of that one small part of him that was clear and certain and solid: his instinctive ability to fight for his own survival, against all odds. So, with a supreme effort, Peter called upon that ability now, and forced himself to kneel before Voldemort once again.

"I...I'd be honoured to serve you in whatever way you desire, my Lord." The words came out in a harsh whisper, from an empty place in his soul.

"Excellent, Wormtail." Voldemort said sharply, and moved to the opening of the cave. "And to demonstrate my pleasure with your long and devoted service, I will gather my Inner Circle to bear witness to your elevation." As Voldemort directed the tip of his wand over his head and towards the sea, his voice rang out. *"Morsmordre!"*

Together, master and servant watched skull and snake take form in the night sky, and the shimmering reflection of the Mark dance on the water below. Then, returning to his seat, the Dark Lord smiled indulgently at Peter as they awaited the arrival of his faithful Death Eaters.

\*\*\*\*\*

The pain seared through his arm sharply, and Severus watched helplessly as the phial he'd been holding dropped and shattered on the ground.

"Severus! Are you all right?" Poppy Pomfrey rushed to his side and vanished the remains of the potion and the phial with her wand.

A group of Slytherins had decided it would be a lark to add a bit of whisky to their pumpkin juice in celebration of the holiday. After a few too many glasses of 'juice', however, several students found themselves on the verge of alcohol poisoning, and the new Potions master found himself escorting three of the idiots to the hospital wing. Since anti-intoxication potion was not a routine part of the infirmary's formulary, Severus had been forced to fetch the remaining phial of the potion from his own, personal stores.

And now, with the Dark Mark burning and the last bit of potion gone, Severus had to return to his laboratory to brew a new batch.

"I'm fine," Severus answered the matron through gritted teeth. "It won't take long...an hour at most...to prepare more." He swept out of the hospital wing at a run. The fire in his arm would not abate until he appeared at the Dark Lord's side. Since he'd taken up at Hogwarts, he found that his master was mostly 'forgiving' of Severus' tardiness when called. He hoped fervently that tonight would be one of those nights.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sweating, dizzy and disoriented after the ritual, Peter was dimly aware that he was being helped by several of the masked Death Eaters who had gathered to watch him receive the Dark Mark. One helped him into a chair. Another produced a salve and poured a coating on the inside of his left arm, which was still raw and throbbing. A third helped him into his robes. A fourth handed him a goblet of water to drink. They moved in silence, with an ease and competency that spoke of long experience.

When their ministrations were complete, they all stepped back into a semi-circle. The cave was silent, filled only with the sound of waves crashing against the rocks below. After a long moment, Peter felt another, more familiar, hand stroking his head.

"We welcome our newest servant, Peter Pettigrew, also known to us as 'Wormtail', into our Circle," the Dark Lord declared to the gathering. "He has been rewarded for his long, personal service and tonight, for bringing the Potters to me."

Excited murmurs broke out among the group. *"The Potters?" "They've been found?"*

"Will we go for them soon, my Lord?" asked one with a deep, resonant voice.

Voldemort held up his hand and the cave fell quiet. "I desire to take care of these troublemakers...personally. Two of you, however, have earned the honour of attending me in this task. One is Wormtail and the other...well...the other appears to have been detained."

"My Lord," piped up another voice, this one clearly female, "what of the Longbottoms?"

Voldemort nodded thoughtfully. "While I no longer believe they are a threat, they are...have been...close to the Potters, and may yet be useful. You and your husband will continue to keep an eye on them.

"Now, I am eager to depart. You are all dismissed."

With a wave of his master's hand, the air about Peter moved with the twisting and swirling of many robes, and the crowd of Death Eaters Disappeared.

Peter's head was starting to clear. He must have been given an Invigorating Draught, he thought dimly. Suddenly, he found a parchment and quill being thrust into his hands. He looked at them in confusion.

"Although I expect Severus to appear shortly, I feel the need for haste," Voldemort said with evident impatience. "With my prize so close, I wish to claim it as soon as possible. You will write down the Potters' address, Wormtail, and I will charm the parchment to be found by Severus when he arrives."

The jumble of his masters' words began to make sense in his mind. Severus? Snape? *Snivellus*? Was a Death Eater? Voldemort wanted Peter to go with him to... *No! Gods, no!*

His hands shaking violently under the glare of Voldemort's scrutiny, Peter wrote down the Godric's Hollow address. He desperately tried to think of some way out of accompanying his master. But no idea came. Nothing would spare him. There was no escape.

Voldemort took the parchment from Peter's hands, folded it and sealed it magically. With a swish of his wand, it hovered in mid-air, surrounded by a bright yellow glow. Then the Dark Lord turned back to Peter, a wide smile gracing his altered face and his eyes glittering brightly. Peter had never seen him so happy.

"It is time, Wormtail. Let's pay your friends a visit, shall we?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Lily had been asleep on the sofa when the sudden, shrill whine of the alarm echoed loudly in the lounge. The sounds of Harry crying only added to the confusion. She

jumped to her feet and felt a bit disoriented as she noticed James peeking through the curtains with Harry in his arms. Even in the dim light from the fireplace, she could see that his face had gone pale.

"What...?" she started to ask. He turned from the window and thrust the baby into her arms.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off!"

Cold, icy dread spread through Lily's body, even as she stroked Harry's back, trying to soothe him. "James... I..." But her mind was blank. She'd envisioned this scene a million times and yet now.... Holding her son tightly in one arm, she flung the other around her husband and kissed him. "I love you."

James nodded, fear and love and determination etched in his face. "Go, Lily!"

The plan was for Lily to run with Harry out the back door, past the Apparation barrier and Disapparate to the Farm. She had just turned to run when she remembered, in horror, that her wand was upstairs in Harry's room! Lily shot one last look at James, who was adding more protective spells to the house, even as the handle of the front door started to turn. Lily tore up the stairs, flung herself into Harry's room and slammed the door shut. Harry was still crying as she placed him in his cot and scanned the room frantically for her wand.

"It's okay, Harry," she said, trying to keep the fear from her voice. "Everything will be okay!" But it wasn't okay. It had all gone terribly wrong.

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Peter whimpered as he moved up the Potters' garden path, several paces behind his master so as not to be heard.

"His efforts at protection are feeble," the Dark Lord cackled as he pointed his wand at the Potters' front door. With a muttered spell, the door handle opened easily, and Voldemort walked into the house with a wide smile, as if he had arrived for afternoon tea.

There was an immediate onslaught of spells that ricocheted through the front room. Peter cowered on the path, as the reflection of flashing lights glowed from the inside, and the clashing sounds of his master's high-pitched laughter and James' defiant, challenging voice rang out. He stood shaking, frozen to the spot. He couldn't go in. He couldn't do it. He couldn't bear to see the look on James' face.

Peter covered his face with his hands. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry," he chanted in endless repetition, his body weaving back and forth in misery.

A flash of green light was followed by a silence so sudden that Peter jumped.

*No no no no no no no no!*

He pushed his way into the house and saw James, unmoving at the bottom of the stairs, as the Dark Lord stepped over his body. Voldemort didn't even glance at Peter as he continued up the stairs to the landing above.

Peter knelt down by James and stared at him. There was a sudden crash overhead, but he hardly noticed it.

James' arms and legs were set at odd angles. *That's not right*, thought Peter with a frown. He straightened out James' limbs until they appeared somewhat normal.

*There! That's better!*

But it wasn't better. There was something else wrong! Peter screwed up his face as he tried to figure out what it was. Then it came to him: his glasses! He looked around and found them lying on the floor, a few feet from where James lay. Peter picked them up, cleaned them with the edge of his robe and placed them back on James' face. Then he felt in his pockets for a handkerchief and lovingly wiped off some blood that ran from James' forehead. He tried to push some hair out of James' eyes, and he laughed when it bounced back into the same unruly mess.

"Sorry, Prongs," Peter giggled, "but your hair is just hopeless!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Where was it? It wasn't on the changing table where she thought she'd put it. Her heart raced madly and she gasped for air as though she'd been running...

Lily's heart lurched as she heard James yelling, and the sounds of destruction coming from the room below. A cackle of high-pitched laughter rang out, making Lily want to retch.

*WHERE IS MY BLASTED WAND?*

At last! She saw the edge of it poking out between the seat and the back of the rocking chair next to Harry's cot.

She grabbed it up and quickly pointed it towards the door. "*Colloportus!*"

Lily rushed back to her son, hoping beyond all hope that there might still be a way out. *The window!* she thought suddenly. She could open the window, escape and send a Patronus for help! But as she leaned over to pick up Harry, a terrible silence descended over the house. A horrible chill swept through her body.

"JAMES!" she screamed, and as she whirled around, the door to the bedroom was blasted off its hinges and fell to the floor in front of her with an ear-splitting crash.

*"Expelliarmus!"*

Her wand was gone. She looked up to see it in the hand of Lord Voldemort, who stood in the now-open doorway smiling...a ghastly, horrible smile.

Lily's breaths came in short, harsh pants, each one lancing her heart with pain. Tears fell from her eyes as she reached back to make sure Harry was there, the feel of his warm body giving her courage. She straightened and stood like a sentinel between her son and the man who meant to kill him.

"It will be all right, Harry," she whispered. "Don't move, love." Against all reason, Harry's cries receded into a soft whimpers.

With one hand still on Harry, Lily's other had reached reflexively for the locket that hung beneath her jumper, feeling the cool, reassuring weight of it against her skin.

"Mrs. Potter. At long last!"

Lily noticed the wizard's breathing was laboured, and even in her grief, she felt a jolt of pride that James had fought hard. She knew he'd done everything he could. Now it was up to her. It was simple, really. She just had to make sure the magic was triggered.

"Yes, Mr. Potter put up a good fight," Voldemort said as if reading her thoughts. "But the fight is over now." He began to move towards the cot. "You know what I want."

*Kill me, you inhuman monster!*

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!" she pleaded, planting her feet firmly on the carpet.

Lily concentrated with all her might and braced herself as Voldemort lifted his wand, pointing it at her heart.

*Yes, you bastard, kill me!*

Voldemort wavered; lifting his head and his wand as if he'd just caught a whiff of something... wrong.

"Stand aside, you silly girl... stand aside, now!"

Lily fought her panic. Had he sensed it? Did he know? She closed her eyes to avoid his seeking gaze and to regain her concentration. When she opened them, her eyes were full of tears and her voice shook with racking sobs.

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me!"

Voldemort tried to push her out of the way, but she summoned all her strength and pushed him back. He stumbled and looked astonished.

"Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy!" she begged in desperation.

"You are a fool if you are willing to trade your life for another," Voldemort hissed. For a moment, his eyes bore into hers, and she suddenly felt the terrible sharp pain, sensing another child... another time... another place. But there was no time left to consider its meaning.

"Take me instead!" she cried again, demanding, pleading. Daring.

"I'll take you both!" thundered Voldemort as he raised his wand once again.

A sense of relief and calm came over her as she reached for and felt the soft hair of her young son for the last time.

*I love you, Harry!*

As the Killing Curse was uttered, Lily's heart rang out, bursting with love for Harry, for James, for her parents. Holding her love tightly, she felt buoyant and unafraid, even as a flash of brilliant green light erupted from the tip of Voldemort's wand.

\*\*\*\*\*

Wormtail was squatting next to James, muttering and rocking, when another flash of green light at the top of the stairs jarred him back to attention. His master! He leapt over James and ran up the stairs to the demolished doorway, taking in the scene before him.

Lily was lying on the floor in a heap. *She's dead, too*, Wormtail thought in a detached sort of way. It was a strange sight to see Lord Voldemort towering over baby Harry, looking at the child in amusement. Harry was standing in his cot, looking back up at the Dark Lord. Wormtail idly observed that, with Voldemort standing in front of him, Harry couldn't see his mother slumped on the floor. That's probably a good thing, he thought approvingly.

"Wormtail," said his master evenly as he continued to stare at the child, "you have come just in time to see my enemy destroyed."

*Enemy?* Wormtail was confused. He'd thought James and Lily were his enemies. But, Harry? What did he mean?

Wormtail stared at James' son and was surprised when Harry turned and met his eyes.

"Eter!" cried Harry.

Wormtail's heart clenched as he looked at the baby, who was holding out his hand...reaching towards *him*! Then he noticed something odd; there seemed to be a faint reddish glow around the boy. It was pulsating a bit, like the echo of a heartbeat. Wormtail shook his head and blinked. It was probably just a trick of the light.

Voldemort was now bending over Lily. Wormtail couldn't see what he was doing. He didn't dare ask. After a moment, the Dark Lord straightened up, holding a golden, heart-shaped object in his hand.

"That's Lily's locket!" Wormtail exclaimed, recognising it as the one that Lily had taken to wearing lately. It was open and appeared empty.

His master held it up as if appraising its worth. "Yes, I think this will serve my purpose nicely," he said with a smile, then broke into another cackling laugh. "A memento of his mother's will be perfect! Wormtail, you will hold the receptacle until I ask for it." Voldemort held out the locket by its chain, and Wormtail took it.

He turned it over in his hand, surprised by its warmth, and wondered why there was nothing inside it. When he looked up again, he saw with alarm that Voldemort was pointing his wand at Harry's forehead.

*No! Not the baby! Not James' son! No, please! There's no need to...* But the stuttering words remained in Wormtail's head; his mouth was incapable of uttering them aloud.

He watched, mutely, as his master smiled, eyes flashing red, and spoke the curse one more time.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

Wormtail gasped as the light of the Killing Curse hit Harry squarely on the forehead. But instead of the baby falling over, something else very odd happened. The baby seemed to freeze as the reddish glow that Wormtail had noticed before appeared once again, enveloping Harry's body. There was a flash and, as the glare receded, Harry stood illuminated by an iridescent, golden light.

Voldemort staggered back, confused and alarmed. Wormtail looked back and forth, from the baby to his master. In a heartbeat, the golden light gathered itself into the jagged wound that glistened on Harry's forehead, concentrated into a single beam, and shot out from Harry like a knife, slicing through the Dark Lord, who fell to his knees with a terrible scream.

Wormtail found himself flat against the wall and watched in open-mouthed, fascinated horror as the outlines of Lord Voldemort began to blur, his features and limbs appearing to fracture and melt. A cold wind seemed to have blown into the room, catching up the pieces of the Dark Lord and transforming him into...something no longer human. Elements coalesced together in a dark funnel, gathering speed as it turned rapidly in upon itself.

The whirlwind that held the remains of the Dark Lord swept around the room once and flew out through the window into the night sky, a high-pitched scream trailing in its wake.

\*\*\*\*\*

Severus Apparated into a grove of trees that faced a street of simple houses with nice lawns and picket fences. His white-knuckled fingers were clutching a piece of parchment tightly in his hands, and he frantically scanned the houses looking for number twenty-five, cursing himself for his delay in getting here.

A burst of green light flashed from a second story window a short distance away. Severus knew, with heart-rending certainty, that he'd found the house he'd been looking for.

Pulse hammering, he pulled the Invisibility Cloak out from his robes and covered himself. He sprinted towards the house, even knowing that he was too late.

He stopped before the fence that surrounded the house, catching his breath and listening. Suddenly, a horrible high-pitched sound emanated from above, and he felt something...a foul-smelling gust of wind...whip past his head. He gave it only a moment's thought as he walked through the open gate and down the path, trying not to make a sound. Whatever had happened here tonight, Severus wanted to remain invisible for as long as possible.

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Harry's screams finally brought Wormtail to his senses, the locket he'd been holding having fallen from his hands, forgotten. He crept towards the baby, wailing in his cot, unable to make sense of what had happened or how Harry could still be alive.

*Well, he won't be for much longer,* Wormtail thought sadly, watching the blood pour out of the wound in Harry's head. He looked away quickly, not wanting to think about Harry any more. His eyes landed on a wand. Yew, with a phoenix feather core. His master's wand. He bent over to pick it up, stroking it for a moment, and then stowed it away, almost absentmindedly, in his robes.

Wormtail stepped out of the room onto the landing and surveyed the scene: Lily in a heap on the bedroom floor; Harry screaming in his cot, blood everywhere; and James, lying at the bottom of the stairs. Wormtail winced, wishing that the baby would stop screaming so he could think. He had to think!

*Think think think think think....*

The Death Eaters knew he had come here with his master. They'd want to know what happened, where the Dark Lord had gone. What could he possibly tell them? That he'd been turned into a vortex of Dark matter by a baby who didn't die? Wormtail snorted and laughed. Then he thought of Sirius, and his laughter died in his throat. Sirius would have been by his flat by now. When Wormtail didn't show up, he'd leave. Where would he go? He'd be suspicious. Perhaps he'd come here! He might be here any minute! Suddenly frightened, Wormtail instinctively changed into his Animagus form and scurried down the stairs, out the open door, heading for the darkness of the trees across the street, as fast as his little feet would carry him.

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The screams from the house tore through Severus, and his heart leapt into his throat.

*Lily?*

He stood immobile at the door, listening carefully. No, it was a baby's cry. Lily's son. Harry. There were no other voices, no other footsteps. Severus stepped carefully through the already-open door. He was greeted by the sight of James Potter, lying at the foot of the stairs, as if napping, except that his eyes were wide open, dull and unseeing.

Severus had often fantasised about James being dead. He'd imagined himself being the one to kill him. Yet, seeing him now, actually lifeless, Severus felt only disgust. The man had been incapable of protecting his family. His wife. *Lily*.

His eyes glanced up, and he moved cautiously up the stairs, barely noticing the small rat shoot past him, headed in the opposite direction.

As he stepped into the bedroom, Severus froze. He took in Lily's figure on the floor and Harry's thrashing and wailing. Had Voldemort gone? Had he killed Lily and James and left the boy? It wasn't possible! It didn't make sense! But the boy's cries forestalled any more thinking about unanswerable questions.

Severus tossed aside the Invisibility Cloak and moved swiftly towards the cot. Assessing the wound on Harry's forehead, he cast a spell to knit the flesh together. This staunched the bleeding for the moment, but the oddly shaped injury kept pulsating, and Severus knew the boy was far from safe. He was pale and his cries were growing weaker. He needed blood...and soon.

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Hidden safely amid the thick trees, Wormtail returned to his human form. He paced angrily, thinking about Sirius. Sirius should have been the one to die! It had all gone spectacularly wrong and Wormtail couldn't understand how. Yet Sirius was, once again, miraculously safe! The gall of it turned to bile that gnawed through his stomach like poison. Sirius was alive and Wormtail was in danger! They'd *all* be looking for him...the Order, the Aurors, the Death Eaters! He had to act fast or he'd be dead or in Azkaban within hours.

Wormtail stopped pacing and stood looking at the house, the door still ajar. He realised, in horror, that there was evidence he had been there tonight! The boy. The boy was still alive. If Sirius showed up soon, Harry might live! He would remember. The boy had recognised him!

Wormtail's heart fluttered so fast he thought he might faint. He took deep breaths. He forced himself to remain calm. He stared at the house, desperately trying to think of a solution. His eyes moved from the roof of the house to the flowerbeds under the windows and then to the side of the house. He noticed a tall pipe poking out of the ground. He knew about those pipes. He knew them very well, in fact. He was paid to know about Muggle gas lines. They often affected the Floo Network, after all. Relief washed over Wormtail as he lifted his wand, pointed it at a section of the yard where he knew a connection lay hidden under the ground, and smiled.

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Severus moved rapidly, afraid that Voldemort or other Death Eaters might reappear at any minute. First, he lifted Lily gently and placed her into the rocking chair; her head lolling on her shoulder, like a rag doll. Kneeling next to her, Severus felt compelled to push the hair out of her face, and when he did, he was startled to see that there was a hint of a smile on her face. Her eyes were closed. If he let himself, Severus could imagine her waking up at any moment and smiling. Her body was still warm as he touched her face. He felt the odd sensation of tears falling onto the hand that held hers... *No!* He couldn't do this... think about this now. He had to get them all out quickly.

He stood and picked Harry up from his cot as gently as he could. He was surprised how small and light the child felt. With Harry in one arm, Severus leaned over Lily to put his other arm around her shoulder, so that mother and son were cradled together in his chest as he readied to Disapparate. But just as his grip on them tightened, a sudden hot blast pushed him forward, and a blinding white light flashed violently before everything went dark.

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A/N: Some of Lily and James' dialogue in this chapter is taken directly from JKR's **Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban**, pages 179 and 240, Scholastic paperback, 1999.

While designing the arc of Peter's character in this story, I was excited to find that the wonderful HP essayist JOdel had done a lot of thinking about Peter Pettigrew that supported my own theories. However, it is necessary to credit JOdel with the final exquisite plot twist of Peter's scheme against Sirius and how Voldemort discovers the truth. I hope that I've done it justice in this story. You can read it for yourself in her Red Hen essay, *Case in Point: the Pettigrew Puzzle*: <http://www.redhen-publications.com/Pettigrew.html>

# From the Ashes and Epilogue

Chapter 24 of 24

Set in the time of Voldemort's first rise, this is a tale of choices and consequences, darkness and light, love and hatred, laughter and tears, and of trust and betrayal. Lily Evans, Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew each provide a piece of the puzzle and, by telling their individual stories, the whole is revealed. By the time we reach that fateful night in Godric's Hollow, we learn that truth is neither black nor white, and that we are all vulnerable to evil.

*This novel-length fic was completed before the release of DH. Illustrations are by anemonesque.*

~ 2008 Quill to Parchment Runner-up: Best Marauder Era Fic ~

## From the Ashes

## and Epilogue

## Severus

Consciousness returned slowly. First he smelled smoke, followed quickly by pain. A dim memory of an explosion pricked through the fog in his mind. Severus couldn't open his eyes; they seemed sealed shut. From long practice, he inventoried his body for injuries before trying to move. It hurt to breathe. His ribs... perhaps a lung. One leg seemed to be twisted and throbbed with pain. His back was on fire. His arms seemed... all right. His left arm was pinned between the ground and his torso, and he could feel something soft beneath his hands. His head was pounding, and he was certain that, at the very least, he had suffered a concussion. He felt the soft thing in his hand shift and heard a whimper.

*Harry.*

In a rush, the fog cleared and it all came back. With an enormous effort, he forced his eyes to open. He was lying on his side with the baby tucked under his chin. In front of him lay an expanse of uneven, smoking rubble. He glanced up to see half of the bedroom roof over his head intact. The other half that had been connected to the window was gone, and the room itself seemed to have shifted to ground level. The glow of the stars and the moon overhead cast their light upon what remained of number twenty-five, Beacon Lane. Parts of the house were still on fire, and Severus wondered how they hadn't all been obliterated by the blast. His free arm reached for and found his wand. He uttered a spell that created a large, transparent bubble around him and the child to protect them against any remaining fire and smoke until he could gather his strength to do more.

Slowly, he shifted Harry into his free arm and tried to push himself up by the other. A razor-sharp pain fired from his shoulder and serrated down his back, and another screamed from his broken leg. Severus gritted his teeth and forced himself upright, his breathing ragged. He pointed his wand towards his twisted leg and muttered another spell, which seemed to set the broken bone back into place and allowed him to sit up. Permitting himself only a moment to recover from the shock of moving, Severus checked the baby. He was either asleep or unconscious, but he was, at least, still alive. The wound in the child's head had reopened, but the blood had coagulated, sealing it for the moment. It seemed that the boy sustained only minor cuts from the blast itself, having been protected from the worst of it by Severus' body.

With another effort of determined will, Severus unclasped his cloak and tore it from his blood-stained torso. He scrunched it up until it resembled a dark nest, laid it on the patch of ground where he'd just been, and placed Harry on top. The boy never stirred. Staring at him, Severus wondered how this baby had managed to cheat death twice in his short life. It occurred to him, not without irony, that he was responsible for the first attempt on Harry's life as well as the reason the boy had survived the second. As he stared, the boy's eyes fluttered open, and Severus' breath hitched as the light of the moon glittered off a pair of emerald eyes for just a moment before they closed again. He knew those eyes. They belonged to Lily.

Lily....

*Where is she?* Ignoring the pain in his back, Severus pushed himself to his feet. He had taken only one step when he felt himself slip. He threw his weight forward to provide a counterbalance and steadied himself. He moved carefully after that, pushing aside debris with his feet as he looked for her. He felt the stirrings of panic. *She has to be here!*

Finally, in the shadows, he caught a glimpse of auburn hair. Stumbling towards it, he was appalled to see her covered by clumps of shattered wall, dirt, and stone. He began to dig the debris away with his fingers, working relentlessly until she was finally released from the remains of what had been her home. His hands bleeding, he just wrapped his arms firmly around her, pulling her free.

Severus laid her broken body in his lap and, with the sleeve of his robe, attempted to brush the blood and dirt out of her face. When he had done all he could, he just looked at her, stroking her face gently. He didn't need the magic of Legilimency to feel his memories unfurl and wrap around them both.

The day when she decided to make him her Potions partner. Taking her, in a panic, to the infirmary after a potions accident. Sitting in the sun, watching her write in his mother's textbook when she dubbed him *'The Half-Blood Prince.'* Her easy laughter. Her sharp wit. Her caring about *him*. Defending him. Accepting him for who he was. Being his friend.

The ache in his heart widened, and he let it. He gathered Lily's body up in an embrace and held her tightly in death, as he had never done while she lived. She had been the one bright light in his life, and he had callously snuffed it out. His tears began to fall freely. The pain in what remained of his damaged soul rumbled deep within him and forced its way out, until a keening cry erupted, renting the still night air. He cried out for the hideous loss of the only person who had, without reservation, without expectation of anything in return, shown him genuine, loving kindness. He cursed himself, for he had betrayed her, assuring her destruction even before the final curse was thrown. He had killed the one person for whom he'd ever felt love.

He rocked Lily in his arms and wept for a long, long time. Finally, the tears ebbed until only a dull, throbbing ache remained. He wiped his face and gently laid Lily down. Then, from the crucible of his grief, he felt something new spark and take form within him. Still shaking, he pulled himself to his knees and, taking out his wand, he touched its tip to his chest, over his heart.

"I vow to you, Lily Evans Potter," he said with quiet but fierce and resolute determination. "I swear on your soul that I will fight the evil that has devoured me and destroyed you. I will sacrifice my life to do whatever it takes to right the wrong I have committed against you and so many others. I pledge myself in this. Dumbledore can take my life and use it as he will. My debt to you will never be fully paid until my own life ends." He touched the end of his wand to her chest. "To this I vow."

There was no spark from his wand. He didn't expect to see one; it wasn't possible to share a magical vow with one who was dead. But he was startled when a sudden flash of light burst over his head. He looked up and was astonished to see Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix, fly down in a flutter of red and gold wings and land on his shoulder.

Severus froze, uncertain as to what this meant or what to do. Then, he began to feel warmth flow down his back, a wetness soaking through his robes. He'd been ignoring the pain there, but now noticed it lift. He found it easier to straighten his body, and his breathing eased. *It was the phoenix*, he realised suddenly. *Phoenix tears!*

"Severus."

It was a whisper in the quiet of the night, and Severus thought he'd heard it in his mind.

"I'm here, Severus."

He shot to his feet, and Fawkes took to the air, flying towards the source of the voice and landed on the shoulder of an elderly wizard in purple robes. Albus Dumbledore stood in the midst of the destruction, looking intently at Severus over his half-moon spectacles.

"I'm sorry, sir," was all he could say. He dropped his head, unable to meet the Headmaster's eyes.

"I know you are, my boy," he said gently. "Fawkes only goes to the aid of those truly loyal to me."

Severus looked up, one eyebrow cocked with scepticism.

"It's true, and I know it now with absolute certainty. As do you. And I am grateful to have it, Severus. We will need you."

He could only nod as he watched the Headmaster survey the scene around him. Dumbledore's eyes eventually fell upon the sleeping form of Harry Potter. The old man bent over, picked up the boy, and gently rocked him in his arms. Staring at the child, Dumbledore placed one gnarled finger on the wound disfiguring the child's forehead and muttered. After a moment, he removed it.

"Curious," was all he said.

"What do you wish me to do?" asked Severus, wanting suddenly to be busy, to have a purpose. To leave this place.

Dumbledore sighed, and Severus was surprised to see him place Harry back onto the robe-nest.

"There will be much to do before the end of this day. For now, I need a place...a refuge...that is unknown by anyone. It would also be helpful if it were stocked with some store of useful potions. Might you know of such a place?"

*He knows, of course*, Severus thought with a grimace. *He always knows.*

"Yes," he replied heavily. "I have a home not far from here that would suit that need."

"Excellent!" said Dumbledore. He smiled, but it was a dimmer sort of smile than usually graced the Headmaster's face when he was pleased. "I'd like you to go there and prepare whatever you think will be helpful to restore young Harry to health. He's been through a great deal tonight, and he needs our help."

"Shall I take the boy with me?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No. I don't think it safe or wise to Apparate with him in his condition. Especially not knowing how he survived the Killing Curse or what it may have done to him."

If Severus thought there was nothing left in his life that could shock him, he was wrong. The Headmaster's words rocked him so strongly he staggered backwards.

"Survived? B...but... how...?" he stammered.

"I have no idea," said Dumbledore with a shrug, "but it seems as if our young Harry has refused to die. And even stranger, Voldemort appears to be... gone."

"Gone?" he said aghast, hardly able to take in this information. "But..."

Dumbledore waved his hand. "There isn't time for speculation now, Severus; it's important that we move quickly. The Unplottable spell on this house will wear off by sunrise, and Muggles will be swarming all over it. I want to move Lily and James to a safe place before then. And as for Harry, I gave my Secret-Keeper's note revealing this location to Hagrid, and I expect him to arrive here shortly. I must be off, so I'd be obliged if you could direct Hagrid to your seaside home, and he'll bring young Harry to you. Later, probably tomorrow evening, Hagrid is to bring the boy to his aunt's home in Surrey. It's all been arranged."

Severus started in alarm. "Headmaster, I do not wish my involvement in this..." he gestured awkwardly, "to be known." The thought that his colleagues at Hogwarts might know of his part in this tragedy was appalling. Hagrid was a good soul, but not known for his discretion.

"There's nothing for it I'm afraid, Severus. Hagrid needs the directions, and they must come from you. All right?"

Severus nodded, even as he began to consider ways around this dilemma.

The Headmaster leant over and picked up a piece of shimmering fabric. It was the Invisibility Cloak that Severus had nearly tripped on. Dumbledore folded it neatly and tucked it into his robes without saying a word.

"I think all will be well, Severus," said Dumbledore as he placed a hand gently on Severus' arm. There was a look of trust in the old man's eyes that he never thought he'd see there. "She didn't die in vain," Dumbledore said softly.

There was a flare and the phoenix disappeared. Dumbledore followed and, Severus noted, Lily's body had gone as well.

Severus scavenged about the ruins until he found two objects that he quickly transfigured into a parchment and a self-inking quill. He wrote out the address and directions to him home on the parchment, folded it and wrote *Rubeus Hagrid* on the front. He cast the same spell that Voldemort had used on the note left for him in the cave and affixed it to the robes covering Harry. He had just finished casting a Disillusionment Charm on himself when there was a *pop!* behind him. He turned to see Hagrid, clutching an old shoe that he had obviously used as a Portkey. The enormous man burst into tears as he took in the scene before him.

"Find the boy, you fool!" Severus muttered under his breath. He didn't want to leave until Hagrid had the child in hand.

Finally, he saw Hagrid's eyes light upon the glowing note. Severus breathed a sigh of relief as he watched the man carefully pick up the very small boy and enfold him in his giant arms.

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## Wormtail

When Wormtail had stopped by his mother's house in the middle of the night to hide his master's wand, he had a moment of regret that he wouldn't be able to say goodbye to her. He felt a bit badly that she'd be upset when he'd gone, but there was nothing for it now. Maybe someday... well... he had other important things to think about first.

He remained in his Animagus form when he returned to his flat, just in case Sirius was still there. Relieved when he wasn't, Wormtail changed back and scratched out a note to Padfoot.

*Sorry I missed you earlier. Something came up. I should be home by eight o'clock in the morning. Perhaps we can catch up later today?*

*Wormtail*

Wormtail summoned his owl and sent it off to deliver the missive. *That should do the job*, he thought. Then he changed back into his rat self and prepared for the day ahead. He had some scouting to do and, unlike the disaster of the night before, this had to go exactly as planned. There was no room for error.

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Wormtail had never thought much about his neighbourhood before, and now that he'd stopped to watch, he was surprised to see how many Muggles actually lived there. It was especially busy in the mornings, with so many of them bustling off to work. As he sat on the low wall on the corner of the intersection between his street and the one that ran perpendicular to it, Wormtail wondered idly what sort of work Muggles actually did. From this vantage point, he also had a clear view of his own front door, and it was not quite eight o'clock when he saw Sirius Black Apparate into the alleyway that ran alongside his building.

*Right on time, mate*, he thought grimly, glad that Padfoot was the predictable sort.

Checking on the location of the gas main that ran through this intersection, Wormtail stood up and walked the few steps across the pavement to the corner. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small package and unwrapped it. Inside was the bloody stump of what had been his index finger. It had hurt like bloody hell when he'd sliced it off, and he was extremely glad that he'd had a pain potion on hand to take the edge off.

Standing as tall as he could, he yelled, "It's Sirius Black!" at the top of his lungs, pointing with his left hand, the finger he'd cut off held tightly by the others on his right.

Some people stopped, confused, while others ignored him, pushing on to their destinations. Sirius heard him, though. Just as he reached the front door of Wormtail's building, he turned on his heel, looking for the source of the voice. Wormtail saw Sirius find his mark and run hell-bent towards him. As soon as Sirius reached the edge of the pavement, Wormtail, still pointing, started shouting again, shaking in the face of vivid images of James and Lily lying dead stirring his anger and pushing it to the surface.

"It's him! He's a *murderer*! He killed the Potters!"

Sirius was livid, his dark eyes full of hatred.

"Why did you do it, Peter?" Sirius cried in anguish, his eyes wild and his voice pleading. Wormtail saw him struggle, not wanting to pull out his wand in the midst of the crowd of Muggles that had begun to gather.

"He did it!" Wormtail said, his tears flowing freely. "Lily and James, Sirius! How could you?" he sobbed.

This was, as Wormtail had predicted, too much for Sirius, who reached inside his robes. Wormtail was ready. Just as Sirius raised his wand, Wormtail pointed his own behind his back and muttered, "*Reducto!*"

Time seemed to freeze for the smallest second before the explosion ripped through the street behind him. And in that second, Wormtail dropped the severed finger, turned into the rat, and dropped through the opening of the sewer grating at his feet. He fell and landed in a murky pool below the street, then shook himself a bit. Turning to get his bearings, he took off at a run down the sewer, leaving the sounds of screams and cries of terror behind him.

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## Severus

It wasn't until mid-morning that Severus was able to dispatch the annoying half-giant from his house. With Harry tended to and asleep, his own body ached longingly for a few hours of sleep himself before the Headmaster was scheduled to arrive. The infernal, oversized creature, however, wouldn't stop *talking*!

Finally, Severus explained that, sadly, his own kitchen was not stocked for visitors, and since Hagrid must surely be hungry, he might consider stopping by a lovely wizarding pub that was within flying distance. Sure enough, the gamekeeper's eyes lit up.

"I am feelin' a bit hungry, now tha' yeh mention it. Good idea, Professor!" he said in his booming voice. "I'll take the motorbike over fer a bit. Sirius Black leant it to me, yeh know. Poor Sirius. He was hard done in las' night." Hagrid sighed deeply for a moment, and then smiled.

"Hey, now! I wonder if the folks at that pub will have heard yet about You-Know-Who bein' gone and Harry survivin' that curse. Who could have imagined such a thing, eh, Professor?"

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Later that night, Severus sat on the porch with a glass of whisky and gazed out at the sea below. The moon was high and bright, just as it had been the night before, its light reflecting off the water. It was the same moon, the same stars, and yet they seemed so very different.

Dumbledore had come and gone quickly that afternoon, taking a strand of memory from the child and performing some other spells that Severus didn't bother to ask about. His own tasks to remedy Harry's wounds had been rather straightforward. Severus considered that if there were ever a day to feel happy, this would have been it, to be released...finally...from his master's service. Yet, the day had been difficult for him.

It was being in the child's presence that had set him on edge. Every time Severus looked at the boy he saw the shock of unruly black hair that reminded him bitterly of his father. He imagined the boy at Hogwarts in a few years' time and wondered how it would feel to have a miniature version of James Potter sitting in his class. His stomach churned at the thought. And yet, every time the boy looked at him, it was Lily's eyes that he saw. Severus sighed and sipped his whisky, relishing the heat of it. After taking so long to get rid of Hagrid that morning, he now couldn't wait for him to return to take the boy away.

The roar of an engine roused Severus from his thoughts. *Finally*, he thought in relief. *The overgrown fool is back at last.*

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Hagrid had wrapped Harry up securely around his massive chest and tucked him into his moleskin coat. The baby never seemed to cry, Severus noted, as he watched Harry laugh and pluck on Hagrid's enormous beard. Sitting astride the motorbike, Hagrid was, at last, ready to take off.

"Did yeh know tha' yer were famous, little Harry?" Hagrid cooed to the baby as he tried to disentangle Harry's hands from his beard. "Toasts were bein' made in yer honour by wizards all over Britain!"

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. "I believe the Headmaster is waiting for you, is he not?" he asked, trying to stifle his impatience.

"Yer right, Professor. And I'm startin' out late, too. There's just been so much ter celebrate today," Hagrid said wistfully as he stroked the boy's head. "Well, we'll be off then. Expect I'll be seein' yeh at school, eh, Professor?"

"I expect so," he snapped, immensely relieved that Hagrid wouldn't remember any of this.

The motor started and roared to life. Severus stepped back until he stood behind the half-giant and pointed his wand just below the Hagrid's right ear, where the memories of the past twenty-four hours were located.

*"Obliviate!"*

Finally, my biggest thanks is reserved for my daughter, starkid, for putting up with me paying more attention to this story at times than I did to her.