

Unseen

by Subversa

Written pre-DH. Winner Quill to Parchment Round 2, Best Marauder Era and Winner 2007 OWL Awards, Best in Hogwarts: A History.

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Chapter 1: Summer After First Year

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Unseen

Chapter 1: Summer After First Year

The midday summer sun shone on the tree-lined Harrogate suburban street, casting very little shadow. Twelve-year old Pepper Evans looked over at her sister, who sat on her bed painting her toenails bright pink. 'Salty, there's a boy across the street wearing one of those robe-things you wear at your school.'

Lily screwed the top on the nail varnish. 'Are you sure?' She sat up tall, craning her neck to see over the windowsill. 'Where?'

Pepper indicated with her pinkie, keeping in mind her mum's oft-quoted dictum that it is rude to point. Surely it did not count if one used one's smallest finger? 'Across the way, behind the trunk of that tree see?'

Lily made a face. 'If I stand up, I'll smear,' she fretted, pausing to blow ineffectually on the pink nail polish. 'Tell me what he looks like,' she temporised, picking up the latest issue of *Jackie* magazine from the bedside table and beginning to fan her wet toes.

Pepper squinted. 'He's got black hair,' she began.

'I know *loads* of boys with black hair,' Lily objected. 'Is it long? Short? Messy? Oily?'

'It's longish,' Pepper said.

Lily's brow furrowed. 'I know three boys in my year alone with longish black hair. What is his face like?'

Pepper shrugged. 'I can't tell from here. But if number nine sees a boy in a black robe lurking in the shadows, she'll call the police.' She watched Lily's frantic fanning. 'Why don't you just magik them dry?'

'I told you!' Lily responded exasperatedly. 'I'm not allowed to use magic outside of school. The Ministry for Magic can track such things.'

Pepper abandoned the window. 'You said you'd do me next,' she whinged, watching as Lily put the nail polish in a drawer.

'Later, Pep I promise. But I have to see who this is.' Lily stood and crossed to the window, walking carefully so as not to smear her carefully painted toenails.

Pepper's head jerked up when Lily gasped. 'What is it?'

Lily did not answer, but slipped into her new summer sandals and flew to the door, concern for her nail varnish forgotten.

'Where are you going?'

'You might have told me he has a big black eye!' Lily snapped before thundering down the steps.

'I didn't see a black eye,' Pepper said to the empty doorway. Sighing, she slipped on her own new sandals, trailing down the stairway and out the front door. Breaking into a run, she crossed the road with Lily.

'Severus?' Lily said softly. 'Severus, show yourself.'

From around the trunk of the large tree came a scrawny boy, dressed in plain black wizard's robes. He was about the same height as the two girls and as thin as Pepper. His prominent hooked nose dominated his somewhat pinched face, and his dark eyes were narrowed in suspicion as they rested on Pepper.

'Who's she?' he demanded of Lily, never taking his eyes from Pepper's face.

Lily reached out her hand and lightly touched the purple bruise beneath his left eye. 'What happened to you?' she said, concern flooding her voice.

The boy flinched away from Lily's hand as a wild thing bolts from humankind. His sudden move caused him to stumble, and he landed on his bum in the dust.

Pepper laughed.

He was on his feet again in a flash, a length of polished wood clenched in his fist. 'Shut it!' he hissed, advancing on Pepper threateningly.

Lily interposed herself between them, taking the boy's wand-bearing arm in a sure grip and inducing him to lower his weapon. 'Severus, this is my twin sister, Petunia but she's called Pepper.' Maintaining her hold on the boy's wrist, Lily turned to her sister. 'Pep, this is my friend from school, Severus Snape.'

The insolent boy yanked his arm from Lily's grasp, and he thrust the piece of wood out of sight, up the sleeve of his robes. 'You would do better not to go about laughing at people,' he snapped at Pepper, then turned from her, effectively dismissing her.

'She didn't mean anything by it,' Lily told him in a reproving tone.

Severus shrugged, then crossed his arms over his narrow chest and said, 'I told you I could find your house.'

Lily giggled. 'You never told me that! But I *did* invite you to come visit, and here you are.'

Pepper stared at her giggling sister. Why was Lily suddenly behaving like a stupid *girl*? She gave an undignified snort, which drew a disdainful glare from the dark-eyed boy. Lily had the grace to flush and give her sister an apologetic smile.

'You lot may want to speak with the police when *she* calls them on us, but I am going to go inside,' Pepper said, jerking her head towards the face silhouetted in the curtains at the window over the garage at number nine, Claret Drive.

Lily looked up quickly, where the pug nose and cats-eye glasses of the neighbour-lady could clearly be seen. 'Hello, Mrs Parker!' she called, smiling and waving. 'We're working on the costumes for Pepper's school play next term!'

The figure at the widow snapped the curtains closed and Lily grabbed Pepper's wrist with one hand and Severus' with the other. 'Get your broom,' she hissed at him as she began to tug them across the street. 'We can't have you wandering about in wizard's robes!'

Severus jerked his wrist from Lily's grasp and retrieved his rather battered-looking broomstick from the ground. 'Do you want me to shove off, then?'

'No!' Lily replied, releasing Pepper and turning to him again. Pepper fidgeted impatiently as Lily stayed to coax the boy. 'Come *on*, Severus we're going to find you something else to wear.' Lily did not attempt to touch him again, but once she was sure he was following her, she led the way across the road and up the drive to the front door. Pepper broke from them and ran into the house. Pausing on the stoop to check for witnesses, Lily opened the door and nudged Severus inside before following him in and shutting the door behind her.

'Salty, have you lost your mind?' Pepper fairly shrieked, standing in the entrance hall with her hands on her boy-like hips. 'Mummy and Daddy will go spare if they find out you brought a boy in the house while they're not home!'

'Oh, tosh,' Lily said, waving a hand at her sister. 'Severus isn't a boy ' she giggled at the indignant look on his face, 'he's a school chum.' She smiled conspiratorially at Severus. 'Come on up and let's find you some jeans to wear you can't parade around Claret Drive in school robes.'

Pepper rolled her eyes, but accompanied Lily as they began to climb the steps up to the first floor but Severus stood his ground. 'I didn't come here so you could give me clothes,' he said. 'I just wanted to see if I could find your house after you told me I couldn't. I'll go now.'

Lily paused on the third step up, looking down at him with her almond-shaped green eyes, a doubtful expression about her mouth. She had cut her dark red hair since end of term, he noted; she had it tied back in a queue, just as she wore it in Potions class with Professor Slughorn. Her twin sister paused as well and the two of them stood side-by-side, awaiting his decision.

It was interesting to note that although their faces were shaped the same, their features were very different. Pepper's eyes had only a hint of Lily's emerald green, falling more in the hazel range. Her hair held none of the russet of Lily's, but hung about her face, the colour between dirty dishwater and the fur of a common field mouse. The girls were the same height, had the same arms, tapered fingers, and pretty little feet, although Lily had a bandage on one ankle. One stark difference between them was that Lily bore about her face and her tummy the slightest vestige of baby fat, rounding her features to a pleasant degree. Pepper, on the other hand, was extremely thin, the bones of her wrists and clavicle protruding almost painfully from her skin. Neither of them was shaped in a materially different way from Severus but he was still uneasy. There was something about their femininity that was daunting.

Now Lily spoke to him. 'Don't you want to come back to see me again this summer? We have a lovely wood no more than half-a-mile away we can explore, and you can help me find what potions ingredients might grow there. You're better at Herbology than I am.'

Severus stood on the flagged entranceway, wearing school robes which were too short in the wrist and in length, his matte-black hair hanging about his face in stringy disarray, his eyes narrowed.

'All right,' he said, finally. 'I'll come back. Merlin knows what trouble you'll get into if I'm not there to keep you out of the *Rhus radicans*.' He began climbing, darting a wickedly teasing look at Lily.

'I can't believe you brought that up!' Lily cried, dancing up the steps ahead of her companions. 'How was I supposed to know it was poison ivy?' she demanded of Pepper.

'Every three-year old knows that,' Severus scoffed.

The three trooped into the bedroom Pepper and Lily shared, where Lily went directly to the clothes cupboard. 'Where is that pair of jeans that was too tight for me? Mum gave them to me at Easter, but the zip wouldn't go up.' She began to rummage in the bottom of the cupboard.

Pepper sighed dramatically, going to a battered highboy in the corner and opening a drawer, pulling out the jeans in question. 'You had me put them in my drawer to hide them from Mum,' she said. 'You didn't want her to say anything else about you getting fat.'

Lily pulled the garment from her sister's hands with a huff. 'Thank you for mentioning *that* in front of company,' she muttered.

Severus accepted the trousers thrust into his arms along with a faded tee-shirt bearing an odd logo. 'This is my old Manchester United shirt,' she explained. 'It's like a Quidditch team, for Muggles,' she added.

'I know what football is,' Severus muttered.

'You can change in the loo,' Pepper offered, pointing him down the hallway. 'Make yourself at home.'

When the door closed behind him, Pepper whirled on her sister. 'Who *is* he?'

'He's a classmate,' Lily answered, sitting on the edge of her bed. 'Some of the rude boys in my year are mean to him, but he's very smart and he's always been decent to me. He and I are favourite students of our Potions teacher that's the class that's kind of like chemistry and so we've seen quite a bit of each other outside of class, at the teacher's parties. We're the only first-years in the Slug Club, so we usually sit together.'

'The *what* club?' Pepper demanded in confusion.

'Slug,' Lily reiterated with a grin. 'The teacher's name is Slughorn, so the group of students is called the Slug Club.'

'Why would *he* be anyone's favourite?' Pepper said, a moue of distaste on her lips. 'He's impolite and scruffy.'

'Well, he's never really rude to *me*,' Lily said. 'And he's wicked smart, Pep. He actually beat me out in Potions, Defence Against the Dark Arts, and Herbology for top of the class. I edged him out in History of Magic and Astronomy, and even the idiot boys from my House were ahead of him in Transfiguration and Charms but I was at the top, of course,' she added with a self-satisfied smirk.

Pepper yawned and flopped down on her bed, grabbing the latest issue of *Jackie* from the table. 'You're such a swot,' she said in disgust. Pepper's marks were perfectly respectable, but she saw no use in killing herself to be the top of the class she had always left that position to Lily. But this past year, Lily had not been at school with Pepper, who for the first time in her young life realised that the girls she had grown up considering her friends were really Lily's friends. It wasn't that they were unkind to her but she was no longer included in the outings and parties carried on by the cool kids. Lily had certainly added flavour to the twins' interactions with other students in their year at school, but Pepper had added a spice with her outspoken opinions and barbed comments. If there had been ruffled feelings, Lily had always smoothed things over. Now, Pepper only felt like herself when Lily was home on holiday and then they were able to carry on as if the time apart had never happened. Lily hadn't changed a jot she was the same loving, funny sister she had always been.

The boy came back into their room, his robes wadded up in his arms. Lily's jeans fit him quite well, easily fastening across his flat stomach; the football shirt was just long enough to cover his torso. On his feet he wore shabby black oxfords; they were a touch unfashionable, but scarcely noticeable under the belled trouser legs. Both girls

looked him over and nodded as one.

'You'll do,' Lily said, popping up from her seat on the edge of the bed.

Severus scowled. 'Where's this wood?'

The three walked together down Claret Drive, across the Town Road, and down a lane sparsely dotted with cottages. At the end of the lane was a field, and beyond the field was a wood. Severus watched the girls critically as they scrambled over the low stone wall separating the field from the lane; they both climbed and jumped as well as he did, himself; obviously, they weren't prissy little girls who sat in their nursery playing with their dolls and having stupid tea parties.

Lily and Pepper noticed that Severus was not beside them, and they stopped to turn and look at him. Smirking, Severus vaulted over the wall. Lily grinned, but Pepper glowered at him.

'Show off,' Pepper muttered, turning and stomping away.

Severus raised one eyebrow at Lily. 'What's got up her nose?'

Lily shrugged. 'She's not used to having a boy around.'

Severus snorted, but did not comment. After a moment, he realised that Lily was staring at him. Slowly, he turned to look into her face. 'What?' he demanded.

'Who hit you?' she asked softly.

Severus looked away from her, watching Pepper begin to follow a path beneath the trees into the wood. 'I ran into the wall,' he said flatly, beginning to walk again.

Lily touched him tentatively on the shoulder, and he stopped to glare at her.

'You came back from Christmas with a limp that didn't get better until Professor Slughorn marched you in to see Madam Pomfrey,' she said. Severus rolled his eyes and looked away from her. Inexorably, Lily continued. 'When we came back after Easter break, your teeth looked as if someone had knocked half of them out and you had put them back yourself not very well,' she added. 'I'm not stupid, and I'm not going to tell tales at school, Severus.' She kept her green eyes on him until he could feel the weight of her gaze on the side of his bare neck; reluctantly, he turned his face back to hers. 'Tell me who hits you.'

Severus looked at well-loved Lily Evans in her brand new summer clothes and silly sandals with her pink toenails and knew that there was no way she could ever understand his world charity-shop clothing, slipping into ones home like a ghost, fearful of drawing the attention of a brute with mercurial moods attempting to stand guard over someone who did not want or appreciate his efforts no, there was no way to explain his life to her.

'Don't go on about it,' he growled, fleeing into the wood, away from the compassion in her eyes. He heard her following but shoved his hands in the pockets of the jeans, keeping his eyes on his feet. The bruise under his eye was nothing hardly worth talking about. It was almost a love pat, compared to some blows Grandfather had landed on his body since he and his mum had gone to live at Prince Glen. He had cried when they had left their house in Spinner's End, but Mum had explained that there was no way to buy food with Dad gone away, and she had taken him to live with Grandfather.

His grandfather had disliked him on sight, although Severus had no idea what he had done to make the old man so cross. He had only met Grandfather twice that he remembered, before they had moved to live with him. Mum had never said anything to Severus about his grandfather, but he had once heard her telling Dad that she hadn't run away from home to live with a man every bit as angry as her father that had been after Stephy died. He physically recoiled at the fleeting memory of the little hands reaching for him, and he resolutely pushed it out of his mind.

'Lily! It's still here!'

Severus looked up as Lily ran lightly past him to join her sister at a moss-stained old birdbath.

'Remember how we used to sit here waiting for Mr Tumnus?' Lily said, trailing her fingertips in the surface of the pooled water.

'Mr *Who*?' Severus jeered.

Pepper ignored him and nodded, a reminiscent smile touching her features. 'We took turns telling stories,' she said.

Lily turned to Severus. 'Mr Tumnus, the faun from *The Narnian Chronicles*,' she said.

'There's no such thing as a faun,' he stated.

Pepper turned on him fiercely. 'I say there's no such thing as a *wizard*!'

'That's just stupid. I'm a wizard, so wizards are real. Fauns aren't.'

'Centaur's are, though,' Lily said. 'Did I tell you about the centaurs in the Forbidden Forest, Pep? Oh, I wish I could show them to you!'

Severus nudged at the old stone pedestal with his toe. 'Besides, it was a lamppost, not a birdbath,' he complained.

'Well, it wasn't so much that it was a birdbath that made us think of Narnia,' Lily said, seating herself on the grass. 'It's was more that it was a man-made thing in the middle of a wood.' She waved a hand about. 'Why would someone put a birdbath here?'

Pepper flopped down beside her. 'Maybe there used to be a cottage here.'

Severus looked carefully at their surroundings. They had walked a good ways into the wood. The birdbath was in a natural clearing, with pathways extending east and south; to the north and west was a dense growth of foliage. 'What's through there?' he asked, nodding at the brush.

Pepper shrugged. 'We never made it through the brambles,' she said.

'Girls,' Severus sneered.

'It's not as if we never tried,' Lily said. 'I got quite far in on my hands and knees one time '

'until she found a bright green caterpillar on her shoulder,' Pepper supplied, laughing.

Severus turned from his investigation of the thicket to stare at Lily. 'You gave up because of a harmless little *caterpillar*?'

Lily glared at him. 'I was afraid of bugs, then,' she said.

'A caterpillar isn't a *bug*,' Pepper and Severus said simultaneously.

Lily had to laugh, then, and her infectious giggle soon had Pepper laughing as well, although Severus only smirked. She and Pepper then fell into fond reminiscences about their past adventures in the wood, as Severus attempted to find a way to penetrate the brush.

'This would be so much easier with magic,' he complained, abandoning yet another promising hole in the foliage, unable to push his way through.

'Do it!' Pepper said, her eyes alight. She had wanted to see magic done ever since it had been discovered that Lily was a witch, but the law had thus far prevented her from doing so.

'Don't!' Lily cried, twisting around to see what Severus was doing. 'Don't, we'll get in trouble!' She couldn't see him now, and she stood, moving along the line of tangled brush, looking for him. 'Severus?'

Pepper popped up, as well, peering into the tangle of tall weeds, bushes, bramble, and vines, trying to pierce the murky shadows. Lily called his name, but the dratted boy didn't say anything.

'Where did he go?' Lily fretted.

Pepper scoffed. 'He's hiding to scare us.'

'But he was here just a minute ago!'

'Will you two shut it?' a slightly muffled voice commanded.

There was a great thrashing sound, as of someone struggling through a stubborn hedge, and Severus' head appeared, leaves and bits of twigs tangled in his untidy black hair, a huge grin making his pale face almost nice-looking except, of course, for the crooked teeth and the black eye, Pepper amended.

'What have you found?' Lily demanded, apparently suspicious of the expression on his face.

'Oh, just another world,' Severus said tauntingly.

'Narnia?' Lily said, beginning to push her way through the brush to Severus.

'Come see and tell me what you think,' he said, turning and beginning to shove his way through again, stomping grass and vines and pushing and breaking branches to make a way through.

Pepper started in behind Lily, unaccountably excited to see what Severus had found. This place in the wood had always been special to Lily and her.

'It's not Narnia,' Severus said, holding back the final branches to allow Lily and Pepper to escape the thicket, 'but it may very well be Camelot.'

The girls could only gasp and stare.

A/N: Feel free to drop by my Live Journal to check the progress on the story or to say hello! <http://subvers.livejournal.com/>

Chapter 2: Summer After Second Year

Chapter 2 of 8

Severus Snape has one friend at Hogwarts he can count on: Lily Evans. Lily spends summers at home with her beloved sister, Petunia, and in their twelfth summer, the two girls admit the remote, secretive Severus to their private world. Sadly, the older one grows, the more difficult life becomes. What changes will come when other boys begin to come around Lily in her summer hols -and what dangers can come of the dark, violent emotions that burn within a young wizard torn apart by the complications of the ever-darkening world in which he lives?

A/N: Thanks to Ferporcel for beta-reading this chapter in the middle of the night; dear Keladry Lupin is very busy mentoring new writers for the Live Journal SS/HG Exchange. MagicAlly Brit-picked for me, as she always does. I must also thank sshg316 and DeeMichelle for alpha reading for me as I write.



Unseen

Chapter 2: Summer After Second Year

Pepper sat quietly under the spreading oak tree on the far bank, ignoring the numerous acorns digging into her bum. The Kingdom bridge arched over the stream bed, which was currently all but dry. When first they had discovered it, on that day the summer before, the weeds, brambles, and vines had so overgrown the banks that the trickling water had been hidden from their view. She, Lily, and Severus had been so enthralled with their discovery, they had spent the whole of their summer holiday

clearing out the tangled growth and neatening up the marvellous, hidden world they had found behind the undergrowth in the clearing.

Severus had perhaps been fanciful in likening the lichen-covered stone bridge and what lay beyond it to King Arthur's Camelot, but the discovery had seemed to them utterly enchanting. The bridge led across a small stream, beyond which the overgrown shrubbery of a once-formal garden could be found. When they had struggled through the dense undergrowth amidst the eight-foot-tall hedges, they had found an old, crumbling in-ground swimming pool. They had been able to descend the concrete steps at the shallow end and on down the sloping interior until the sides of the pool had risen fifteen feet over their heads. The shape of the pool was an irregular one, looking like no man-made swimming pool they had ever seen. Some of the cracks in the surface had grown so large that weeds and wildflowers grew in the interstices.

A winding path through a stand of rowan trees led to a small lake, which might, once upon a time, have been stocked with fish for sport. Now, it was a place to dangle one's feet in the cool water on hot days or to place one's drinks in the water to chill.

The remaining days of that summer had been ones of excitement and exploration. It had become obvious fairly early on that they had stumbled upon the ruins of the estate of a once-rich family. With the combined lack of curiosity and blind acceptance of the very young, they had not puzzled further over the provenance of their discovery. They had not wished to find reasons why they ought not to trespass upon the property of another person; obviously the place was no longer cared for by anyone, and they were fully prepared to remedy that negligence to the best of their ability.

Beyond the swimming pool was a particularly dense stand of trees which grew so thickly, with branches hanging so low and so entwined, the sun scarcely shone through. They had dubbed this haven El Castillo del Viento, which Pepper had insisted was Spanish for the Castle of the Wind. Severus had snorted and rolled his eyes, but Lily had loved the name, so Pepper had got her way about it. Severus had taken to stashing his Muggle clothes there; upon his almost-daily arrivals, he would secrete his broom and his robes, don the jeans and tee-shirt, and embark upon the task of the day.

He had taken the project very seriously. Pepper and Lily had been intrigued by their find and had spent many hours whispering together about the possible history of the place, but Severus had behaved almost as if he were obsessed with it. He had toiled energetically to clear away the undergrowth from the bridge and the stream banks; he had paced the area of their small Kingdom from the bridge north, south, east, and west, establishing the likely perimeters of the property. Now, in the second summer of their rule of their small Kingdom, he had devised small traps at likely points of entry; not for the purpose of ensnaring intruders, but for the purpose of detecting them.

'What is the point?' Pepper had asked, watching him meticulously tie a long piece of twine about the trunk of a tree and stretch the string across the ground.

'The point is to know if we've been discovered,' he had replied, with more patience than he often displayed toward Pepper.

Pepper had laughed. 'It's not as if we've any real right to be here,' she had said.

Severus had glared at her from his spot on the ground, where he was carefully dispersing dust and grass to cover the presence of the twine. 'Are you saying you wouldn't care if other people were mucking about in our Kingdom?'

Pepper's face had clouded. 'Not other kids not anyone, really,' she had been forced to admit.

Severus had only smirked at her and continued to play with his twine.

Now Pepper frowned at the sketchbook on her knees. She and Lily had agreed during one of their late-night discussions of the Kingdom that they ought to have a flag. Lily had insisted that Pepper be the one to draw the design, since Pepper was the artist. She was struggling over a coat of arms, attempting to incorporate the elements the three of them had decided upon. Severus had suggested with a suspiciously innocent air that their icon be a serpent; Pepper hadn't understood Lily's furious refutation of the suggestion until the two had fallen into a right squabble over it. Honestly! Sometimes they acted as if that stupid school of theirs was the entire world. Well, it *wasn't*. Pepper had never been there, and she never *would* be there from what she understood, she wouldn't be able to see anything of it even if she were standing right in front of it! and she couldn't see any reason for the stupid rivalries of the stupid school to have any bearing in the Kingdom.

It had been a rainy afternoon when they had decided the name of their realm. Unable to work at clearing undergrowth or to walk the boundary of the land, the three of them had huddled in El Castillo del Viento.

'It should have a beautiful name,' Pepper had said dreamily, sitting with her arms wrapped about her legs.

'It should have a strong name,' Severus had retorted, sprawled on his belly and playing with a tattered old pack of Exploding Snap cards.

'I don't see any reason why the name can't be both beautiful *and* strong,' Lily had interpolated, keeping the peace. 'Camelot was the most beautiful kingdom in the history of the world and King Arthur brought peace and unity to the people.'

'You may not have noticed, Evans,' Severus had drawled, 'but this is obviously *not* the real Camelot. This is entirely the wrong part of the country for that.'

'It doesn't have to be the real one for us to call it that!' Pepper had snapped, coming promptly to her sister's defence.

Severus had shrugged. 'If you have no imagination to think up your own Kingdom name, then call it Camelot.'

'You've got an idea!' Lily had exclaimed, cutting off Pepper's angry reply before it could be uttered. 'Tell us!'

Severus had glanced at the sisters through his stringy, oily hair; seeing that they were attending to him, he had abandoned the Exploding Snap pack and sat up.

'Do you know what "wyrd" means? W-y-r-d,' he had spelled.

As if responding to the same brain impulse, the twins had shaken their heads simultaneously.

'It's fate. It means the past everything that has already become and it also refers to how past actions continue to affect and shape the future.' Severus had kept his glittering black eyes on the girls as he spoke, evincing an intensity at odds with his usual studied indifference. 'The Kingdom of Wyrd,' he had intoned, 'a realm where magic and fate are woven into a brilliant destiny.'

Pepper frowned over her drawing, erasing her attempt at a horse. In the end, they had compromised on the elements of their coat of arms, each of them choosing an animal representative of themselves. She had drawn Lily's lioness and Severus' serpent, but she was having difficulty determining her own emblem. Lily had made suggestions, the chief amongst which was an eagle; Lily believed that Pepper would have been placed in the House represented by the eagle, had she gone to Hogwarts. Pepper had angrily rejected the idea; truly, when had Lily become so narrow-minded? She behaved as if she were no longer capable of thinking beyond the wizard's world.

'Pepper!'

Pepper looked up and saw Lily pushing her way through the undergrowth. In the summer sunlight, Lily's hair shone dark red; she wore it loose and as she ran it flew behind her like a sheet of copper. Over the last year, Pepper and Lily had both started their periods. Lily had been so excited when it happened to her, during her first term, she had sent a school owl to Pepper with the announcement. Pepper had been jealous for less than one month before her body had followed suit, succeeding her older twin in the acquisition of her menses just as she had done by following her into the world, with Lily the older by a scarce three minutes.

With their menses, had come budding breasts, for which their mum had procured bras for them over the Christmas holiday. In a break with tradition, Pepper had insisted on a plain garment, minus the lace and little pink rose which Lily had found indispensable. Mum had chuckled and said it was just another sign of them growing up, to be choosing different clothes. Pepper noted now that Lily was obviously not wearing *her* bra today, judging by the way her chest jiggled like jelly as she ran. Oh, it was barely noticeable, but Pepper noticed small things how could one keep control of one's life if one did not heed details?

Pepper kept her side of the bedroom, her drawers, and her wardrobe in impeccable order. She had been known to take a straight-edge from her desk to determine that the stacks of knickers were perfectly aligned in her dresser. She had never allowed anyone to see her do it, knowing instinctively that such a practice would be looked upon as odd. But she had the private satisfaction of knowing that her belongings were in perfect order, as were her bedroom and her bathroom except, of course, when Lily was home from school.

Lily skipped across the stone bridge and flopped down beneath the oak tree beside Pepper, panting lightly from her exertion.

'Where's Severus?' Lily inquired, leaning over to look at Pepper's progress on their coat of arms.

Pepper snorted. 'How am I supposed to know?'

Lily frowned. 'What's got up your nose?'

Pepper shrugged. 'I'm here. Isn't that good enough for you?'

Lily rested her forehead briefly on Pepper's bare upper arm. 'You're my sister, Pep. No one will ever be closer to me than you.'

Pepper felt a warmth flood her body, seeming to spread from her heart outward to her fingers and down to her toes. A giggle bubbled up from the depths of her sudden cheer. 'Mum's got her meeting with the Ladies' Auxiliary this afternoon let's go home and listen to our Osmond records as loud as we want!'

Lily giggled in response. 'Severus can come and find us at the house, if he wants us,' she agreed, springing up. 'Remember the last time he came in whilst we were listening to Donny?'

Pepper made her voice gruff, doing a credible impersonation of Severus. 'He not only *sounds* like a girl he *looks* like a girl.'

Lily snorted as she and Pepper headed back across the bridge. '*His* hair is longer than Donny's is!'

'No one would ever mistake *Severus* for a girl! With that nose?'

'Pep! Don't be mean!' After a moment, Lily giggled again. 'Not that you don't have a point....'

'Isn't Donny cute?' Pepper said breathlessly, giving voice to her most heartfelt emotion.

'Dreamy,' Lily averred.

In perfect amity, the sisters made their way back to their home, Pepper's looming disquiet laid to rest on the common ground of their friendship.

Dinner that night was lamb chops and sprouts, with an apple pie bought from the bakers for afters.

'I just didn't have time to prepare anything, Clare the meeting went on until late this afternoon,' Mrs. Evans explained to her husband.

Clarence Evans grinned conspiratorially at Lily as he began to put slices of pie onto small plates. 'Salty and I don't care, do we, pet?'

His wife looked with disapproval at Lily, who grinned and passed the dessert plate to Pepper.

'I wouldn't care for any,' Pepper said, watching her mother's face.

Elsie Evans smiled at Pepper, who rose and went to stand beside her mother. The two were strikingly similar in build, both with sharply defined bone structure in their rather long faces, with comparably thin arms, which they now crossed whilst looking at Mr. Evans and Lily.

'I hope we won't have to buy all new clothes for you next term because you've got too big for the old ones,' Mrs. Evans admonished Lily before placing an arm around Pepper and leading her from the room.

Pepper could not resist the temptation to look over her shoulder and smirk at Lily. Lily stuck out her tongue.

'Am I fat, Daddy?' Lily asked, poking at the apple pie with her fork.

'Not a bit!' Mr. Evans assured her, taking a large bite of his pudding. At forty, Clare Evans was losing his hair and gaining a slight paunch, but looked quite distinguished when he dressed in his three-piece suits to go to work at Grunnings Drill Company, in Harrogate. 'Your mother is a touch thin, as is Pepper but you're perfect as you are, Salty. Don't you fret about it.'

Lily sighed and pushed the pie away from her. 'I can't fit into Pepper's jeans, anymore.'

Mr. Evans spoke with great delicacy. 'Pepper has time still to grow out of her skinniness,' he said. 'But you girls are growing up now, love, and you may be different-looking women. There's nothing wrong with that.'

Lily pushed away from the table, leaning over to kiss her father's bald spot. 'Thanks, Daddy. I don't think I'll have any pudding tonight. Mum says a girl can't be too careful, and that no boy would want a fat girl.'

Mr. Evans watched his daughter as she exited the room, reflecting to himself that she was quite perfectly proportioned for a thirteen-year-old girl. With a shake of his head, he pulled over the abandoned plate and began to eat hers as well. No need to let good pie go to waste!

Saturday dawned with a steady rain which did not let up. The girls irritated their mother with their incessant complaints and frequent opening of the front door to see if it was *really* raining that hard. It was therefore a comfort to them all when Elsie Evans took up her handbag and her umbrella that afternoon for her weekly appointment at the hairdressers'.

'Lily Anne, I expect you to have your half of the bedroom tidy when I return,' she admonished. 'Can't you learn to keep house as tidily as your sister? No man wants to marry a slovenly girl, let me tell you!'

The door closed behind their mother, and Lily rolled her eyes. 'I'm the tidiest girl in my dormitory,' she objected darkly.

Pepper looked up from her drawing tablet. 'You lot must live in a sty,' she said frankly.

Lily shrugged. 'It might be a little cluttered, but not *dirty*. The house-elves see to that.'

Pepper gripped her lips tightly to prevent herself from uttering a question about what a house-elf might be. Honestly! Lily dropped the most outrageous things into perfectly civil conversations now and it was obvious to Pepper that her twin wanted to be questioned about the odd world in which she lived ten months out of the year but Pepper had no intention of gratifying that type of show-off behaviour. She sniffed audibly and lowered her face again to the sketch.

'Of course,' Lily added, 'Alice is a bit of a mess, but the others just leave their things lying about.' She popped up from her chair and went over to look out the window. 'I *hate* being inside I want to go to the Kingdom.'

'Think of all the mud,' Pepper advised, wrinkling her nose distastefully.

An oddly staccato knock at the back garden door brought Lily's head around, a smile lighting her face. 'It's Severus!'

'I didn't need *you* to tell me that,' Pepper said snidely, carefully tucking her drawing away from sight. She didn't want *him* to see it until *she* was satisfied with it. If he belittled it.... No, she would definitely keep it secret until she was ready to show it to him.

She trailed down the hallway and found Lily putting the kettle on to boil; a rain-drenched Severus was rubbing his hair dry with a tasteful Wedgwood-blue bath towel.

'That's one of mine!' she screeched, darting forward to snatch it from unworthy boy-hands. She turned angrily on her sister. 'Why couldn't you give him one of *your* towels to rub his greasy head in?' she snapped. 'I bought this set out of my own pocket money!'

Lily stepped up to her sister, her face dispassionate. 'I'm ashamed of you, Petunia Anne Evans,' she said flatly. 'I never thought I would see the day you would behave in such a way to a guest in our home.'

Pepper felt her face burn, and she knew she had flushed in embarrassment. It was fine for Lily to talk; she didn't care for nice things. Yes, Pepper had seen the mortified humiliation on Severus' paper-white face but *her* towels weren't Lily's to use!

She stood in mute anger, one shoulder hunched against Severus, smoothing the expensive towel in her hands. Lily left the room for just a moment and returned with another towel. She walked past her twin without speaking, and pulling a chair right next to Severus', she reached up and began to dry his chagrined face with her own hands.

Stubbornly, Pepper did not leave the room. She didn't know what to say how to say sorry to either her sister or their friend but she was determined not to be left out of what was likely to be the only entertainment on offer that afternoon. Feeling awkward, she stayed where she stood, a few feet from the table, and tried not to fidget but desperately wished to hear what the other two were whispering. Were they making fun of her?

Severus, deeply embarrassed, moved his face away as Lily reached to dry the water from it. Gently persistent, she moved closer to the edge of her chair and stroked the plain white towel over his throat.

'Don't mind her,' Lily murmured. 'She's just in a foul mood.'

'I'm not dirty,' he muttered, his eyes averted.

Lily stood and laid the towel about his shoulders, lifting his hair from beneath it, then she crouched on the other side of him, away from Pepper. 'I know you're not dirty,' she said. 'Pepper doesn't mean it.'

He would not look at her, but she waited patiently, ignoring the increasingly restive movements of her sister on the other side of the table. At last, he raised his eyes to Lily's face.

'I thought you were going to make tea,' he said, striving for a normal tone.

The smile which Lily bestowed upon him made his breath catch in his chest. With an impish gleam, she took her finger and lightly touched the tip of his hooked nose.

'Bleep!' she said, laughing.

Severus knew she was playing with him her green eyes were so warm, so fond as they rested upon his face he never doubted her. Putting on his best scowl, he demanded, 'Are you making fun of my nose?'

Lily popped up, a puckish grin upon her face. 'No! I was only *bleeping* it.'

Continuing as if she had not spoken, he said, '... because my nose is one of my finer parts.'

Unable to contain herself, Pepper burst out, 'Oh, right. Your big honking nose is one of your finer parts? What does that say about the rest of you?'

Lily seemed to freeze, her anxious glance travelling from Severus' face to Pepper's and back again.

Severus' head swivelled smoothly to pin Pepper with his black eyes. 'At least it stays out of other peoples' business,' he quipped nastily.

At this immensely Severus-like behaviour, both sisters breathed audible sighs of relief.

Turning back to Lily again, he said, 'Haven't you always wanted to be an only child?'

Pepper's outraged squeal and Lily's burst of laughter were simultaneous and clearly indicated that the three friends were back on familiar ground. Discarding her carefully folded towel upon the top of the dresser, Pepper helped Lily to put tea upon the table. Severus pulled out the pack of Exploding Snap cards from his robes, and they settled down to play a three-handed game.

Soon, Lily and Severus fell into one of their usual squabbles over the rules of the game.

'That was an illegal play!' Lily said, outraged.

Severus raised an eyebrow at her. 'Are you questioning my game-playing integrity?' He turned to Pepper. 'Is she saying I cheat?'

Pepper rolled her eyes at him, but Lily's hand shot out, picking up his card and thrusting it back at him. 'Take it back!'

Severus glanced at the card, then at Lily's face. 'No,' he replied, smirking.

'Oh!' she said slapping the card onto the table top. 'You you *Slytherin*!'

He inclined his head graciously. 'Thank you.'

Lily's further enraged gasp brought his laughing eyes up to her face. Unable to resist the urge to prick her Gryffindor sensibilities, he lightly touched the tip of her perfectly average nose. 'Bleep,' he said.

Thus it was that Mother Evans found her two well brought-up daughters wrestling a scrawny, straggle-haired, ill-favoured boy to the floor of her orderly kitchen when she came in from her appointment in a puff of cool air, carrying with her the scent of the lacquer which had been used upon her new hair-do.

'Girls!' she said in the tone that required immediate obedience. 'Get up from the floor this instant!'

The twins scrambled to their feet and promptly straightened their jeans and tops, each of them feeling quite a bit wrong-footed to have been discovered in such a tussle by their very particular mother. Severus stood as well, his expression immediately closed, his eyes moving to the door as if to judge the distance and whether he could move fast enough to get past the adult and through the door before she could grab him.

Bravely, Lily said, 'Mum, this is my friend, Severus Snape, from school. Severus, this is my mother, Mrs. Evans.'

Elsie Evans studied the bedraggled boy from head to foot. 'How nice to meet you,' she said, her tone implying words other than the ones she spoke. 'You know, there's a break in the rain now it would be an excellent time for you to return to your home without getting any wetter.'

Severus dipped his head without uttering a word, moving past Lily's mother as quickly as possible. Lily followed him, saying, 'We'll see you Monday,' for they never played in the Kingdom on Sundays.

'Oh yes,' Elsie said, a speculative look in her eye. 'Tomorrow is Sunday. Then Severus must come eat Sunday lunch with us. Shall I write a note for your mother, Severus?'

Severus paused at the door, looking imploringly at Lily before he spoke to Mrs. Evans. 'No, ma'am; I can tell her,' he said, the hated change in register in his voice occurring at that instant, completing his utter humiliation. It had been happening for weeks now, but had never happened before in front of the girls. Merlin, how he *hated* puberty.

'Then we'll see you tomorrow, if your parents can spare you,' Elsie said, turning and walking out of the room.

Pepper hastened to stand with the other two at the back garden door. 'You've got to come,' she said urgently. 'If you don't, she'll start making excuses for why we can't hang around with you anymore.'

Lily nodded. 'Please come, Severus once she sees that you're a nice boy, she'll be all right.'

Severus scowled at them. 'Being around you lot is turning out to be hard work.'

Neither girl knew what to say, so they stood in the doorway as he stepped out into the rain-wet garden, where he retrieved his broomstick from beneath the edge of the rose bushes. Without another word, he mounted and kicked off.

'I love it when he does that,' Pepper breathed, watching the broom rise into the sky. 'But why can't I see it after he rises above our heads?'

'There's a Muggle-repelling charm on the broom,' Lily said, continuing to watch the figure on the broom until it was out of sight. 'It's the only way he dares to fly it into Muggle-inhabited areas.'

Pepper made a disgusted noise and pulled her back into the kitchen, closing the door behind them.

Sunday morning found Severus standing morosely before the age-spotted mirror in his bedroom, looking disconsolately at the too-short trousers and too-small shirt he had unearthed from the wardrobe to wear to the Evans' for lunch. Grandfather bought what Severus needed, and Grandfather decreed that Severus did not need jeans, or trousers, or any other Muggle clothes. Grandfather said that pure-bloods wear wizarding robes and that Severus would dress as befitted a Prince.

Severus snorted derisively. Of course, the robes Grandfather saw fit to purchase for Severus' use were from the charity shop. If Severus was dressing in a manner fitting a Prince, then the Princes were a poverty-stricken lot. He looked around at the decaying grandeur of the room in which he slept when he was not at Hogwarts. It did not compare to the opulent furnishings in the rooms used by Grandfather. Prince Glen was a venerable old wizarding dwelling it was Severus himself who was apparently unworthy of Grandfather's notice except, of course, when the sadistic old bastard was feeling in need of amusement.

He stared at his reflection. At least he wasn't sporting a black eye or other facial disfigurement today not other than the usual. He had not known until he had gone to Hogwarts that he was ugly. He had his mother's black hair and sallow complexion, but it was from his Grandfather that he had inherited the Prince nose. He didn't look at all like his dad Tobias Snape was a fair-haired, hazel-eyed Muggle and from what he had seen of old pictures of them together, his dad had always been much better-looking than his mum.

At Hogwarts, he had learned about love potions, and he wondered if his mum had used one to make his dad love her. But Professor Slughorn said the love potions were not long-acting; they had to be re-administered on a regular basis to maintain effectiveness, and they did not actually create love. Anyway, he knew his parents had loved one another, once upon a time. He had seen them when they were happy together. He could remember them taking him to the London zoo when he was very small; they had strolled along, hand-in-hand, as he had run from one exhibit to the next, exclaiming over the exotic animals. Having now seen older students at school behaving in that mawkish way, he knew that it betokened attraction affection, even. Of course, that had been before Stephy.

Ruthlessly pushing the recollection from his mind, he determined to go to his mum. He almost never disturbed her, and for that reason, he seldom saw her but he needed her help. He *had* to look presentable for Lily's parents. Going to Harrogate spending his free time in the Kingdom being near Lily those things were more important to him than anything.

Stopping before his mother's door, he rapped his signature staccato beat he wanted her to know it was him, not her father, who wanted to see her.

'Come in, Severus,' a weak voice called.

Severus entered the room and immediately saw his mother lying in her bed. Keeping his eyes fixed resolutely on her pale, pinched face, he crossed the floor and stopped by her side.

'Hi, Mum,' he said, taking the hand she extended to him.

Eileen Snape seldom left her room, and she spent many of her days in her bed, being served and waited upon by the house-elves as if she was an actual invalid. On rare days, she got up and dressed, and on even more rare days, she left her room and ventured out to sit at meals with her father and her son. On those occasions, Severus was never far from her side; Grandfather had never laid a hand upon his mum that Severus had seen, but he used his vicious tongue on her with the efficacy of a medieval scourge. Severus could not bear to see her taunted so mercilessly; invariably, he pulled the old man's attention to himself, taking the consequences with a stoic lack of emotion, enduring silently the vitriol as it was translated from vile words to cruel hexes and physical violence for his benefit.

Eileen smiled mistily at him, the love in her expression piercing her son like a blade. 'How is my big boy today?' she said, clinging to his hand.

Severus closed his eyes briefly to block out her pitiful face; he needed to focus on his errand. Opening them again, he looked in her black eyes, so like his own, and said, 'Mum, I need your help.'

Eileen's gaze faltered for a moment; Severus knew she was afraid he would renew his entreaties to leave this place, to go back to their home, to find his father didn't she remember that he had ceased to beg her for those things long ago?

'I have an invitation to a luncheon,' he persisted, using language he hoped would pique her curiosity. 'The family of a girl I know from school she's Muggle-born, so her family are Muggles. I can't go in robes.'

He released her hand and stepped back from the bedside. 'See?' he said, holding his arms out from his body. 'These things don't fit me anymore, Mum.'

'Bring my handbag to me,' she said, her head falling back onto her pillow. 'It's in the cupboard. I have some gold but you'll have to go to Diagon Alley by Floo; I'm not well

enough to come with you.'

'No, Mum,' Severus said firmly. 'The invitation is for today. I need something *now*. You'll have to transfigure something.'

Heedless of the moan she uttered, he turned resolutely and strode across the room to the highboy. 'Where is it? Where is your wand?'

'Severus I'm so tired '

He began opening drawers at random, keeping his attention solely on the contents of the drawers, ignoring the framed photographs, both wizarding and Muggle, which decorated the surface of each piece of furniture in the room. Ruthlessly, he dug through undergarments, scarves, belts, robes, until he felt a ridge beneath his fingertips. Hah! He jerked the silken scarf to one side and found himself confronting a wood-framed photograph of a laughing, tow-headed toddler. The chubby hands were reaching out reaching for him and he slammed the drawer closed again.

'Bloody bugging hell!' he cried, stumbling back and nearly falling over a poufy footstool. As he stumbled, he reached for the back of a chair to steady himself, and so doing, he lost his focus for a fleeting moment and with no warning, he was ambushed from all sides by the same cooing, smiling, laughing face, topped by yellow curls and warmed by tawny eyes, from frame to frame to frame.

Without speaking another word, he rushed from the room, slamming the door behind him and fleeing down the corridor.

When he returned to his bed chamber, after pacing wildly through the never-used rooms on the second floor, it was to find a pair of black trousers and a white dress shirt, perfectly laundered and starched, lying upon the counterpane. He donned them swiftly, aching relieved to find them a perfect fit. He raised an eyebrow at himself in the mirror he didn't look half-bad, really it must be the Prince half of his blood showing through, he thought to himself sarcastically. With the resilience of youth, his spirits rebounded, the little face in the photographs once again safely buried in his mind.

'Thank Merlin,' he murmured to his reflection, before turning and picking up his broomstick.

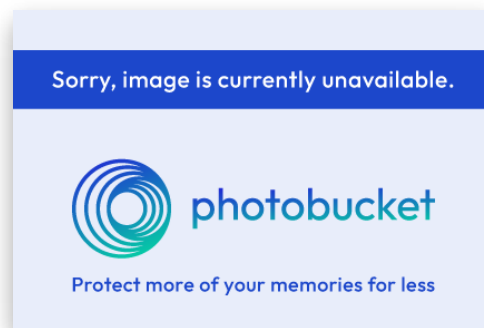
'You'd best thank your mother,' the mirror replied as the door closed behind him.

Chapter 3: Summer After Third Year

Chapter 3 of 8

Severus Snape has one friend at Hogwarts he can count on: Lily Evans. Lily spends summers at home with her beloved sister, Petunia, and in their twelfth summer, the two girls admit the remote, secretive Severus to their private world. Sadly, the older one grows, the more difficult life becomes. What changes will come when other boys begin to come around Lily in her summer hols - and what dangers can come of the dark, violent emotions that burn within a young wizard torn apart by the complications of the ever-darkening world in which he lives?

A/N: Beta reading kudos to Keladry Lupin and to DeeMichelle; as always, MagicAlly Brit-picked for me. I must also give thanks to sshg316 for alpha reading and superior cheerleading.



Unseen

Chapter 3: Summer After Third Year

James Potter shifted his position on the ground, unintentionally jostling his companion.

'Will you watch what you're doing?' Sirius Black complained testily.

James took his eyes from the neat house across the way and glanced at his best friend. 'Who's rattled your cage?'

Sirius moved restlessly. 'It's bloody hot under this cloak, mate and I don't think Evans is going to make an appearance today. Let's go home we can Floo Remus I'll Keep for you if you want to practice.'

James turned his face stubbornly back to the Evans' home. 'Not yet just a bit longer.'

'We sat here yesterday, and all we saw was the family going for a Sunday afternoon stroll and you wouldn't even talk to her,' Sirius complained. 'Tell me again *why* we're here?'

James refused to look at Sirius. 'Stalking my quarry and preparing for the timely pounce and inevitable victory,' he said in clipped tones.

Sirius snorted. 'Right. Brave Gryffindors, hiding under an Invisibility Cloak like a couple of pathetic Slytherins.'

'Put a sock in it.'

'But not one of yours, please.'

James choked back a laugh.

Sirius sighed noisily and rested his forehead on his raised knees.

'There!' James whispered excitedly. 'Someone's coming from the back garden ...'

Sirius looked up quickly, his keen grey eyes tracking the movement of the three figures as they slipped out the gate onto the pavement. Before he could speak, James cursed with the heated fluency Sirius had always envied. Sirius' parents always said that the Potters were a load of blood-traitors; regardless, Sirius thought *this* Potter certainly knew how to express himself.

'... that *wanker* Snivellus!' James spat, completing his tirade.

Sirius whispered, 'So, why is the Slytherin out there with the girl, while we cower under cover?'

'We're biding our time, mate,' James said shortly.

'We're *wasting* our time, mate,' Sirius retorted.

James simply hissed, 'Shut it!'

'Yeah, if Snively could hear with his nose, we'd be done for,' Sirius muttered sourly.

The three across the road stopped at the curb stone as the girl whom James and Sirius did not recognize ran back into the house, soon emerging again with a silken bundle in her arms. Snape said something with a scowl, and the two girls set off at his side, walking with him stride for stride. It was obvious that the three were accustomed to walking together.

James couldn't tear his eyes from Lily, but Sirius was able to note the other two, as well. Snape had grown to be taller than Lily in the last year. At the age of fourteen, he had endured a growth spurt that gave him several inches on both of the girls. However, as had been frequently noted by the boys in the third year Gryffindor dormitory, nothing else about Snivellus had improved. He was, if possible, thinner and weedier, with his beaky nose and fallow, oily skin seeming only to make his shoulder-length black hair more lank and greasy than ever. Whispers regarding Snape's newly-deepened, silkily-snide voice had been heard from the girls in their year, but Sirius could see no factors to mitigate the unprepossessing appearance of the acerbic Slytherin.

The girl with the rolled fabric in her arms was probably Evans' sister. She was about the same height as Lily, with a similarly-shaped face, but there the resemblance ended. The Muggle girl sported a popular layered hair-cut with impossibly bright golden streaks insinuated amongst the mousy-brown locks. In repose, her face was bony, but when she had smiled at Snivellus, Sirius had been able to see the likeness to Lily.

But why in thunder was Evans' sister smiling at Snape?

Giving in to the inevitable, Sirius allowed his gaze to follow that of his best friend James Potter, the only person in the world he would have chosen for a brother, had he been given the option to choose and to rest his eyes upon the glowing beauty of Lily Evans. At fourteen, her body had budded into efflorescing womanhood. Her legs were slender and shapely, her bottom was perfectly rounded, her waist looked to be small enough to span with one's hands and her breasts had disrupted the concentration of boys many years above her. The whole was topped by the unbelievably green eyes, the burnished henna hair, and the lips which could be simultaneously kind and teasing and oh, so kissable.

And this paragon was the single-minded obsession of Sirius' very best mate, James, who had been drawn to Lily Evans from the time they had encountered her on the Hogwarts Express, en route to their first year. In Sirius' mind, Evans belonged to James there was no question; Sirius never thought of her as anyone but the girl James wanted.

Truly.

Sirius watched as the trio passed by, then he was jerked from his absorption by a sudden lurch on the part of his companion.

'Be still!' Sirius whispered. 'Do you want them to notice us?'

'We've got to follow them!' James replied desperately. 'Come on!'

Sirius took a firm, quelling hold on his friend's arm. 'Do you really think we can follow them for Merlin-knows-how-long under the Invisibility Cloak?' he asked as reasonably as he could. 'Let's watch them we'll follow another time, from farther down the lane.'

James hesitated, clearly torn. 'Why would she be with *him*?' he fretted. 'She wouldn't so much as come into *Hogsmeade* with me even after I offered to buy her tea at Madam Puddifoot's!'

'Well, they're in old Sluggie's club together, aren't they?' Sirius said reasonably, able to speak more loudly now that Evans and her companions had moved farther down the street. 'And you know how sweet Evans is she'd be nice to the devil himself if he showed up, needing a friend.'

James turned to Sirius. 'Snivellus isn't far from it, is he? She just has a soft spot for the *weak*.'

Sirius shrugged. 'Right, mate. Look, they've gone beyond the corner. We'll hide down there, next time we come. Let's go now what do you say?'

James only nodded.

Sirius heaved a sigh of disgust. 'You're being pathetic, you know that, right? There's got to be a better way to spend the hols why don't we go give those Ravenclaw birds a treat?' He raised a wicked eyebrow. 'They made it very clear that they would enjoy our company any time, under any circumstances. Why do you want to waste our time on the ONE witch who won't give you the time of day?'

'We'll come back tomorrow,' James said decisively.

Sirius groaned audibly, raking his fingers through his black hair and banging his forehead on his knees.

Severus walked the perimeter of the Kingdom as he did on every visit, checking to see if the various trip-wires had been disturbed. At the beginning of the summer, it had been necessary for him to re-set many of the traps; after his long absence, some had been disturbed by animals. At least, he hoped it was animals. There had never been any sign that their refuge had been invaded by adults or worse, by other kids.

It was a recurring nightmare of his. Ever since they had discovered the Kingdom and begun working to make it their own, he had been plagued with dreams of the space being invaded and defiled by others. The very notion made him twitchy, and he often woke from such dreams in a cold sweat but as these dreams had supplanted the chronic nightmares about Stephy, he had no real complaints to make.

Having arrived at the farthest reaches of the lake, he seated himself under a tree and stared across the water. Pepper had finished the drawing of their coat of arms by the end of the previous summer, and she had spent term time buying, cutting, and fashioning the silks to transform her drawing into a true flag. She had resisted his every attempt to view either the sketch or the sewing of the banner. She and Lily had been eager to have him rig a flagpole, and he had spent the first week of the summer hols finding a fallen branch longer than he was tall, hammering metal rings into it and stringing these with a sturdy cord. For one entire tense day, he had attempted to seat the makeshift flagpole in the ground. He had never cursed so much in front of the girls before, and Pepper had been appalled. Lily had ended up incorporating some of his more colourful epithets into her own vocabulary.

After a sleepless night, the answer dawned upon him. The girls arrived the next day to find Severus assembling his necessary components, and soon he put them to work. By lunchtime, they successfully erected the flagstaff, filling the post hole with firmly packed sand mixed with pebbles, and setting very heavy rocks about the base.

In jubilation, they trooped to the Evans' house for a celebratory meal. Sprawling about the lounge, the three ate sandwiches and watched Blue Peter on the telly. Elsie Evans glared in at them a time or two, but otherwise left them to their own devices. She had no idea what attraction her otherwise tractable children felt for the sullen, ugly wizard boy, but since he treated them still as if they were boys, as well, she left it alone.

Replete from three sandwiches and copious draughts of lemonade, Severus lazed on the floor, his back against a large ottoman. Pepper stacked their plates and fussily carried them to the kitchen; when she returned, a half-grown grey kitten chased at her heels.

'Hullo, Blue,' Lily crooned, reaching a hand to the little cat. 'This is the kitten I told you about,' she reminded Severus. 'He's named for Blue Peter,' she added with a chuckle.

Severus watched the cat suspiciously. He had never had a pet, and although several people in his House had familiars which treated the Slytherin common room as their home, he was not fond of them.

Blue was watching Severus, as well. The normally playful kitten stopped two feet away from the still boy and sat down, curling his tail about his feet as he studied the new specimen in his territory with round blue eyes. After a moment, the kitten stood again and approached Severus, his tail held straight up in the air.

'What does it want?' he said tersely, sitting motionless.

Pepper looked over at him. 'Don't call him it!' she snapped. 'He's a boy aren't you, Blue?'

The kitten's ears flicked briefly at the sound of his mistress' caressing voice, but he did not deviate from his mission.

'Hold your hand out to him,' Lily said quietly, watching the cat boy and the human boy confront one another. 'He just wants to sniff you.'

Aware of the girls' eyes upon him, Severus held his hand out warily to Blue. It seemed to him that the little bugger took an inordinately long time to sniff each of his fingers. At last, the slightly damp nose completed its inspection.

'Are you bloody well done?' Severus muttered.

Blue walked directly into his lap, and after making a circle or two upon Severus' denim-clad legs, curled up and began to purr.

'Look at that!' Lily said, marvelling. 'He likes you!'

'He likes me!' Pepper flared. 'He's mine!'

Lily had fretted over Pepper's increasing loneliness, which had only deepened each year since Lily had gone away to Hogwarts; Severus had been the silent recipient of Lily's distressed confidences. The girls with whom Pepper and Lily had associated in primary school now no longer even pretended to be Pepper's friend. They were in the popular group at school, whilst Pepper did not fit in with any of the cliques. She wasn't clever enough to be a swot, or dissolute enough to be a freak, or pretty enough to be of the popular set. She was without a niche and without her sister and now she even missed Severus during term time! She was simply wretched. To cheer her, the Evanses had procured a kitten to keep her company.

'Well, come get it,' Severus snarled, staring at the creature whose sharp claws were much too close to his crotch. He scowled at it and poked with his finger. Blue retaliated by rolling onto his back and swatting at the finger with his paw, claws carefully sheathed. Intrigued, Severus poked again, and before long, he and Blue were engaged in a mutually satisfying pastime.

Pepper sat on the edge of the sofa, her mouth in a thin line, her fists clenched.

'Leave them,' Lily murmured. 'They're both happy.'

At length the kitten tired of his sport and leapt to the floor, scampering out of the room. Severus then clambered to his feet, overtly brushing cat hair from his legs. 'Let's see the flag, then,' he said.

'When I'm finished,' Pepper stalled. 'I should be done by Monday.'

Severus glared at her. 'After all the bother of putting up that flagpole, you'd better be finished with it then.'

At last, Lily ran up to him. 'Okay, we're ready. And Severus mind you say something nice to Pepper about it.'

He stood up and arched an eyebrow at her. 'Why?'

'Because she's worked so hard on it and it will mean so much to her if you like it,' Lily explained, beginning to walk back around the lake.

Pepper actually looked anxious when they approached El Castillo del Viento. The flagstaff stood between it and the Kingdom bridge, and now the white silk of the flag had been attached. The cord was threaded through the strip of heavy canvas sewn on the very end, just like a real flag, with metal eyes spaced along so that the cord could be passed through.

'Stop there,' Pepper said nervously when they were within six feet of her.

Obediently, the other two stopped, and Pepper pulled the cord so that the flag raised, brilliant jewel tones peeking from the folds of white silk as the summer breeze fluttered through it. When the flag was fully raised over their heads, a good draught caught it and it unfurled in all its vivid colour, and the three stood transfixed by the glory of the standard of the Kingdom of Wyrld.

Centred upon the flag's field of pure white was the coat of arms. The top left portion of the emblem was crimson, and a leaping lioness was represented there, the dark gold of the animal's body further embellished with lavish silken embroidery, outlining her green eyes and brown nose. The bottom portion of the emblem was kelly green; emblazoned there was a silvery coiled serpent, the scales embroidered in a dark grey, its staring black eyes reminiscent of the Slytherin whom it represented. The top right portion was royal blue, upon which a running gazelle was depicted, its graceful form and lustrous hazel eyes, tinted with green, emphasized by skilful embroidery. The

whole of the heraldic device was limned by a ridge of gilt which appeared to have been painted upon the fabric.

After a moment of proudly watching her handiwork flutter in the wind, Pepper turned her attention to Severus, searching his frequently passive countenance for a reaction to her contribution to the Kingdom. He seemed amazed, his dark eyes wide, his thin lips parted in an 'O' which revealed his crooked teeth. Before long, Lily was watching him as well, her gaze travelling from his face to Pepper's and back again.

At last, Lily was the one to speak. 'What do you think?' she asked softly.

Severus looked straight at Pepper, respect on his face. 'I think it's perfect,' he said. 'There's more to you than one might first think.'

Pepper's long face flushed pink to the roots of her artificially lightened hair, and her hony teeth showed in a wide smile of pleasure.

Sirius Black fidgeted miserably beneath the stifling Invisibility Cloak. They had followed Evans and her sister all the way down to this stone wall, which the girls had climbed, and now they had disappeared into the wood.

'Can we leave now?' Sirius inquired, intensely bored.

'No,' James said. 'We're going after them.'

'And how are we going to explain that? "Oh, hullo, Evans we were just passing by and saw you ..."?'

James whipped the Invisibility Cloak away and held it wadded beneath his arm. 'I don't think we have to explain anything we'll just play it by ear.'

James vaulted the wall and Sirius followed suit. 'It would be more fun if Snivellus was with them,' Sirius said. 'I wonder where he is.'

James shrugged as he walked. 'I don't care about that greasy toerag. You chat up the sister so I can talk to Evans.'

Sirius extended an arm in front of James, halting him in his tracks. 'Have you completely lost your mind?' he demanded haughtily. 'Chat up a Muggle with a face like my Uncle Alphard's favourite thoroughbred hunter?'

James rolled his eyes. 'Don't be so bloody particular,' he complained. 'You didn't have any objections to that Ravenclaw bird with a laugh like an African Fwooper.'

Sirius tossed his dark fringe out of his eyes with a move of such unstudied elegance that James was moved to grin.

'Well, as to *that*,' Sirius said, 'the bird in question is a sixth-year.'

James could not argue with this logic; not many fourteen-year-old wizards could engage the interest of a sixteen-year-old witch. He gave Sirius an ironic salute and jerked his head towards the trees. 'Let's go. We don't know how deep this wood is, mate we may have a hard time finding Evans.'

Sirius forged ahead grumbling. 'Move as quietly as you can, and we'll listen for them. Girls can never be quiet. We'll hear them chattering.'

Pepper fetched their flag from El Castillo del Viento and raised it, with Lily standing respectfully before it. They watched the standard flutter in the breeze for a moment before they walked onto the bridge, seating themselves on opposite sides of the waist-high stone sides. Pepper pulled a transistor radio from her pocket and set it on the rock at her side, turning it on and fiddling with the dial, searching for a radio signal.

'I told you it wouldn't work out here,' Lily said.

Pepper made a face at her and restored the radio to her pocket. 'Where is Severus?' she said testily. 'He's supposed to be here.'

Lily gazed over her sister's shoulder, watching the stream burble over the rocks. 'Pepper, do you like Severus?'

Pepper's hazel eyes darted to her sister's face. 'Did he tell you to ask me?' she asked, as if it was a throwaway question of no particular importance.

'Of course not!' Lily laughed, bringing her eyes back to Pepper's face.

Pepper tried to look disinterested, but she knew she had flushed; she could feel the burning in her cheeks. 'Don't you like any boys at your school?' she asked, desperately trying to deflect attention from herself. The very last thing she wanted was Lily's pity or for Severus to know how she, Pepper, felt, if he didn't feel the same way.

Lily wrinkled her nose. 'There are some older boys I sort of liked last year,' she admitted. 'But that was a bit silly of me they would never notice me.'

Pepper shot a sharp look at her. 'Don't be thick,' she said gruffly. 'You're beautiful, Salty.'

Lily surged from her seat to sit by her twin, enveloping Pepper in a sudden hug which had Pepper twisting away from her. 'Stop that!' Pepper said, torn between gratification at the show of affection and distaste at being touched. 'Try to act your age, Lily Anne.'

Lily simply grinned at her unrepentantly.

Pepper was still glaring at her sister when the boys pushed through the undergrowth and emerged onto the bank. She had been expecting Severus, and in her confusion, she first thought one of the black-haired boys in Muggle clothing must be him.

The taller one was carelessly handsome, his grace of movement seemingly as much a part of him as his patrician features. Even so, it was the second boy who caught Pepper's attention. His hair was disordered, his face was rather long, with a mouth just now quirked at the corners in a very friendly way; he wore glasses, and carried a silvery bunch of fabric under one arm.

Pepper found herself instinctively smiling back at the two attractive boys, who were approaching the bridge with matching self-assured swaggers. Lily, on the other hand, was a different story.

'You!' Lily cried, leaping to her feet and pulling her wand from the cunningly concealed pocket worked into her jeans. 'What are you doing here?'

The two boys halted, each of them raising their hands in placating gestures. 'Easy, Evans,' the tall one said. 'Take it easy.'

Pepper looked at Lily, confused. 'Who are they?'

Lily did not answer, but crossed the bridge, stalking the boys menacingly. 'How did you find me?' she demanded, stopping a few feet away, where she could keep her wand trained on them both.

The taller boy began to move to one side, speaking soothingly as he did. 'We were just flying by,' he said, trying to move past Lily on her right side. 'We thought we'd stop by and see how you're enjoying the hols.'

Lily's wand tracked the movements of the tall boy. 'Freeze, Black or I'll do it for you.'

'Come on, Evans,' the bespectacled boy said, drawing Lily's attention back to himself. 'You know you'll just get in trouble if you hex Sirius. Stand down we're only here for a friendly visit.'

The one called Sirius what an odd name! slipped past Lily and sauntered onto the bridge, the full force of his charming smile turned upon Pepper. Helplessly, Pepper stared up at him, her eyes wide, her mouth slightly agape.

'You must be Lily's sister,' he said smoothly, holding out his hand. 'I'm Sirius Black a school mate of your sister's.'

Gobsmacked, Pepper accepted the boy's hand, a tentative smile on her lips. She saw that Sirius' eyes were grey; she felt her heart begin to beat more quickly when he looked into her eyes as if she was the only human being on earth.

'No!'

Pepper dropped Sirius' hand and turned anxiously to the sound of Lily's distress. The messy-haired boy was moving closer to Lily, a teasing expression on his face but Lily did not appear to be amused.

'Potter, if you take one more step I will lay you out try me and see if I won't!'

'Don't mind them,' an enticing voice murmured in her ear.

Pepper turned her face away from Lily to find that Sirius had sat down across from her and was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees.

'They're just joking,' he drawled. 'They're great friends they carry on like that all the time at school.'

Pepper found it difficult to look away from the handsome boy's engaging half-smile, but Lily's voice kept distracting her.

'I'd rather go out with '

'with the Giant Squid,' the one called Potter supplied, his good humour unimpaired. 'Yes, so you've said before.' As Pepper watched, the messy-haired boy stopped smiling. 'Or maybe you'd just rather go out with Snivellus?'

Lily, disregarding her wand, pulled back her empty hand and slapped Potter's face.

It seemed to Pepper that the next several minutes passed in a blur. Sirius jumped up, a wand having appeared as if from nowhere in his hand, and he was running off the bridge. Lily had sheathed her wand and had her hands covering her cheeks, as if amazed at her own actions. Potter had staggered back a bit from the blow, and was wiping away the tickle of blood from his lower lip, but he was still talking.

'I'm sorry, Evans I didn't mean to insult you I know you'd never go out with old Snivelly.'

'Oh, *shut* it, Potter,' Lily cried, pulling her handkerchief from her pocket. 'Whom I go out with is not now, nor will it ever be, your business.' She approached him and dabbed at his lip with the handkerchief. 'But I ought not to have hit you,' she added in a small voice.

With quick reflexes, Potter raised his hand and gently clasped Lily's wrist, holding her hand to his face. 'I don't mind,' he said huskily, looking down into her face. 'It's the most attention you've ever paid me.'

Pepper stood beside Sirius, three feet away from Lily and Potter, her eyes glued to them. Lily made a disgusted sound at the Potter boy's words, but Pepper was entranced. Oh what she would give to have such an attractive boy say something so soft and sweet to her ...

In the sudden quiet, Pepper felt as if they were being watched, and she looked back over her shoulder. Standing before the overgrown hedge, just beyond the bridge, was Severus. He stood as if immobilised by an unseen force, his eyes narrowed, his lips pressed in a firm line. For three beats, Pepper watched him as he stared at Lily and Potter, then he whirled on the spot and was gone, moving silently back the way he had come.

Pepper did not tell Lily about seeing Severus until later that afternoon, after Lily made Sirius and Potter walk with her to where they had stashed their brooms.

'I don't want you see you here again,' Lily said, her hand hovering threateningly over her wand pocket.

Sirius Black sighed with exaggerated patience. 'Evans, why would we come back here? We have plenty of girls to visit who actually *want* to see us.'

Lily's face expressed her incredulity. 'Then I suggest you get busy visiting them, Black I suppose there is no accounting for taste.'

She turned a cold shoulder to him, and Pepper exchanged a sympathetic look with the handsome Sirius Black as Lily began to speak to the other boy.

'I mean it, Potter.'

The boy touched his split lip. 'I believe you, Evans.' He looked at Lily for a long moment before he murmured, 'I won't come back if you don't want me to.'

Lily's hand shot out and closed over the handle of Potter's broom. 'Good. Then you won't mind leaving your Nimbus with me.'

Potter's mouth dropped open. 'Not my broom be reasonable, Evans '

'Reasonable?' she cried. '*Reasonable* would be the ability to go about my business without being stalked. Reasonable would be having a nice day with my sister without being intruded upon by you and your friends. Reasonable would be you having a CLUE that I'm not interested in you, as I have told you time and time again. Now *you* be reasonable and *hand it over!*'

Wordlessly, James Potter released the broom handle.

Lily smiled angelically. 'Don't fret I'll take good care of it for you,' she said, stepping away from him again.

Potter seemed to notice the expression of disbelief on Sirius' face. 'This means you have to go to Hogsmeade with me next term, Evans,' he said with an assumption of audacity.

Lily raised her eyebrows in an expression Pepper recognised as being directly copied from Severus. 'I won't mind being in Hogsmeade with you, Potter,' Lily said solemnly.

'See you the first of September, then,' Potter said and mounted behind Sirius, who kicked off and flew them quickly out of sight.

'I'd go out with him,' Pepper said, her eyes still on the spot where the broom had disappeared.

'You wouldn't, Pep not if you saw the way he acts at school. I've never known anyone more conceited than James Potter.' Lily began walking home, the broom propped on her shoulder. 'Besides, I didn't say I'd go with him I said I wouldn't mind him being there at the same time as me.'

Pepper was scandalised at this flagrant waste of a perfectly handsome boy. 'He's much better-looking than Severus you can't even compare them,' she fussed. 'You should have seen Severus' face when he saw Sirius and James!'

Lily stopped. 'What? What do you mean?'

'Severus came up after you slapped James, Salty, and your hand was on James' face '

'Oh no!' Lily cried, distressed. 'Pepper, why didn't you tell me?'

Pepper sniffed. 'Oh, he was just in one of his snits you know how he gets. He ran off before I had a chance to even speak to him.'

'You don't understand,' Lily said. 'They make his life hell, Pep he fights them and their gang all the time they never leave him alone.'

Pepper's brow furrowed. 'Would Severus be jealous because James touched your face?'

Lily thought about it, beginning to walk again and grabbing Pepper's hand. 'Probably not jealous in the way you mean. Severus doesn't like me that way but he does consider me to be *his* friend not theirs.'

Pepper pulled her hand away from her sister's and walked beside her, completely puzzled over the intricacies of Lily's life at that so-called school.

Mrs Potter placed bottles of Butterbeer on the table before the two boys and gently ran her hand through her son's untidy black mop.

'Don't stay up too late,' she cautioned.

'We won't, Mum,' James said.

'Thanks, Mrs Potter,' Sirius added, toasting her with his bottle.

When they were alone in the kitchen, Sirius took a long pull from his drink and studied his best mate with narrowed grey eyes.

'She doesn't like you,' he began, his voice musing. 'She *hit* you. She *took your broom*.'

James turned mooncalf eyes upon him. 'Isn't she *amazing*?'

Sirius banged his head twice upon the wall for good measure, and Benny the house-elf came running to scold and to shoo them off to bed.

Severus began haunting the villages within easy broom flight of Prince Glen. He hid his battered old broom and walked the streets of nameless places as if he could out-walk his thoughts. He felt unmoored, like a helium balloon which has been released into the ether. He remembered feeling nearly this badly after Stephy was gone, but he had still had their little house at Spinner's End. It had been worse after his mum moved him to Grandfather's house; he had completely lost his centre then, and had been forced to work very hard to find it again.

His first year at Hogwarts had been torture. Mum had allowed Grandfather to escort Severus to King's Cross Station, but seeing the other students engaged in fond farewells with loving parents had simply made him sad. His humiliation upon being discovered crying in a train corridor by two laughing, teasing boys had caused him to burn with shame. Telling them, in answer to their seemingly friendly question, that his name was 'S-severus' had resulted in general hilarity for his interrogators.

'S-severus?' Sirius Black had laughed.

'S-snivellus is more like it,' James Potter had replied, earning forever Severus' enmity.

The Gryffindor boys had soon taught their scorn for Severus Snape to their dormitory-mates, and Peter Pettigrew learnt to call him 'Snivellus' as well to be fair, Remus Lupin had never called him by that name, but he had never defended Severus, either. The loud and frequent ridicule from Potter and Company had earned for Severus the contempt of even his own House-mates, in the beginning but the judicious use of some of Grandfather's hexes in the formal duelling room in Slytherin House had won for him the respect his magical ability deserved.

It had also attained for him the label of 'Dark.'

To be truthful, he had not known those hexes were Dark. Grandfather had certainly used them indiscriminately on an unarmed Severus. When Severus had returned to Prince Glen after his first year at Hogwarts, the first time the old man had attacked him, he had defended himself with all the pent-up hatred his soul contained, and for one short, glorious skirmish, Severus had given as good as he got. That clash had resulted in the sitting and dining rooms being warded in such a way that Grandfather's wand was the only one permitted to pass those portals and if Severus had not been thinking very quickly, it might have resulted in the loss of his wand, as well. As it was, he had managed to escape and to flee the house; he had stayed away until hunger and worry for his mother had driven him back. Grandfather had blackened his eye for him, but he had not been asked to surrender his wand and that had been the black eye he had sported the first time he had gone to Harrogate and found Lily.

Lily. In the end, she had not been his friend. In the end, she had been nothing but a weak, stupid girl. In the end, she had stolen his sanctuary and given it to his enemy.

Each day, Pepper and Lily returned to the Kingdom, but Severus did not. The girls raised the flag and dangled their feet in the lake and ate a picnic lunch at the very bottom of the crumbling in-ground swimming pool and whiled away afternoons lying upon their backs and talking desultorily in the cool of El Castillo del Viento but they did it alone.

One night, in the still darkness of their bedroom, Lily said aloud, 'It was his safe place, Pepper.'

'I know,' Pepper replied regretfully, staring into the rays of moonlight filtering through the curtains. Those other boys had been infinitely better looking but had they been honest? Had they meant the things they said? At least with Severus, you always knew where you stood. 'He won't be back to see us again,' she added, hoping her sister would disagree.

Silence was the only answer she received.

Finally, Severus knew what he must do. He was no longer upset; he was calm and cool. It was a straightforward case of treason, really. He and they had worked together to create the Kingdom, but they had betrayed it, and for that, they must pay.

No, he wasn't angry. He was simply the judge, jury, and executioner.

Late one afternoon, he flew to the Kingdom. His careful surveillance told him the girls were absent. With a cold, self-righteous rage, born of bitter betrayal and decimated dreams, he stormed through their domain, wreaking havoc in every conceivable way. Systematically, he walked the perimeter, disarming and destroying his traps, leaving the nullified bits of twine lying in plain sight. Working with nothing but his own hands, he found and carried large rocks from all around the area to the bridge and piled them from end to end, obstructing passage. It wouldn't keep them out, but they would be forced to cross the stream to reach the Kingdom, now and Pepper, for one, wouldn't like that. The thought brought a grim smile to his face. Good.

Further devilry sent him splashing across the stream, heedless of the drenching of his shoes and robes. He scrambled up the bank and pushed through the foliage until he stood in the clearing with the birdbath. Here it was: the Evans sisters' symbol of childhood imagination. With all his strength, he pushed at it, wishing nothing more fervently in that moment than to see it fall from its pedestal and shatter at his feet.

But the marble was well seated in the earth, and he could not budge it from its moorings. He brought the heaviest rock he could lift over his head and tried to smash the statuary, but the birdbath remained unspoiled. As a final gesture, he gathered fists full of dirt, leaves and grass and piled them into the basin of the birdbath.

Next, he set about dismantling the flagpole. He had already used the anchoring stones about the base to block the bridge; now he pushed, pulled, and heaved to bring the proud flagstaff to the ground. The memories of how they had worked together to design the flag to build and raise the flagpole of their pride when the flag had first flown only served to reinforce the justice of his verdict. As he ripped the cord from the metal eyes of the flagpole, evil inspiration took him. He ran beneath the branches of El Castillo del Viento and removed the jeans and tee-shirt he had kept there. Ripping foliage from every available tree, bush, and hedge, he fashioned a crude effigy by stuffing the clothing with the leafage, tying the armholes and legs of the clothing closed with twine, to retain the shape. When he was finished, he threw the cord over a low-hanging branch and hung the figure wearing his clothing in plain sight.

Imagining the girls' horrified reaction to his effigy pleased the savage desire to make them suffer for what they had done the perfidy they had perpetrated against him. But it wasn't enough the clamouring in his mind was calling, over and again, for blood.

With an ugly, frightening look upon his face, Severus went back into El Castillo del Viento and took up the flag from whence it had fallen when he had grabbed up his Muggle clothes. Uncaring of the mud and filth upon his hands, he tightened his grip upon the pristine white silk, the muscles in his forearms bunching, preparing to rip the flag end-to-end, rending forever the eighteen months of meticulous work Pepper had put into the ensign of the Kingdom of Wyrd.

The next day, standing in the midst of the carnage, Pepper was rigid with anger, the muddied but intact flag in her hands. Lily just sat down beside the broken flagpole and cried real tears.

'Who would do such a thing?' Pepper cried. 'Was it those boys? You should never have taken that broom, Salty!'

Lily looked up at Pepper with an expression akin to pity. Drying her face with her handkerchief, Lily stood and dusted off her bum before walking to the bridge and splashing through the stream to the other bank.

Pepper followed, swelling with indignation. 'Why did you look at me like that?' she demanded.

Lily stood across the stream from her sister. 'Don't you see, Pepper?' she asked. 'Severus did it.'

Pepper *didn't* see. It made no sense to her but she wasn't sure which was worse: her lack of understanding or the way Lily sadly shrugged before pushing through hedge and leaving her alone.

When Pepper arrived home, clutching her ruined flag, she found Lily in the old laundry, where their Mum's washer stood next to the age-old stone basin in which previous generations had laundered their clothing. On a metal stand by the window was a large birdcage, in which a common barn owl lived. The Evanses had determined on their first trip to Diagon Alley that they needed to have a post owl to ensure the ability to communicate with Lily when she was away at school.

Lily was tying a rolled parchment to the owl's leg and speaking as if it could understand her words. Pepper had seen Lily do that before with the filthy bird, but it had always made her feel uncomfortable. Everyone knew that animals couldn't understand human speech.

'Professor Horace Slughorn, Athena. At Hogwarts. And I'll need a mail order catalogue from Dervish and Banges, okay?'

The brown owl clicked her beak and took off through the open window.

Pepper stood in the doorway, her lips pressed tight in a disapproving line. 'You should have closed the door what if Blue had come in here? That horrid bird might have hurt him!'

Lily shook her head. 'Pepper, I've told you Athena won't attack your cat. She's a magical owl she knows the difference between pets and prey.' She approached Pepper and lifted the heavily soiled flag. 'Can it be cleaned?'

Pepper snatched the fabric from Lily and walked to the basin. 'I don't know,' she admitted, 'but I'm going to try.'

Lily came and stood behind her sister, one comforting hand on Pepper's shoulder. 'I'll help, if you'll let me.'

Pepper did not answer, but placed the muddied silk on the counter between them and reached to the shelf above, lifting down cleaning products.

One week later, Pepper stood with Lily in the back garden in the chill of early morning. In her hand, Lily held James Potter's Nimbus 1000, a very fine broomstick.

'I wish you would take me with you,' Pepper said fretfully.

'I can't, Pep I don't fly well enough for that,' Lily explained for the umpteenth time.

'Do you do you think that Potter boy will care if you use his broom?' Pepper asked, stumbling a bit over her question. It bothered her that she got so flustered about boys, but she did adore handsome ones.

'I don't bloody well care,' Lily said flatly, patting the right front pocket of her jeans, making sure she had her pocket money secure. 'What are you going to tell Mum when she asks you where I am?'

'You left before I woke up,' Pepper recited. 'I'm not positive, but I think you might have gone to visit Karen Smith for the day,' she added, naming one of Lily's former friends.

'Good girl, Pep,' Lily said. 'I'll be back as soon as I can.' She kicked off.

'Bring Severus back with you!' Pepper hissed, but Lily was already gone.

On days when he did not fly to a nearby village to wander the streets and try to regulate his thoughts, Severus hid out in the old owlery at Prince Glen. In medieval times, the owlery had been a bell tower, but when a wizard had taken possession of the property, the bell tower had been converted to the much more practical owl refuge. Grandfather only kept two owls, now, and when Severus wasn't lying upon the mildewed mattress in the old caretaker's flat on the ground floor, shooting flies with his wand, he was in the bell tower of the owlery, staring out over the surrounding countryside and making impossible plans.

He sat upon the narrow stone ledge surrounding the belfry, where the owls liked to roost, and made a game of tossing treats to Grandfather's younger bird, an expensive eagle owl called Jupiter. Jupiter started and fluttered to the other side of the tower just as Severus noticed movement on the periphery of his vision. Turning, Severus saw a figure on broomstick angling rather inexpertly for the front lawn.

Merlin's beard it was Lily!

Without a thought, he barrelled down the stairs to the ground floor, flinging the door open and running out to flag her down.

She spotted him and changed her course, making a very bad landing on the grass at his feet.

'Are you all right?' Severus demanded.

'Severus!' she cried, letting the broom drop to the grass and advancing on him.

He stepped back from her, remembering in a rush that she had betrayed him and everything he held dear. 'What are you doing here? Showing off your new toy?' He flung his hand to indicate the broom she had dropped.

Lily stopped, seeming to be a bit put-off by his manner. 'I'm looking for you and the broom is just on loan.'

He scowled at her, trying to ignore the mixed up emotions roiling in his stomach. 'You've found me. What do you want?'

She took another step in his direction. 'I was worried about you,' she said softly.

Worried? His brain attempted to process the idea. No one worried about him not even his own parents. That was obviously a lie. He snorted and did not respond.

Lily spread her hands before her. 'Don't you have anything to say to me? Where have you been?'

He stepped toward her now, aggressively. 'If I had anything to say to you, I would have found you and said it, wouldn't I?' He took another step and was pleased when she fell back from him. 'Why would I tell *you* where I've been? Do you think I want Potter and Black showing up?'

Lily swallowed visibly. 'You don't understand,' she said, pleading.

He sneered. 'I understand! I understand that you betrayed us betrayed the Kingdom by bringing strangers and worse, *that* lot! into *our* special place the place we found we built! it was ours no one else's. How could you?'

When he completed his tirade, he was fairly spitting in her face, so enraged had he become, and so close to her he had drawn. Undaunted, Lily raised a hand to his arm.

'They followed me they waited at my house, and they followed me.'

Severus jerked his arm away from her. 'How *stupid* and careless can you be?' he shouted.

'I didn't mean for it to happen!' she shouted back.

'Well, it did, didn't it?'

Lily took a deep breath. 'I want you to come back.'

Using his superior height, he crowded her. 'I have no interest in forming part of your *court*, Evans.'

'I don't have a court, Severus!' Lily retorted, exasperated. 'They're not coming back! I don't want them!'

'It didn't look that way to me,' he snarled. 'You were petting Potter's face when I saw you.'

'I slapped him and his lip was bleeding. I was wiping the blood off!'

Severus stopped and stared at her flushed face. 'You did?'

'Yes!' she snapped. 'You can ask Pepper if you don't believe me!'

He crossed his arms across his chest and scowled at her. 'They'll be back.'

'No, they won't!' she retorted hotly.

'How do you know?' He was plainly disbelieving.

She stared him down. 'I told Potter I would hex his bits off if he came back.'

Severus gave her a very serious look. 'If I was there, and he came back, I would kill him.'

Lily became very still. 'Well, I think he would rather do without his life than his bits,' she said.

He couldn't help but grin at that. 'Good point, Evans,' he said.

For an awkward moment, they only looked at one another.

'So, now what?' Severus said at last.

Lily reached into her pocket and withdrew a small square box. 'I bought something for you,' she said, looking into his eyes, her heart in her own. 'For us.' She opened the box to reveal a heavy brass medallion, the disc unevenly split, the jagged edges fitting together perfectly. 'See?'

Severus looked at the box, curious. 'What is it?'

Lily took the medallion in her palm, pulling until two fine sixteen-inch chains dangled from her fingers. 'Half for you, half for me,' she said, taking half of the medallion in one hand to show him that there were two separate pieces. 'The medallions are enchanted,' she explained. 'First of all, they're invisible when they're around your neck. Second of all, they each bear a Protean Charm. If you want to see me, you touch the medallion and think the time and place of our meeting. We seal the enchantment when we put them on they are keyed to us we don't even have to use our wands.'

Severus stared at the necklaces, then looked at Lily. 'Do you think this is a good idea?' he asked hesitantly, stalling for time, trying to fathom what she meant by it.

'Yes,' she averred, her almond-shaped green eyes fixed upon his face.

'To what purpose?' he asked suspiciously. 'A bribe?'

'No!' Lily said. 'It's a security item. We can come to one another's aid to protect the Kingdom. If Potter and Black come back or anyone else! I can call for you, and if you need me, you can call for me.'

Severus pondered the necklaces in light of these new suggestions. 'All right,' he said at last. 'I suppose that makes sense.'

Before he could say another word, Lily reached up to place the medallion about his neck, and then she dumbfounded him by throwing her arms around him and hugging him tightly.

'Don't go away again,' she whispered into his chest.

He thought she might have lost her mind, given the irrational progression of her behaviour, but once he felt her body pressed to his, he could not truly object. Severus did not return the embrace, nor did he answer.

A/N: From the Harry Potter Lexicon: Fwooper - Africa: African bird with brightly-coloured feathers. A Fwooper's song will drive the listener insane, so each bird must be sold with a Silencing Charm on it (FB).

Chapter 4: Summer After Fourth Year

Chapter 4 of 8

James Potter finds a way to spy on Lily by using Pepper; we learn the fate of little Stephy; Lily agrees to help Severus in his research, then she and Pepper go with him for a shattering confrontation; in the aftermath, Lily takes the lead in her relationship with Severus.

A/N: Beta reading thanks to Keladry Lupin and DeeMichelle; MagicAlly is my Brit-picker extraordinaire.



Chapter 4: Summer After Fourth Year

Elsie Evans paused in the doorway to the lounge, surveying with some disfavour her daughters and their visitor. Infusing her voice with bright cheer, she said, 'Girls, you have guests!'

Lily, Pepper, and Severus looked up when Mrs Evans spoke. The trio made an interesting study together on the sofa. Lily sat on the far left, the cut-off jeans she was wearing showing a generous length of smooth, well-formed legs. Her top was cream-coloured gauze with a square yoke, which had been elaborately embroidered with bright flowers. Her dark red hair fell past her shoulders. To the far right sat Pepper, whose jeans were intact. Her white blouse bore tartan accents, and her bleached blond hair just brushed her shoulders. The two girls, whose appearance had been so similar in previous years, grew more disparate with each passing month. Lily was slender but curvy; Pepper was painfully thin, with scarcely any feminine shape to her body. Their inquisitive looks as they responded to their mother's words demonstrated their differences, for Lily was guarded and cautious, whilst Pepper was eager and curious.

Their companion, who sat between them, was impassive to the point of taciturnity. He wore faded denims on his thin legs, topped by a rather ratty-looking tee-shirt of indeterminate colour. His black hair was as long as Pepper's and hooked behind his ears; a grey cat was curled up in his lap. At the sight of the visitors in the doorway, he was on his feet with his wand drawn, unceremoniously dumping the indignant cat to the floor, where it walked away with affronted dignity, its tail in the air.

'Thinking of using that, Snape?' James Potter inquired in a falsely pleasant voice, his eyes flicking to the wand. 'What ever will Mrs Evans think?'

Sirius Black spoke from behind Potter. 'Yes, *Severus*, what would Mrs Evans think if you were to wreck her lounge with your little uncontrolled magic accidents?'

Lily stood and drew her wand as well. 'I told you last year, Potter I don't want you here,' she said coldly.

Potter strolled into the room as if he owned the place, giving wide berth to Severus and Lily, and Black followed behind him, keeping a close eye on the drawn wands. They stopped before Pepper, and Potter smiled at her. 'We're not here to see you, Evans,' he said without looking at Lily. 'We're here to see Petunia.'

Pepper flushed bright pink as her mother advanced into the room, saying, 'How nice!'

Severus caught Lily's eye and tilted his head silently toward the door. Lily strode to the door and Severus followed her; before exiting the room, Lily turned back to her sister.

'Come on, Pep it's getting late.'

Pepper looked away from the two charming boys who were smiling down at her; her eyes were slightly unfocussed, as if she had been looking into the sun. Before she could answer, Mrs Evans spoke again. 'Lily Anne, you two run along Pepper has guests; she can't attend to you now.' Turning her back on the two at the doorway, she smiled at the polite, deferential boys. 'I'll bring tea, shall I? Sit down and make yourselves at home.'

'That would be lovely, ma'am,' Black said, taking the seat next to Pepper on the sofa as Elsie Evans brushed past Lily and Severus and hurried down the hallway to the kitchen.

Potter pulled up an ottoman and sat down in front of Pepper, his hazel eyes still smiling into hers. 'Don't worry about us, *Lily Anne*,' Potter said, his tone, in the absence of the adult, now dripping with sarcasm. 'You and Snivellus just run along and play.'

Lily's lips thinned at the taunt, but it was Pepper's gesture, as if to wave her out of the room, that was the final straw. She grasped Severus by the wrist and tugged him into the entrance hall and out the front door.

Lily stood at respectful attention as Severus raised the Kingdom flag, and they remained there for a time, watching it flutter. Severus had been unwilling to rip the flag in half the way he had meant to do on that terrible day the previous summer, but he had soiled it with his hands. Pepper had tried to remove the stains, but had been unable to do so. Lily had finally persuaded her to allow the flag to be taken to Hogwarts, where a female house-elf by the name of Cranny had succeeded in ridding the silk of the mud marks. Lily had tried to reward Cranny for her assistance, but the small creature had declined.

Now Severus and Lily stood side-by-side, much changed from when they had first pushed through the bushes to find the bridge across the stream into the Kingdom. Severus had grown to be half-a-head taller than Lily, and there was a faint dusting of darker hairs on his face now. In many ways, they were infinitely more comfortable with one another, seldom needing words to communicate their thoughts, but in other ways, they were newly awkward. Severus was keenly aware of Lily's beauty and her femaleness, in a way he had not been bothered by those attributes even the summer before. The knowledge that every boy in his dormitory wanted to touch to defile the girl whom Severus regarded as being particularly his own was disconcerting. She wasn't his girlfriend, but she was indubitably a girl, and she was definitely his friend and he vaguely thought he would do something about the rest of it, when the time was right.

Lily turned to him and wrapped her fingers around his wrist again. 'You promised if I would help you, you would tell me,' she said quietly.

Severus sighed and carefully disengaged his wrist from her grip, looking down and allowing his hair to fall forward and cover his face. 'All right.'

He led the way into El Castillo del Viento, and Lily followed. He sat cross-legged and so did she, her knees resting a mere inch from his. Severus pulled a long piece of knotgrass from the ground and held it between his fingers, his face averted, as he began to speak.

'Do you remember the last week of term, when we covered antidotes and inoculations?' He didn't glance up to see Lily's nod; he took it for granted. 'Remember Slughorn talking about the childhood diseases? The one that's incurable?'

'Was incurable,' Lily corrected. 'It was called ' Lily frowned as she struggled to remember. 'Decipio potent I can't remember all of it he said it wouldn't be on the exam,' she added by way of explanation.

'It's called Decipio Potentia Corporis,' Severus supplied. 'DPC for short.'

'That's the disease that befalls children of mixed parentage Muggle and magical. Professor Slughorn said it was really rare,' Lily added.

Severus said, 'Correct. One in three thousand will have it but if it happens once in a family, the odds shorten to three in ten.'

Lily was very still. 'I don't remember him going into that much detail about it,' she said.

Severus' head dipped lower, and his shoulders came up in a shrug. 'I've never told you that my dad is Muggle.'

Lily gasped. 'No! You haven't. But ...'

He looked up into her face. 'But I'm in Slytherin.'

Lily nodded, her green eyes wide with surprise.

He shook his head and looked back down to the grass, methodically tying knots at quarter-inch intervals. 'Yeah. I'm not sure how that happened.'

Lily reached one hand out and laid it upon his knee. 'But you and your mother live with your grandfather I always thought your dad had died.'

His hands stilled, but his eyes remained fixed upon them. 'Not my dad my little sister.'

'Oh, Severus.' Lily's words were breathed, rather than spoken. She moved to her knees and leant over him, engulfing him in an embrace smelling of her prized Charlie perfume and girl sweat. Her cheek rested on the top of his head, and her soft breasts were practically in his face as she hunched over to hug him.

He froze, suddenly prey to wildly conflicting thoughts and feelings which had nothing at all to do with Stephy. He closed his eyes and breathed her scent, feeling the long, fragrant tendrils of her hair sliding over his face. She had hugged him once, the previous summer, but prior to that, he had not been embraced in longer than he could remember. It felt rather nice.

He did not reciprocate, and at last, she released him, kneeling by his side. Softly, she whispered, 'How old was she?'

Severus closed his eyes. Why did she have to know so much? Why did they have to talk about it at all?

'She was two.'

'And you? How old were you when ...?'

He sighed, his voice becoming abrupt. 'I was eight when she died.'

Lily seemed to respond to his discomfort; she sat down again, giving him space. 'She died of Decipio Potentia Corporis?' she said.

Severus nodded.

'But now there's a cure for it?'

He nodded again, feeling a mixture of anger and grief welling in him, obscuring the earlier, softer reactions to Lily's hug.

In a whisper so low, the sound might have originated with the wind, she said, 'I'm so sorry, Severus.'

He bolted then, moving away from her, out of the suddenly too-close confines of the sheltered place, first only walking, then running, setting off through the rowan trees and fleeing down the path along the lake, running until the tears in his eyes had fallen to his face and dried upon his cheeks. He stopped on the far side of the lake and scrubbed at his face with the tail of his tee-shirt, seeing that she had set out to follow him, but that she was walking, rather than running.

By the time she reached him, he had again regained his composure. She did not question him as to his sudden departure nor remark upon any redness of his eyes. She simply stood by his side, looking out at the lake. After a time, she twined her fingers with his and leant her cheek upon his upper arm.

'How can I help?'

The ill-favoured, glowering boy followed the smiling, pretty girl into the Harrogate public library. The girl led her companion into the reference section, where a low shelf held telephone directories from towns all over England. She knelt and made a stack of the books, which ranged in size from thick and multi-volumed, as in the case of London, to small and thin, for many villages.

The boy looked at the stack of books. 'Now what?' he asked tersely.

'Carry them over there,' the green-eyed girl responded, gesturing towards one of the wooden tables surrounded by chairs, which were provided for the use of patrons.

The skinny boy bent and lifted the heavy stack. 'This is ridiculous,' he said darkly.

'It's the only way I can think of,' the girl responded cheerfully, following him to the table and sitting down. She took the top book from the stack. 'Do you have a better idea?'

He sagged into a chair opposite hers, directing a hostile look at her from beneath black brows. 'Now what?'

She opened the book and flicked through the pages. 'They're in alphabetical order. Find the letter "S" and look for his name.'

As if for the sake of form, the boy continued to glare at his companion for a moment, but she was unaware of it; her index finger was already running down the first page of "S"-letter names. With an exaggerated sigh, he pulled the next book from the stack and followed suit.

Pepper laughed as Sirius teased James, and James turned to Remus for help in defending himself. She loved sitting in the midst of these good-looking boys, being the focus of their interest, as she had done for the last three weeks. Even though she could not help but notice how their attentions to her intensified when Lily and Severus were present, she tried not to focus on that. She knew they didn't like Severus. Lily had told her about it often enough! but she didn't permit herself to dwell upon it, beyond that. For now, it was enough that they chatted with her and made her laugh and that James would sometimes take her for solitary walks down the lane, twining one arm about her waist and bending his head to whisper in her ear in a way that made her breathless. She desperately wished he would try to kiss her she would let him do it, of course! but that had yet to happen. On their walks, his conversation seemed to come around rather too often to Lily and what she was getting up to with Severus, but Pepper didn't mind that, so long as James continued to give her long hugs before departing from the back garden with his friends on their broomsticks.

Remus Lupin had come to visit with the other two once before. He was a rather pale boy well, Severus was *pale*, but Remus looked *unhealthy* and Remus was terribly kind, even to Severus, who simply sneered at him and refused to respond to his friendly greetings.

That sunny afternoon, Mum had gone shopping in Manchester, and Lily had gone with her, murmuring a vague comment about visiting the library there. What a swot, to spend such a pretty summer day in the library outside of term time! After a particularly exciting parting with James he had smiled down at her in *such* a way before he left! Pepper walked to the Kingdom. She was too full of good feelings to stay indoors.

She pushed through the hedge and crossed the bridge, surprised to see the flag fluttering in the breeze. As she approached El Castillo del Viento, she could see Severus in the murky shadows beneath the thick foliage; it looked as if he was studying the map he always had with him these days. His head came up when she entered the clearing, and she tried not to be annoyed with the expression of disappointment she saw on his hawkish face.

'All right, Severus?' she said cheerfully, deliberately using one of James' favourite greetings. It made her feel closer to him when he was absent.

Severus stood and came into the clearing, his wand drawn and held at his side, a scowl upon his face. 'Do you have them with you, then?' he asked, his voice low and somewhat threatening.

'No!' Pepper denied hotly, incensed at his unfriendly attitude. 'I know they're not to be invited here! *She* has made that perfectly clear, and you sided with her! I was out-voted!'

Severus noticeably relaxed his stance, tucking his wand away, his scowl easing into a puzzled frown. 'Hasn't your sister explained to you what sort they are?'

Pepper felt her happy mood evaporating. 'I don't need *her* to tell me what to think!' Pepper snapped. 'Perhaps if Lily acted more like a girl, *she* would have admirers, too!'

Severus crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a sardonic look. 'That sounds exactly like your mum.'

Pepper sniffed and tossed her head so that her bleached blond hair flew about her long pinched face.

Severus tried again. 'You know they're only using you, right?'

Pepper felt a rage so blinding that she didn't know she had flown at him until he had both of her wrists held in his ungentle grasp. 'What's up with you?' he demanded impatiently.

'You're just jealous!' Pepper screeched, trying and failing to wrench her wrists from him.

That startled a laugh from him, a sound Pepper had seldom heard, but it only made her angrier. Severus looked down at her from his superior height, his endless eyes glittering with amusement. 'In what way could I possibly be jealous of pompous James Potter?' he asked.

'Because *I fancy him more than I do you!*' Pepper screamed.

Severus dropped her wrists and stepped back from her, the laughter dying from his face. 'Yes, you're right; that's exactly it,' he said sarcastically. 'Nevertheless, when he gets tired of using you to spy on Lily, he'll walk away without looking back.'

In her fury and through her tears, Pepper swung at him again; in a flash he had whirled her around and wrapped her up from behind, his arms like iron bands across her nearly flat chest, pinning her arms to her sides.

'If your sister wouldn't kill me for it, I'd leave you here to scream at the trees,' he hissed in her ear, exasperation clear in his tone. 'I'm not being a git here, girl. I'm trying to help you and I don't ever help *anyone* ask Lily.'

'Let me *go*, you brute,' Pepper hissed back. 'I'll tell my parents how you've mauled me about!'

Severus released her and walked away, shaking his head. In seconds, he emerged from El Castillo del Viento with his broom in hand. Without looking at her or speaking again, he kicked off and was gone.

Remus Lupin reached for his goblet of iced pumpkin juice and moved his bishop. Playing chess with Sirius could be a true challenge when Sirius was actually paying attention to the game. James sat at the other end of the Potters' kitchen table, playing a game of Exploding Snap with Peter.

'Pepper is a nice girl,' Remus said in his quiet way.

'If you like skinny girls with no bobbies and a face like a horse,' Peter said maliciously, darting a knowing smirk at James.

James looked at Remus, ignoring Peter. 'Pepper is all right,' he said.

Remus frowned. 'Do you think it's fair to chat her up just so you can be close to Lily?'

James closed his eyes and sighed noisily, running his hand through his perpetually-disordered hair. 'It may not be fair, mate but can you think of another way for me to do

it?'

Sirius looked from Remus to James and back again, his grey eyes sober, but he did not speak.

'Lily loves her sister, you know,' Remus persisted. 'She's not going to like you any better if you hurt Pepper's feelings.'

James glared at the cards in his hand. 'I'll figure something out,' he muttered.

Remus shook his head and turned to Sirius. 'Can't you talk some sense into him?'

Sirius shrugged. 'I've been trying to talk sense to him about Evans since first year, mate. Good luck with that.' He tossed his fringe out of his eyes. 'Besides - all's fair in love and war, right?' He moved his queen decisively. 'And - checkmate.'

Pepper leant back against her bed and stared at Lily, who was sitting on the floor across from her, leaning against her bed, as well. The lights were off, and the windows were open to the soft summer air. Between them, an array of candles burned, and on the record player, the Bay City Rollers sang *Bye Bye Baby*.

'She died?' Pepper said at last, her hazel eyes wide. She felt really low for being so rotten to Severus that afternoon.

Lily nodded.

'So, was it some kind of cancer, or something? Like leukaemia? One of those that kills kids?' Pepper wracked her brain for an illness that would take the life of a two-year-old.

'No,' Lily said. 'It's an illness that only a wizard child could have and then, only a wizard child with one magical and one Muggle parent.'

'But what about it would make a person die?' Pepper persisted. 'Is it like a severe flu or something?'

Lily stood and went over to her school trunk, rummaging about in it and emerging with a textbook in her hands. 'It's a disease called *Decipio Potentia Corporis*,' she said, returning to her place on the floor and flipping to the back of the book. 'DPC, for short. The name is Latin it means "power ensnared in the body."'

Lily's voice quavered on the last word, and Pepper was disconcerted to see a tear trace its way down her sister's cheek.

Lily read, "'When the child begins to experience the first manifestations of magic, the body is unable to release the power.'" She looked for a moment into the flame of the candle before taking a deep breath and beginning to read again from the text. "'The magic thus ensnared in the child's body perpetrates irreversible damage to the internal organs. The condition is fatal. In most reported cases, the child dies before the age of three.'"

Pepper frowned, saying in some confusion, 'And so his parents got a divorce?'

Lily shrugged. 'I didn't ask that. His father said it was his mother's fault that their baby wouldn't have died if Mrs Snape hadn't been a witch and that he wouldn't risk having another baby with a woman whose very blood was fatal to her own children.'

Pepper tilted her head back against her mattress and closed her eyes. 'That's an awful thing to say,' she whispered.

The girls sat in silence for a few moments, each lost in her own thoughts. At last, Pepper stood and walked across the room, removing one record from the turntable and replacing it with another. 'And now there's a cure?' she asked.

'Yes,' Lily said, closing the book and placing it on the floor beside her. 'We found out in our Potions class that there's been a breakthrough in research. There's a potion which can be given at birth to prevent a child from ever developing DPC.'

Pepper looked up, her brow puckered. 'So, we're going to find Mr Snape to tell him, "Hello if your baby had been born now she wouldn't have died?" Do you think he wants to know that?'

'No,' Lily said. 'Severus wants to tell him that it's safe to come home that if Mr and Mrs Snape have another child, it can be inoculated at birth.'

Pepper placed the needle on the record and looked into her sister's eyes as David Bowie's *Space Oddity* began to play. 'Does Severus think that will make his father want to come home?'

Lily nodded wordlessly.

Pepper simply shook her head. It didn't seem likely.

Suddenly Lily began to laugh. 'Why are you listening to David Bowie?'

Pepper crossed her arms over her narrow chest. 'Why? Don't you like glam rock?'

'Glam rock?' Lily chortled. 'David Bowie is a *wizard*!'

It was a relief to them both to laugh until they cried.

Two days later, Severus was swimming in the lake when the girls appeared unexpectedly through the rowan trees. It was Sunday afternoon, and the Evans girls never came to the Kingdom on Sundays. He shook his head. Why could girls never be depended upon to do what one expected of them?

'Go wait at the clearing,' he called, his hands cupped about his lips.

'Why?' Lily called back, as she and Pepper continued to approach him.

'Just *do* it, Evans,' he snarled.

Pepper pointed to a clump of bushes near the shore. 'Look he's skinny dipping!'

Lily followed her sister's finger and saw the clothing spread out on the bushes. Without another word, she grabbed Pepper's arm and pulled her back along the way they had come.

'We could steal his clothes!' Pepper giggled, glancing back over her shoulder.

'What a foul thing to do,' Lily said repressively. 'Besides, would you really want to deal with *that*? She waited a moment for her meaning to penetrate Pepper's brain. 'He wasn't expecting us it *is* Sunday, after all. We'll give him his privacy.'

Less than ten minutes later, Severus joined them in El Castillo del Viento, his tee-shirt sticking to his wet skin, his hair still dripping. He stood over them, scowling at

Pepper. 'Your parents let you out of the house with a brute on the loose?' he inquired with a sneer.

Pepper dropped her eyes. 'I didn't tell them anything.'

Somewhat mollified, Severus sat down, completing their accustomed triangle. 'I should hope not,' he said flatly.

Lily looked in some alarm at the scratches on his forearms. 'Did you get into a disagreement with an angry cat?' she asked, reaching one finger to hover over the deepest scratch.

Severus raised a mocking eyebrow at Pepper, who sighed. He said, 'Something like that.'

'I did it,' Pepper admitted in a small voice.

Lily huffed. 'You two need to stop whatever you're playing at,' she scolded. 'We have a mission.' She turned to Severus. 'Give me the map.'

He pulled the folded map from the back pocket of his jeans with an exaggerated flourish. 'Yes, madam,' he said sarcastically, darting an exasperated look at Pepper, who grinned in agreement.

Lily spread the map out in the grass. Next to the map, she laid a railway timetable.

'I'm fairly sure I've found him,' she said with scarcely contained excitement.

Severus was immediately intent. 'Where?'

Lily looked up, her green eyes glowing. 'Bolton.' She pointed on the map. 'It's close to Manchester.'

Severus fought to keep his face blank. *They* had lived in Manchester, he and his parents. His father hadn't gone very far away from Spinner's End, had he?

'I've never flown there,' he said. 'How do I get there?'

Lily opened the timetable. 'We get there by train. We can go early, find your father and speak to him, and we can be back before supper.'

Tentatively, Pepper pulled an envelope from the back pocket of her jeans; she reached within the envelope and removed three tickets. 'I've bought our tickets for next Saturday your father is more likely to be home at the weekend.'

Severus sat back, lips pressed together firmly. 'I don't see why *you* need to come,' he said coldly to Pepper. 'I don't want you gossiping to Potter and Black about my business.'

Pepper's face flushed, but she held his eyes steadily. 'This is Kingdom business,' she said. 'I took the same vow *you* took I would never speak to them or to anyone else about it.'

Severus stared into her eyes, his fingertips caressing the smooth length of his wand. He knew Lily was watching him nervously, but he didn't care. He wanted to cast the spell on Pepper and see what she really thought about it. 'Too bad we don't have any Veritaserum,' he muttered darkly.

'Stop it,' Lily said to him. 'If we had it, we couldn't use it it's regulated by the Ministry of Magic.'

Severus rolled his eyes sarcastically, but the subject was dropped in favour of what story the girls would tell the Evanses about their plans for next Saturday and what sort of clothing they should wear to see Tobias Snape. Severus let them talk; he was too busy envisioning his mother's face when he and his father arrived at Prince Glen to take her home to Spinner's End.

On Monday afternoon, Pepper was stunned when she received *four* visitors all at one time. James had brought his friend Peter, as well as Sirius and Remus. Lily had simply rolled her eyes and pointedly raised the book she was reading closer to her face.

Pepper thought Peter was the least attractive of the four boys; there was something rather shifty about his looks. Even Severus, who seldom ever tried to look his best, was better-looking than Peter Pettigrew, she decided.

The boys were quite entertained by the telly, which gave Pepper a lovely excuse for sitting beside James on the sofa, with his arm about her shoulders, just as if he was really her boyfriend. She desperately wished the girls from her school could see her in the midst of these boys no one would ever dare feel sorry for her again, if they did!

Pepper couldn't help but notice when Lily dropped her book into her lap and grabbed the front of her tee-shirt as if it had burned her. Lily then walked into the hallway, and soon afterwards, Pepper heard the front door close.

Severus looked up when Lily entered the clearing; he was relieved to see she was alone. He had used the charmed medallion to call for her, but he could never be sure that she would come without Pepper. He strode across the grass to meet her, stopping with his arms crossed over his chest.

'How could you tell *her* about Stephy?' he demanded angrily. 'I've never told *anyone* until I told *you* - I wouldn't have done if I'd known you were going to blab to Potter's *girlfriend*.'

Lily put her hands on her hips. 'You know as well as I do that she's not Potter's girlfriend, Severus. He's only using her to spy on you.'

Severus was so gobsmacked he allowed himself to be sidetracked. 'Don't be daft, Evans. He's using her to spy on *you*.'

Lily shrugged. 'Whatever that doesn't matter. What matters is that we *need* her for this.'

Severus sneered. 'Why? We don't need a *flag*,' he replied nastily.

Lily punched him on the arm. 'Don't be a prat! *She* had the pocket money to buy the train tickets I don't have that much, and I know you don't, either.'

A shadow passed over his face. 'I'll pay her back,' he muttered, suddenly embarrassed. If it hadn't been important, he would never have accepted the charity.

She stepped closer to him, her green eyes full of what? He couldn't identify her expression, although he had seen it more and more often of late.

'I know you will,' she said, laying her hand upon his forearm and looking guilelessly up into his eyes.

The sunlight glinted on the coppery highlights in her long hair, and for the first time, he was suddenly overcome with the urge to kiss her. Would she let him? Would she hex him?

Stepping away from her, he pulled his pack of Exploding Snap cards from his pocket. 'Fancy a game?' he asked.

She agreed, and the dangerous moment passed.

On Saturday morning, the three stood upon the doorstep of a cheerful-looking terraced house in a nice working-class neighbourhood in Bolton. Severus was nearly green with anxiety, but Lily and Pepper stood sentry on either side of him, both filled with the sense of justice that is the particular realm of those who have yet to be bruised and battered by the realities of life.

'Ready?' Lily whispered to him.

Severus swallowed with great difficulty past his Adam's apple, which bobbed in his throat; he did not answer.

Pepper patted his arm in a kindly way then rapped sharply on the blue door before them.

After a moment, the door was opened and a tall, thin man stood in the doorway. His fair hair was cut short, and his hazel eyes passed over the three teenagers in a friendly fashion. He was quite handsome, with the beginnings of small wrinkles in the corner of his eyes deepening when he smiled at his visitors.

'Good morning,' he said genially.

'Mr. Snape?' Lily said.

Tobias Snape leant a shoulder on the doorframe and nodded at Lily. 'That's me,' he agreed. 'Who might you be?'

At last, Severus spoke. 'Dad?' he croaked from his overly dry throat.

Tobias froze, the smile disappearing, to be replaced by a wary look. His eyes darted to the face of the black-haired, heavy-browed boy. Hazel eyes held black for a moment before the man said softly, 'You're the spit of your grandfather.'

Pepper glanced anxiously at Severus, who looked as if he had just been hit in the stomach by a stray football. She didn't know much about Severus' grandfather, except that Severus lived with him, and that the old man was both unkind and ungenerous. Filled with indignation on behalf of her friend, she wanted to defend him, but had no idea what to say.

'How did you find me?' Tobias asked.

'Phone directories,' Lily responded, drawing his attention to her again.

'Who *are* you?' Tobias demanded.

Pepper saw her chance. 'We're people your son can depend on,' she answered coldly.

A door in the house slammed and running feet could be heard approaching them. Tobias made as if to step out onto the doorstep and close the door behind him, but voices hailed him from behind.

'Daddy! Daddy, we're ready for the park!'

Pepper stood in open-mouthed amazement as three little girls, not one over the age of five, crowded around Tobias, their curious little eyes glued to the visitors. Pepper felt Severus stiffen at her side, and she and Lily simultaneously each took an arm, as if to hold him up.

'Toby? Do we have guests? Who is it?'

The voice of a woman floated to them from the interior of the house, and a cowed Tobias allowed the door to be opened wide as an obviously pregnant young woman joined him in the doorway. She was of medium height, with long golden hair and big brown eyes. She was very pretty. Her hand went automatically to the head of the smallest little girl as she addressed the group on the doorstep.

'Hello,' she said, smiling. 'I'm Trudy Snape. Would you like to come in? Toby was going to take the girls to the park for a bit, this morning to give me a rest.' Her free hand went to her swollen tummy, and she looked up at her husband with great affection. 'He's a wonderful daddy.' She looked back again to the trio before her. 'But there's time won't you come in?'

Severus did not speak, but pulled his arms free and walked down the steps, heading for the street.

'Thank you,' Pepper said, jerking her head at Lily to follow Severus, 'but we don't want to be a bother. We could just walk along to the park and chat with Mr Snape there.'

Tobias' eyes followed the retreating back of his son, and he appeared momentarily torn. 'It's just about a collection for the jumble sale, love. I'll take the girls you go have your lie-down.'

Pepper walked down onto the small patch of front garden and saw that Lily had contained Severus at the curb. Tobias Snape came down the steps with the smallest girl on his hip, her little fists clinging to his shirt; he was carrying a push-chair with his free hand. The two older girls held hands with one another and followed close behind their father, their wide brown eyes riveted upon the strangers. Pepper waited whilst Tobias settled the youngest girl in the push-chair, then she took the handle. 'I'll manage this,' she said briskly. 'We passed the park on the way down the street. You talk to your son.'

Severus walked in silence beside the man who had been the saviour in every wild scheme Severus had ever dreamt of to safely escape Prince Glen with his mother, now feeling as if he had been turned to ash inside. The blinding pain of the reality of three Stephy-look-alike children and a pregnant wife had passed rather quickly; now he was empty inside clean and pure in his fury.

When they reached the park, Lily and Pepper began to play with the little girls, helping them to climb up and come down the metal slide. Severus knew they were watching him worriedly, but he didn't care.

He turned to his father. 'Does *Trudy* know you're already married?' he demanded coldly, his burning gaze fixed upon his father's face.

'Trudy doesn't know about you or your mother, no,' Tobias answered carefully, his expression shuttered.

'Won't she be surprised to find out about us, then?' Severus said spitefully.

Tobias' head snapped up and a serious look settled on his face. 'Don't be foolish, boy,' he said. 'You have nothing to gain by upsetting a pregnant woman with lies in fact, you will lose out if you do something so stupid. I won't give you a brass farthing if you bother Trudy with this.'

Severus straightened, glaring at his father with cold disdain. 'We don't want your fucking money,' he spat. 'I didn't come here for that.'

'Watch your mouth, Severus,' Tobias snapped, uttering his son's name for the first time. His eyes darted protectively to his daughters, who were laughing happily in the company of the Evans sisters.

'Or what, *Father*?' Severus sneered. 'Will you punish me? I'd like to see you try.' He drew his wand and angry green sparks flew from its tip.

'Put it away!' Tobias snarled, suddenly towering over his son with clenched fists. 'My *God*, how I hate magic! Put that thing in my face again and I'll break in half, just like I did hers!'

Severus stared at Tobias. 'You broke her wand?' he whispered.

'Bloody right I did,' Tobias returned. 'Goddamned magic killed our Stephy, didn't it?'

'*She* didn't want Stephy to die!' Severus cried. 'She nearly died herself over it she's still not right, and hasn't been, ever since you left!' He swallowed audibly and played his best card. 'There's a cure for DPC now, Dad an inoculation that all babies receive at birth. Another baby wouldn't die like Stephy did you could come back home, now.'

Tobias closed his eyes and turned his face away. 'I'm sorry,' he said at last. 'I know it's been hard on you but I knew her father would take her in again. You've been provided for.'

Severus grabbed the edge of his tee-shirt and jerked it up to his armpits. 'Yeah, you prick the old bastard has provided for me, all right.'

When Tobias did not turn to look, Severus moved to his other side. 'Look at your handiwork, *Father*,' he hissed. 'You should be proud.'

Finally, Tobias opened his eyes, and the colour drained from his face. Severus' torso was criss-crossed at intervals with vivid red scars.

'It's a slicing curse he used against me,' Severus said. '*She* would have healed me, but he warded my room against her he hates us, you know. He'll never forgive her for marrying *you*, a filthy Muggle, and for having *me*, a worthless half-blood.'

Tobias finally tore his eyes from the horrible scars and looked his son in the eye. 'We were never married,' he said firmly.

'You fucking *liar*,' Severus said, dropping his shirt and taking a threatening step towards his father. 'You were bound in Hogsmeade by a member of the Wizengamot. I've seen the pictures.'

'There were no banns,' Tobias answered firmly, 'no church, no vicar, no signing of the register we were never married. I'm telling you, boy.'

Severus straight-armed his father directly in the chest, knocking him backwards a few feet; Tobias staggered, but did not fall. 'She swore an unbreakable vow when she married you,' Severus said, the magic within him rising and roiling in his rage against the man who had scorned his mother. 'She's fucking bound to you *until you die*.' He brandished his wand, the magic now pouring off of him in waves that even his father could recognize. 'I could help you with that,' he said, his voice now cold and unemotional.

Tobias fell to his knees in terror.

Severus aimed the wand at Tobias' chest, concentrating with all his might on his hatred. He could do it. He could cast the Killing Curse. His mother would be free, and his bloody cowardly father would get what he fucking deserved.

Lily hit him from the side in a tackle which would not have been out of place in a rugby match. She knocked him clean off his feet, deliberately smacking his wand from his hands, her tears wetting his face. 'No, Severus, you mustn't,' she sobbed. 'I can't let you.' She snatched up his wand and held it fast.

Severus shoved her from him in a fury, scrambling to his feet again. 'Hand it over, Evans,' he said dangerously.

'Daddy!' a little voice piped, right behind them. 'Daddy, the big boy and girl are rowing!'

Severus looked over his shoulder and saw the two older girls were clinging to their father, who still knelt in the park grass. Pepper had put the smallest child back in her push-chair and had hurriedly brought the child to her father's side, but Pepper's eyes were fixed fearfully on Severus.

Severus looked the man who had been his parent directly in the eye. 'I don't have a father, and you don't have a son,' he said coldly. His eyes flicked contemptuously over the three little curly fair heads and he added, 'Yet.'

He took his wand from Lily, who offered it to him freely, and he walked out of the neighbourhood park. As he strode away, he felt as if great chunks of himself were falling away and being left behind, but he did not slow down or look back, even when Lily called his name.

Pepper looked down at the Snape family; the eldest child wiped a tear from her father's face and said, 'Why are you crying, Daddy?'

'I don't know, Stephy,' he said, burying his face in the little girl's soft hair.

Pepper snorted in disgust and followed her sister and their friend out of the park and down the street.

Severus did not speak on the walk to the station nor on the journey back to Harrogate. Pepper tried to engage him in conversation, but he did not respond to her, and Lily gently shook her head, encouraging Pepper to leave him alone. When they left the train, Severus walked away from them and Lily tugged on Pepper's arm to dissuade her from following him.

'He doesn't need to be alone,' Pepper objected.

'He prefers to be alone at times like this,' Lily assured her. 'He'll come back when he's ready to talk about it or, when he's ready to carry on as if it never happened.'

The sisters returned home and sat down to supper with their parents, embroidering colourfully on their daytrip to Manchester to visit a friend of Lily's from Hogwarts.

That night, as she lay in her bed, Lily could not settle down. She couldn't stop replaying the events of the day through her mind, seeing the way Severus' hopes had been torn to shreds. She had often seen him when he was really unfit for human companionship it had been part of their friendship, really. If she had been unable to accept his frequently anti-social ways, their closeness would never have evolved.

Rising from her bed, she went to the window and gazed out at the night. It wasn't just worry for him that kept her awake. For months, she had been conscious of her growing feelings for Severus Snape. She held them to her greedily, her own secret of which no one else was aware. She knew it was girl-boy attraction; she had, after all experienced it before. Lily was neither as silly about boys as her sister was, nor as indifferent to them as her mother believed her to be. She had experienced unrequited crushes before, but always on pop singers or boys so much older that she might as well have been pining for a cinema star.

No, this was something entirely new. A feeling as big as what she had felt for Donny Osmond, but applied to a real boy someone she knew. It was simultaneously mortifying and exciting. She had been meticulously careful not to display her changed feelings to the object of her affections. Severus was perfectly capable of shying away from her. She didn't want that. Professor McGonagall had held a class for the fourth year girls last term about how girls mature more quickly than boys. She had explained that girls have to be patient and allow boys to catch up to them.

Usually, Lily Evans was nothing, if not patient.

But now, she felt wild inside. She felt as if the soft air of the summer night was combining with the silvery light of the full moon to incite her soul to lunacy. She had to see him tonight.

Timorously, she pulled the invisible enchanted medallion from the front of her nightdress and held it in her hand, calling him to her. Moving stealthily in the dark, she pulled on jeans, a tee-shirt, and a lightweight jacket. At last, she touched Pepper on the shoulder, rousing her from sleep.

Pepper sat up, disoriented. 'What is it?' she whispered anxiously. 'Are you all right?'

'Pep,' she said, 'you have to cover for me, and I promise I'll do it for you when you need it.'

'Where are you going, Lily Anne?' Pepper demanded groggily.

'I'll be safe,' Lily said, looking into her sister's eyes, her own begging for understanding.

Pepper watched her sadly. 'Don't you want me to come with you?' she asked.

Lily pulled her into a brief hug. 'Not this time, Pep. Don't tell Mum and Dad, all right?'

Pepper gave Lily a push, disengaging from the hug. 'Fine. But you will really owe me.'

Lily managed to drop a kiss upon Pepper's cheek before she walked to their window, where she hoisted herself onto the window sill and scrambled onto the branch of the enormous oak tree outside their window.

Lily paced uneasily along the stone wall beneath the full moon, wondering if Severus would come.

Soon, she saw him as he landed in the field between her and the wood. She hastened to him. 'You came,' she said.

'Yes,' he responded. 'Why did you call me?'

Lily reached out and took his hand. 'I wanted to be with you,' she said, feeling her heart racing in her chest.

He did not pull away from her, as he sometimes did, and she led him across the field and into the wood, passing the marble birdbath, which gleamed ethereally in the moonlight. They passed through the hedge to the bridge. Halfway across the arching stones, Severus stopped, and Lily stopped as well, looking up at him, making no effort to hide from him the delicious recklessness she felt.

He looked down into her face, his expression unfathomable. For once, he did not move away or attempt to manage the encounter to his own comfort. He allowed his broomstick to fall to the worn stones upon which they were standing, and he kissed her.

At first, his nose bumped against hers for a moment, until he worked out how to tilt his head for clear access to her lips. She reached for him, twining her arms about his neck, her hands in his hair. His lips were soft and smooth upon hers, and she wanted the moment to go on forever. When they broke the kiss, she buried her face in his neck, clinging weakly as the clamouring within her urged her for more. He did not release her, but hugged her clumsily, seeming to fumble about for acceptable places to rest his hands. He buried his nose in her hair as he held her, and it seemed to her as if his breathing was as ragged as her own.

After a time she raised her face and looked up at him. 'Are you all right?' she asked, knowing her love was showing, but beyond caring.

'I am now,' he said honestly. 'I couldn't rest, before.'

Lily took his hand and led him through the clearing into El Castillo del Viento.

'Lie down,' she instructed, and miraculously, he complied. He seldom did as she asked without argument, but she knew with a certainty that he would follow her lead tonight. In the midnight dark, they were existing beyond the framework of their usual daily lives.

Lily then laid down beside him. 'Lift your arm,' she said, indicating the one between them.

Severus lifted his arm, and she flowed up against his side, turning a bit so that her cheek rested upon his shoulder; she snaked her arm about him, pressing closer, still.

'Hold me,' she breathed in his ear, allowing her lips then to press the lightest of kisses to the side of his neck.

Severus gasped at the touch of her lips and put his arms about her, turning a bit so that he was facing her. She felt as if a great box of magical fireworks had been set off in her chest, her whole being responding to his closeness. Lily took a steadying breath as rightness sang through her veins like lifeblood.

'Now, kiss me,' she said, offering her parted lips to be covered by his.

The two lay within one another's arms, cocooned in the womb of their Kingdom, the moonlight barely filtering through the dense foliage of El Castillo del Viento. In the velvety summer darkness, they learnt to kiss and to hold one another. If the girl eventually slept in the arms of her cavalier, he remained awake until the dawn kissed the night sky. Then, he woke her and sent her home before setting off for home himself, both boy and girl forever changed by the things which had passed between them that night.

A/N: *Decipio Potentia Corporis* is corrupted Latin which roughly translates as Power Trapped in the Body.

Charlie Perfume was hugely popular circa 1975, as were the Bay City Rollers hence the tartan on Pepper's blouse. Although I received the album *Space Oddity* from my brother for my birthday in 1973, it was re-released in the UK in 1975, and the title song became a huge hit.

MagicAlly has warned me that UK libraries in the 1970's may not have held such a wide selection of telephone directories, but I have taken the liberty of saying it was so anyway. It is my error, not hers.

Chapter 5: Summer After Fifth Year

Chapter 5 of 8

There is a hot, secret fifth-year romance; Lily gains in popularity; Severus and Lily exchange words concerning The Mudblood Incident; Severus schemes of ways to get back into her good graces and dreams of the future; James Potter continues to search for a way to get close to Lily, yet proves to have a decent bone in his body; there is a party at the Evans' home; Pepper meets an interested young man; and Severus makes a sad misjudgement.

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Unseen

Chapter 5: Summer After Fifth Year

Sixteen-year-old Pepper Evans ran lightly down the stairs to the entrance hall and pulled open the front door.

'Hi!' she said happily, stepping back to allow the visitor to enter the house. 'Where have you been? Term's been over for a week!'

The very tall, thin boy stepped into the house; he was now more than a full head taller than she. 'I have a job,' he said gruffly. 'I won't be able to come as often.'

A voice floated down from the first floor. 'Who is it, Pep?' Lily Evans stopped halfway down the staircase and stared at the visitor, her mouth open in apparent fury. 'What the hell are *you* doing here?'

Pepper's appalled 'Lily Anne!' was drowned out by Severus' hot rejoinder.

'We both said *sorry*,' he returned, his black eyes narrowed against the unfriendly stance of his auburn-haired accuser.

Lily sniffed and descended the rest of the way, flouncing past him and down the hallway to the lounge.

'What happened?' Pepper demanded, looking from her twin's retreating form to Severus' glowering face and back again. 'Did you row?'

Neither of them bothered to answer her; Lily disappeared into the lounge, and Severus strode down the hallway in pursuit. Pepper stared after them indignantly. Honestly! Not a full week into the summer hols and Lily and Severus were already arguing. Pepper followed them down the hallway and into the lounge. Lily sat on the sofa, a book held up resolutely before her face whilst Severus stood over her angrily.

'What are you two on about?' Pepper said insistently.

Severus spared her a glance. 'It's a private matter,' he said.

'Private?' Lily screeched. 'You call me a foul name in front of the entire school and you say it's *private*?'

'It wasn't the whole school,' Severus muttered.

'What foul name did you call her?' Pepper asked, coming to stand between them.

'It's filthy,' Lily said angrily. '*Mudblood* it's a word pure-blood wizards use for Muggle-borns. It's the nastiest thing you can call someone in the wizarding world.'

Pepper turned to Severus. 'Why would you do such a thing?'

Severus never took his eyes from Lily's face. 'Ask her what her *friends* said about *me* and how she laughed!'

Pepper frowned. 'What do you mean?'

Severus laughed harshly. 'Oh, Miss High-and-Mighty has a load of new friends now all posh sorts, with smart clothes and fancy ways much too high-class to know the likes of me.'

'There's nothing wrong with having rich friends,' Pepper objected reasonably.

'I don't give a damn how rich they are,' Severus said, his voice low and deadly as he watched Lily, who would not lift her eyes to his. 'Have all the rich mates you want. But when a lot of worthless bints insult a *real* friend, what kind of person *laughs*?'

Pepper snatched the book out of Lily's hands. 'What did your friends say?' she asked.

Lily turned her face away and hunched an uncommunicative shoulder at Pepper.

Severus' voice, pitched to imitate that of a girl, was so full of malice that it was difficult to listen to him. 'Have you ever seen a *greasier* boy? Being touched by him would be like falling into an oil slick. Do you think he snogs his books? No *girl* would snog him it would be like receiving the Dementor's Kiss!' He dropped the girlish tone. 'And never mind the use they can think of for my nose!'

'You weren't meant to hear that!' Lily cried, leaping to her feet. 'I wouldn't have let them talk like that if I had known you were listening!'

'You didn't exactly tell them to shut it when you saw me, did you?' he flung at her. 'You were too busy giggling, as if it was the cleverest joke you'd ever heard!'

Lily took an aggressive step towards him. 'Can you look me in the eye and swear you've never turned a deaf ear to what those Slytherin prats say about me? Considering how they love to whisper it to me in person, I can't believe they aren't twice as dirty in the privacy of their dormitory!'

Pepper could tell, by the way Severus looked away, that Lily was bang on mark. 'Well,' she said, her hands on her hips, 'it looks as if you two get up to nothing but mischief in term time. Why would either one of you act that way?' Neither of them answered her, now each darting measuring glances at the other. 'And what in the world is a demender's kiss?'

Severus rolled his eyes at Pepper, seemingly relieved at the distraction. 'Not *demender* Dementor. They're the guards at the wizarding prison, Azkaban.'

Pepper shook her head; she had no interest in their prattle about that unnaturalness. All she wanted was peace it was summer, Lily was home, Severus would come around, and they would have fun. She couldn't bear to have them rowing.

And, if she was lucky, James would come around, too she had a new haircut and new clothes, just in case.

'Stop behaving like firsties and come drink tea,' she said bossily. 'We have plans to make.'

The previous October

In the back of the Potions classroom beside the stone basin, they grappled, covering one another's faces with desperate kisses. She was so beautiful, her skin silky to the touch, her hair smelling fragrantly of her herbal Muggle shampoo. She had a secret smile that only he saw, and then, only in moments like this alone, clutching, clinging, kissing, sighing, until she was backed up to the wall, her arms about his neck, her hands grasping his hair, stroking his neck, driving him mad, their tongues tangling hotly, only the heavy denim of their jeans preventing their frenzied joining.

'Evans,' he groaned, suckling the skin beneath her jaw, nearly beyond himself with wanting.

She arched her neck, offering her throat more fully. 'Lily,' she sighed, her hand delving under his jumper, tugging his shirt free, 'call me "Lily," Severus.'

Her hand skimmed up his torso until her fingertips danced lightly over a nipple, and he growled, 'Lily,' then, before mimicking her move and sliding a hand beneath her jumper and up to her silk-covered breast.

'Stop it,' she protested, twisting her torso to evade his caress.

'You stop it,' he countered hoarsely, deserting the left side of her neck to attack the right, nuzzling her ear before nipping the skin beneath it. 'You started it.' Nevertheless, he obligingly moved his hand around to her back, contenting himself with the sensation of her bare skin beneath his questing fingertips.

A loud commotion in the hallway alerted them to the presence of other beings on the planet, and they disengaged, putting distance between themselves as Lily tugged her jumper into place, and Severus sat down to disguise his most embarrassing consequence of their activities.

Professor Horace Slughorn, their Potions master, entered the classroom. 'How's the extra credit project coming, then?' he inquired, approaching Lily and peering down into the cauldron she was stirring. 'Well, well,' he said jovially, 'characteristic spirals, mother-of-pearl sheen excellent work, Lily!' He turned his admiring gaze to her pretty face. 'What do you smell, my dear? You can tell an old man I won't give away your secrets!'

Severus looked up sharply as old Sluggie began his usual courtly flirtation with Lily. Severus didn't know how she could stand having the fat prat fawn over her, but she never gave any evidence of distaste when their teacher began his line of flattery. She returned the old man's smile and replied, 'I smell moss-covered stones, my mum's jam-filled scones, and'

Severus watched in disgust as Lily whispered the last bit in Professor Slughorn's ear. The old fraud chuckled and wagged a finger at her before moving over to view Severus' notes of the brewing of the potion.

'Oh, jolly good,' Slughorn said, lifting the meticulously notated parchment. 'The appearance of the potion at each stage of brewing was perfect! I knew you could do it, of course, but it is delightful to see the evidence with my own eyes!' He turned his good-humoured attention to Severus. 'And what do you smell, young man?'

Severus returned Slughorn's look blandly; if he had not worked out how to manage the old scoundrel in his first year, he would never have been able to stomach the idea of spending seven years in Slytherin House. 'I smell sugar and spice and all things nice, sir,' he replied, deadpan.

Slughorn responded with a shout of laughter and a clap on Severus' shoulder. The truth was that Severus smelled the bark of rowan trees, which he associated with the Kingdom, the musty aroma of exciting old books, which he associated with the Restricted Section, and a hair potion called Sleekeazy his mum had it and apparently Lily had worn it as well, at some time or other.

Professor Slughorn settled his bulk on a stool next to Severus. 'So, have you heard the good news?' he inquired chattily. 'The headmaster has gone ball-mad this year. There will be balls at Halloween, Yule, and Easter! Only the Yule ball will be fancy dress, of course but isn't it exciting?'

After what seemed an eternity to Severus, Slughorn stood to leave. 'Decant the Amortentia and clearly label the phials with the dates,' he instructed from the doorway. 'We'll lock this one up in my private stores, please it won't do to have a school full of teenagers with access to the strongest love potion in the world, will it?' He smiled one last time before leaving them to tidy up the Potions classroom.

Severus decanted the potion as Lily labelled the phials in her neat handwriting. They worked in companionable silence, occasionally stealing glances at one another.

It was easy for him to lose large blocks of time watching Lily. Not only was she the object of his now incessant thoughts about sex, but her charm and beauty had suddenly become evident to every male in the castle over the age of twelve and under the age of two hundred. She had been named a Gryffindor Prefect, which gave her a certain visibility amongst the students, but she had also suddenly achieved an annoying degree of popularity. At least, it was annoying to Severus and surely Lily was annoyed about it, as well? She had even sixth- and seventh-year boys asking her out, seeking her out in the Great Hall, out-jockeying one another to walk with her down the corridors, and flocking about her when she strolled around the grounds. That would be enough to irritate anyone.

Wouldn't it?

The fact of the matter was that she seemed to enjoy it. She bloomed a bit under the barrage of adulation from the prats and gits who followed her everywhere she went. Severus, of course, was not amongst their number. No self-respecting Slytherin could be seen in company with a Gryffindor and certainly no Slytherin would ever be seen with a Muggle-born student. No, he could not openly be seen with Lily Evans at Hogwarts. He could only steal time with her during their weekend projects for Slughorn, or in odd, dark library alcoves, behind a good Notice-Me-Not spell.

Lily gathered the labelled phials and began standing them in a small box; Severus palmed one phial and put it in his pocket. One should never pass up an opportunity to obtain an asset one might use in the future; he reckoned the most powerful love potion in existence might bring in some gold at some point in the future.

When Lily returned from Professor Slughorn's private store cupboard, she smiled at him; it wasn't the secret smile, but the one that usually presaged a request he would have to deny. Why did she try to use her so-called charm on him? Didn't she know he would do anything in his power for her without such wiles? And didn't she know that when he turned her down, it was for her own good as well as his own?

'So,' she said, darting a look at him from the corner of her almond-shaped green eyes, 'are you going to ask me to the Halloween dance? It's only two weeks away'

Severus stood and began to put his things away in his bag. 'Don't be daft, Evans,' he said dismissively. 'You know that isn't possible.'

Lily crossed her arms over her breasts and surveyed him through narrowed eyes. 'You'd best watch yourself, Severus I might get the idea that you're ashamed of being my boyfriend.'

Severus became very still, the last word she had spoken echoing and re-echoing in his brain. Such words had never been used between them before. They were Lily and Severus, compatriots in the Kingdom, complete with the addition of Pepper but they were also the beauty of Gryffindor and the beast of Slytherin. He looked curiously into

her face. *'You would be seen in public as my girlfriend?'*

A faint frown appeared between her eyes. 'I am your girlfriend, aren't I?'

Severus felt the chasm yawning at his feet. He had come this far on instinct and emotion, without words being required but now she wanted it spelled out for her. He knew he stood in great danger; it was important to answer correctly. Not with the words that seemed right to him 'If anyone is, you are' but with the words that seemed right to her.

'Yes,' he answered.

She smiled again, and this time it was the open, guileless incandescence that invariably brought him neatly to her feet. 'I'm so glad,' she said softly, flowing into his willing arms and tugging his head down for a kiss.

Severus' job with the apothecary in Knockturn Alley kept him busy five days a week. Lily had been doubtful when he had first told her that a Slytherin alumnus the one with whom he had spent the Easter holiday, in company with his other dormitory mates had found the position for him, but he had insisted that the place was overseen by the great Libatius Borage and would be a perfect learning opportunity. So, she and Pepper only saw Severus at the weekend and really, that was probably all for the good. She didn't need him around more often than that, projecting animal magnetism and allure, did she? Lily was determined that her romance with Severus was over it was much too difficult to have a boyfriend whom one could not acknowledge, yet who was possessive and demanding, anyway. Did he expect her to sit in her dormitory whilst everyone else was going to the dance or coupling up for visits to Hogsmeade? She was young, and these were the years for her to go out with lots of boys and have fun not to worry all the time about why her secret boyfriend was glaring at her in class, or in the Great Hall, or when she saw him out on the grounds. The only time things were okay between Severus and her was when they were brewing whether a potion or a storm of unrequited lust at all other times, he was the dangerous, Dark Slytherin, and she was the popular, well-liked Gryffindor and never the twain would meet.

She and Pepper spent quiet days at the Kingdom, their bare feet dangling in the cool water of the lake, alternately chatting about random things and sitting in companionable silence. Lily had never openly told Pepper that she and Severus had become a couple, but she was sure Pepper had sussed them out, nevertheless. Once Pepper had understood that although Lily and Severus were now polite to one another, their quarrel was by no means made up, she warmed to Lily immeasurably. Did Pepper want Severus for herself? Or did Pepper just want them both to be without a boyfriend?

Lily didn't even want to try to work that out.

Conspicuously absent thus far this summer were James Potter and his attendant acolytes. Although Pepper had ceased to haunt the windows watching for approaching callers, she still ran to the mirror to check her hair and make-up each time the bell rang. Lily had never believed that James was sincere in his pursuit of Pepper, but poor Pep was so starry-eyed about him that Lily didn't have the heart to bang on at her about it.

Pepper should count her lucky stars, really. In Lily's experience, boyfriends were hurtful and difficult.

The previous October

'I don't know what you're babbling about, Evans.'

She dropped her books to the top of the table they had moved into the alcove in the far north corner of the library; the impact echoed through the small room like gunfire.

'I'm talking about going to the Halloween dance with my boyfriend,' she said dangerously.

Severus dipped his head over the parchment he was covering with his spiky handwriting. His hair fell forward, conveniently shielding his expression from her. 'I never said I was taking you to the dance,' he said, continuing to write.

'I've turned down three invitations this week, Severus. I've said I already have a date. You're going to make a fool of me!'

He straightened, glaring haughtily at her. 'No one is making a fool of you but yourself,' he spat. 'Neither of us can afford to be seen in public with the other use that empty head of yours!'

She snatched her books from the table before she stormed from the room, but he was sure he saw tears glittering on her lashes.

*He pressed his lips firmly together and bent his head again over his essay, *Theory of Defensive Magic*.*

He tried to stay away he loathed such affairs but Lily hadn't spoken to him in four days, and he had to know. Had she come with some other bloke? Would someone else touch her? Kiss her? The notion made him wildly jealous and decidedly nauseated, simultaneously.

He entered the Great Hall in the company of the other Slytherin fifth-years and stood against the wall. He was not universally popular amongst the members of his House, but he and the other blokes in his dormitory were mates. Rosier, Avery, and Lestrangle ranged themselves about him. The Gryffindor toerags, Potter, Black, and Company, generally eschewed public confrontations with Severus when his gang was present; apparently, they didn't fancy the odds of four on four as well as they did four on one.

After fifteen long minutes of exchanging clearly audible insulting remarks with the other Slytherins regarding the bloodline, clothing, appearance, and probable personal habits of every non-Slytherin who passed within hailing distance of him, Severus finally saw Lily. She was dancing with Remus Lupin, who held her with a respectful reverence that did nothing to mitigate Severus' rage at the sight of her with the hands of another boy upon her. She seemed unaware of Severus' presence, instead laughing and talking with her male counterpart amongst the Gryffindor Prefects. When the dance ended, she did not make it from the floor before she was claimed by Rafe Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch captain.

Severus stubbornly remained rooted to the spot and watched his girlfriend dance every dance, moving from boy to boy with unimpaired good cheer, the continual admiration of her partners, both verbal and non-verbal, keeping the attractive flush in her cheeks. Every smile she bestowed upon another boy was like a jagged dagger embedded in his belly. His only consolations of the evening came when he saw her decline the dance requests of first Sirius Black, then James Potter.

Severus sat morosely in the belfry of the owlery at Prince Glen, watching the moonrise. It had been three weeks since the end of term four weeks since that horrible day when James Potter had handed Severus the worst humiliation of a life fraught with world-class humiliations. He hadn't meant to speak that way to Lily but surely he deserved some leniency for the situation in which he had found himself! She had, just the day before, laughed at him with a group of girls, not one of whom would ever so much as deign to speak to him, then she had defended him whilst he hung upside down with his pants on display! No man could abide that kind of mortification.

He lowered his face, resting his forehead on his crossed arms. He had a job now. He was earning pocket money he could buy better clothes could afford to take Lily out, if she wanted to go somewhere during their summer break. And in another week, he'd have enough gold to buy the gift he had chosen for her.

It was only two more years of school; then they could go away from Hogwarts, away from the Slytherins and the Gryffindors away from everyone who thought that their

Houses should determine how they felt about and acted towards one another. Perhaps they could buy the land the Kingdom occupied they could build a cottage there, and no one would bother them. He would have her all to himself, and she wouldn't want or need anyone else.

His eyes fluttered closed and he fell asleep, into Lily's arms, where he slept every night, in his dreams.

The previous November

He pressed her ruthlessly against the trunk of the ancient tree, plundering her mouth with his tongue while she stroked the back of his neck with one hand and tugged on his hair with the other. The wicker baskets with which they had been dispatched by Professor Slughorn to collect potion ingredients in the Forbidden Forest lay overturned at their feet. They clung to one another desperately, their urgency increased by the fact that they had spent the two weeks since the Halloween dance scarcely speaking to one another, much less kissing and caressing as they had become accustomed to doing.

This ingredients-collecting expedition had been suggested and arranged by their Potions master and they had begun their walk in silence. But being alone together and frightfully lonesome for one another had been twin catalysts; first they began talking, then they were walking more closely together, then they were holding hands, and then Severus had pulled her to a stop and tenderly kissed her lips. Tenderness had soon given way to recklessness; he insinuated one leg between hers, and releasing her lips, he kissed down to her throat, until he nipped that spot that always made her whimper. She did not disappoint him.

'Are you my girlfriend?' he demanded roughly, his nose buried in her hair, his lips at her ear, one hand caressing her breast through her jumper.

'Yes!' she said, turning her face and capturing his lips, kissing him possessively, her tongue invading his mouth as she arched into the hand upon her breast. 'And you're my boyfriend,' she added as she nipped his throat at the spot that always made him groan. He did not disappoint her.

It was late before they returned to the castle with a scant few potions ingredients, gathered in haste just before their midnight curfew. Each of them was possessed of kiss-bruised lips, red marks upon their necks, and wildly unfulfilled desires.

Oddly enough, neither of them brought up the Yule Ball.

Lily sipped desultorily at her tea and stared out the kitchen window in boredom. Picking up a scone, she began to nibble, her mind far away.

'Isn't that your second one?' her mother said pointedly. 'You ought not to stuff yourself at the table, Lily Anne no man wants '

'... a fat wife,' Lily supplied, dropping the scone on her plate, suddenly bereft of appetite. 'I know, Mum, you've told me every day of my life.'

Pepper sat across the table from Lily with a cup of unsweetened tea and an unused plate, looking smug.

'I only want for you girls to be happy,' Elsie admonished. 'It's hard in this day and age for a girl to find a husband. In my day, there were parties, and dances, and a girl was pursued by a man. Now, I don't know how you can tell the girls *from* the men!'

Lily rolled her eyes in disgust, but Pepper spoke up unexpectedly.

'I think it would be lovely to have a party,' Pepper said dreamily. 'I'd like to meet more of Salty's friends from her school.'

Lily looked up at Pepper with a smile, warmed by the uncommon use of her childhood nickname. Their father still used it every day, but Pepper seldom ever did. 'I wouldn't mind inviting more of my friends to come visit,' Lily said. 'We could have a party.'

Elsie Evans' eyes lit up. 'It would be just the thing to brighten things up around here,' she said. 'A lovely opportunity for Pepper to meet some more boys.'

Pepper wasn't the only one who had missed the visits of James and his friends, apparently. Lily hopped up and brought her mother's date book and pen from the dresser. 'Let's plan it!' she said brightly, glad of a project to occupy her.

The Potters returned from their holiday in France in mid-July, and James immediately began to plan how next to approach Lily.

'Not before you wash off the stink of that Parisian perfume, mate,' Sirius said, vicariously smug regarding his best friend's holiday conquests.

James laughed out loud. 'No, certainly not,' he agreed. 'First wash off evidence of other women, *then* fly to Harrogate.'

'Don't you think if you show up at the Evans' house that Petunia will think you've come to see her, Prongs?' Sirius said lazily, shifting his chair slightly to be more fully in the shade of the oak tree in the Potters' rather extensive back garden. He and James reclined on chaise lounges with a small table bearing fresh-squeezed lemonade between them.

'But Lily won't have that great greasy git hanging about her not after the m-word incident,' James said with great satisfaction, pausing to take a long sip of lemonade. 'You have to admit, Padfoot we were beyond cool, that day.'

The two friends lapsed into self-congratulatory silence, reliving their moment of glory. After a time, Sirius darted a glance at his best mate. James was wearing that fatuous look that overcame his face when he was fantasising about Lily Evans. Poor Prongs was becoming antsy about the girl; in the last year, Evans had become so popular that James and his perpetual pursuit had hardly registered with her.

'Tell me again how you're going to court Lily under Petunia's nose without inciting hysterics?' Sirius invited.

'Simple, Padfoot, old friend *you* are going to chat up Petunia whilst I woo her sister.'

Sirius laughed. 'No, I am not,' he retorted, still laughing. 'I told you how I feel about Uncle Alphard's thoroughbreds.'

James smirked at him. 'Yes, you did. You said you enjoy riding them.'

James screeched like a girl when the icy jug upended itself over his head, and although the house-elf came running from the house with a cleansing charm for the lemonade-drenched James, Sirius felt it was worth being told off by the tiny creature to have retaliated for such a dreadful pun.

In the excitement of tidying up the lemonade spill, a new arrival came upon them unnoticed. 'Don't stop, Nonny,' a warmly laughing voice admonished. 'I could stand here all day and listen to you setting Sirius straight.'

The Potters' house-elf turned to Remus Lupin with her hands on her hips. 'Behave yourself, young master, or Nonny will have something to say to you, as well.'

Remus held up his hands in surrender. 'I'll be good, Nonny, I promise.'

Peter Pettigrew came running across the lawn. 'Got off at the wrong house,' he puffed, brushing ashes from the sleeves of his robes.

Sirius snorted. 'Only you, Wormtail, at the age of sixteen, have yet to master the use of the Floo Network.'

Peter scrunched up his nose. 'It's harder than it looks,' he said, flopping down on the grass besides James' chair.

Remus pushed Sirius' feet onto the ground and sat down at the end of his chaise. 'So, Prongs,' Remus began, 'Padfoot says that you were a busy buck amongst the witches of Paris.'

Peter's eyes got very big. 'Tell!' he said with enthusiasm.

James' response was pre-empted by the house-elf, who spoke before hurrying back into the house. 'Owls are coming for you, Master James,' Nonny said, pointing in the distance.

At that moment, all four boys looked up at the sound of wings, and soon, a tawny barn owl lit upon the arm of James' chair, offering his leg. In a flurry, three other birds landed amongst the boys, each offering a message to them.

Sirius was the first to rip the envelope open, at which point he began to laugh. 'I was certain these were our O.W.L. results, but they aren't looks like you won't have to scheme for a reason to go to Evans' house on this date, Prongs we're all invited to a *party*.'

Pepper stomped her foot. 'Explain it to me, you great oaf! *She* won't tell me anything!'

Severus kept his face impassive, not permitting himself to look hopefully beyond Pepper for the approach of her sister. 'Where is she?' he asked with an air of indifference.

Pepper shrugged impatiently. 'A boy I don't know came to call he's some sort of captain of a team, I believe anyway, she stayed behind to *entertain*.' Pepper managed a creditably nasty sneer on the last word, for which she received a nod from Severus. She sighed heavily and turned away from him, walking halfway across the bridge and sitting on the edge. When she was seated, she looked up at him.

Severus sighed; he was such a slave to his own good nature. He joined her, taking the seat across from her. 'I can't come to a party at your house with other Hogwarts students surely your sister explained that to you.'

Pepper stamped her foot again. 'It makes no sense! What difference can it make to anyone?'

'It's impossible for you to understand,' he said dismissively.

'I may not be a witch,' Pepper screeched furiously, 'but I'm *not* stupid!'

Severus frowned at her. 'I never said you're stupid. It's not a matter of intelligence. There are attitudes and ideas that you can have no understanding of because you live outside of the wizarding world. I just can't come to your party, that's all.'

Pepper sighed noisily, and Severus watched her covertly through the curtain of his hair.

At last, she stood and walked towards El Castillo del Viento. 'Aren't you coming?' she called without looking back. 'I brought non-exploding playing cards *now* we'll see who plays a better hand of gin rummy.'

The night of the party was lovely and clear, the half-moon rising in the sky amongst the stars. The Evans' back garden was littered with broomsticks, and the lounge fireplace had been cleaned ruthlessly so that attendees could Floo in, if they preferred. Elsie Evans moved through the good-looking, well-behaved young people, making sure the refreshments did not diminish, whilst Lily held court in the middle of the room, basking in the attention of no fewer than eight different boys. Petunia hovered unhappily near the edges of the group. That nice Remus Lupin went out of his way to be kind to Petunia, but her eyes kept following the Potter boy, who seemed to be avoiding both of her daughters. Instead, she saw him slip out the front door, without even little Peter Pettigrew following him.

James took a deep breath of the soft summer air and strolled along the lane. The party was a waste of his time. Lily was surrounded and ignoring him, whilst Petunia was watching his every move with sad, puppy-dog eyes. Remus had been right; it had been wrong for him to play up to the poor girl just to keep an eye on Lily. Ah, well one could only live and learn. Petunia would get over him soon enough.

As he walked past the lighted windows of the houses on Claret Drive, he was surprised to hear crying. Curious, he followed the sound into someone's front garden and found a small boy huddled beneath a tree, sobbing.

James squatted down beside the child. 'What's wrong, mate?' he said softly, tugging a clean handkerchief from his pocket and pressing it into the hands of the little Muggle boy.

'K-kitty,' the boy blubbered, holding the handkerchief as if he had no clue of its uses. 'Kitty's up the tree!'

James glanced over their heads at the towering oak, not dissimilar to the one in the Evans' front garden. 'Up *that* tree?' he asked.

The boy nodded, his tears abating as he watched James with hopeful trust. 'Pa said Kitty will come down when she's hungry,' he confided, 'but she's too *little* to come down by herself.' This thought sent him into a new paroxysm of tears.

'There, there,' James said, removing the handkerchief from the boy's hand and putting it to good use, 'no use crying about it, is there?' he said practically. 'If I bring Kitty down, will you promise not to cry anymore?'

The boy did not struggle against the ruthless wiping of his wet cheeks. His eyes were fixed worshipfully on the Grand Being who had happened upon him in the dark. Robbed of the power of speech, the child simply gave his head a solemn nod he would indeed promise not to cry if Kitty was restored to him.

'Excellent,' James said. 'Now, we should shake on it.' He extended his hand politely, and the little boy grasped it with his own undoubtedly grubby paw. 'My name is James, by the way,' he added. 'What's yours?'

'Robin Howard Burk,' the boy replied dutifully, 'but me mum calls me Robby.'

James grinned to himself. 'Well, Robin Howard Burk, you turn your back and keep a look-out for bad guys whilst I fetch Kitty down from the tree, all right?'

Excited by the notion of bad guys lurking in Claret Drive, but unafraid, due to the presence of his large friend, Robby crept to the edge of the garden and looked suspiciously up and down the road. Taking the proffered opportunity, James whipped his jacket off and lifted his wand, saying softly, '*Accio* Robby's kitty!' With a hiss and a screech, a kitten was ejected from the tree, and James caught it neatly in the improvised sling of his jacket.

'Kitty!' Robby cried, running back, his post forgotten.

'Kitty's a little upset,' James said, keeping the small feline bound up in his jacket. 'What do you say we let her go inside the house?'

Robby had no objection to make to this suggestion, and James shook Kitty free in the front hallway. 'Thanks, James!' Robby said before chasing after his pet.

James smiled to himself as he walked back to the Evans'. Apparently, there was some good to be got from this evening, even if Lily was too busy to give him the time of day. He would have to ask his father to submit an Emergency Magic Dispensation Request to the Ministry in the morning. True enough, it would be the fourth time this summer, but Dad had a contact in the Improper Use of Magic Office Mafalda Hopkirk had been a family friend any time these last thirty years.

Only Wormtail jumped on him after he returned indoors. 'Where did you go?' he demanded. 'That Ravenclaw bloke is really getting on with Lily!'

'Is he?' James said, taking a glass of punch from the refreshment table. 'We'll just have to see about that.'

Lily stood before the mirror on her dressing table, staring at her reflection. The midnight blue satin had been a good choice to complement her hair and her complexion; her mum really did have good taste for clothes. Pepper had looked well in her sea foam green satin, as well; the colour had brought out the green in her hazel eyes. Pepper had looked her absolute best, her Farrah-flick hairstyle faultlessly done, the expensive blond streaks in her hair lighting her face in a flattering way. The sad thing was that none of the boys had paid much mind to Pepper. The boys who weren't clustered about Lily were paired up with other girls from Hogwarts; no one had evinced much more than polite interest in Lily Evans' Muggle sister. Remus had been kind to Pepper, as he always was, but James and Sirius had simply been bored, and beyond devilling the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff boys by asking their girlfriends to dance, James and Sirius had enjoyed very little sport, that night.

Of course, there had been no Slytherins in attendance, even though one had received an invitation.

As if in answer to her thought, the invisible necklace about her throat heated up against her skin; he was calling to her. Well, she wouldn't go. He could have come to the party if he had wanted to see her, couldn't he?

Lily sat on the edge of her bed to pull off her tights, and Pepper entered the room. 'Did you and Mum put all the food away?' Lily asked.

Pepper nodded, removing her shoes and carrying them to her wardrobe, where she replaced them in the box in which they had come, tenderly stuffing the tissue paper into the toes. 'It was a nice party, wasn't it?' Pepper said, her voice strained, as if she was determined to put a brave face on it. She pulled her dress off and placed it carefully on a hanger, meticulously adjusting it to hang properly before replacing the hanger in the wardrobe.

Lily looked at the pinched, unhappy face of her twin sister and felt a twist of terrible guilt in her stomach. 'Oh, Pepper,' she whispered, standing and going to put her arms around her. 'Never mind them.'

For a moment, Pepper allowed Lily to press their cheeks together. 'Why couldn't we look more alike?' Pepper croaked, obviously fighting tears. 'Why couldn't I be a witch, too?'

Lily Evans held her sister whilst she cried, knowing that Pepper's hot tears were falling upon the midnight blue satin, but not caring. How had they grown so far apart? Before her Hogwarts letter had arrived, she and Pepper had been inseparable, virtually indistinguishable from one another. In the last five years, they had done nothing but grow more different with every passing day. She knew that Pepper missed her knew that Pepper's life was not happy when she was absent but now, it seemed that Pepper's life was unhappy even when she was home. Was it wrong for her to be happy in her life as a witch? To enjoy being a pretty girl pursued by boys? To revel in her popularity? Was it her duty as a good sister to be miserable because Pepper was miserable?

The two girls sat on the edge of Pepper's bed, their arms about one another, rocking back and forth. Pepper cried and Lily murmured, stroking the bleached-blond, hairsprayed Farrah-flick. After a time, the storm of tears passed, and Pepper accepted the box of tissues Lily fetched from the dressing table. Without speaking further, Lily brought Pepper's nightdress and Pepper obediently put her hands up to be dressed, like a child. With a sigh of exhaustion, Pepper then slipped beneath the bedcovers and closed her eyes.

Lily turned off the bedside lamp and wandered over to gaze out the window at the night, her heart in turmoil. She didn't want to be like Pepper she was glad she was pretty glad she was a witch glad boys liked her! It wasn't wrong for her to be happy it was down to Pepper to find her own way in the world, just as Lily had done.

The medallion heated again, and it seemed to Lily as if she could feel Severus' impatience. Well, in many ways, she had known this summons would come tonight. Hadn't she half meant to goad him when she had chosen the date for the party?

With sudden decision, she slipped her bare feet into the black flats she had worn with her dress and went to the door.

'Don't go.'

Lily turned from the door to see Pepper's open eyes in the ambient light of the room.

'I'll be back soon,' she whispered, going to bend over Pepper and smoothing the hairspray-matted hair from her sister's forehead.

'You won't,' Pepper said, turning her face away. 'You'll be gone all night, just like last time.'

Lily looked down at Pepper, torn.

'Go on, then,' Pepper said.

Lily didn't speak again, but crept from the room, moving soundlessly down the staircase and letting herself out without disturbing anyone.

Severus paced the clearing beneath the starry sky and tormented himself with mental images of Lily with another bloke. Lily, kissing another boy letting him put his hands on her receiving and ignoring Severus' summons so she could be with someone else.

He cursed and kicked at a stone. Wasn't that the purported purpose of the medallions? To call for one another?

He felt a sudden cold fear in the pit of his stomach. What if she wasn't coming? What if she was no longer his girlfriend? What if he had forever lost her?

Panicked, he grasped the medallion again. *Come to me, Lily*, he thought and then resumed his pacing.

When she came, it seemed to him as if Nimue herself approached him from the Kingdom bridge. She wore a dress which shone black in the moonlight, her skin appeared as white as ivory, and the dark red of her hair framed her face. She walked straight up to him and into his arms; he read her intent quickly enough to meet her scorching kiss with his own heat, and the endless weeks of not touching her fell away as if they had never happened.

He swept her up and carried her beneath the low-hanging branches of El Castillo del Viento, and they lay together as they had done that night exactly one year before. He rose over her, as he had not done then, and covered her body with his own, the two in all their clothing yet finding ways to move together in driving defiance, their touches, whispers, and kisses carrying them into that haven that existed only for them, and beyond, to places they had not yet been.

When the moon had reached its zenith, they walked hand-in-hand by the lake, saying more true things to one another with their silence than they could have hoped to speak with words. At last, Severus stopped and looked down into her shadowed face.

'You chose tonight for your party because of the date?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said.

'Did you truly think I would come? Or did you mean to punish me?'

'Both neither I don't know.'

She turned from him and began to walk back the way they had come.

'Where are you going?' he demanded.

'Home,' she replied. 'It's late. I'll be missed.'

'No no, wait,' Severus said. 'I have something for you.'

Lily stopped and turned back to him, her curiosity piqued. 'What do you have for me?'

Severus fumbled in the pocket of his trousers, then pulled out a black velvet cube.

Lily became very still.

Confused, Severus held the box out to her. 'Take it I bought it for you.'

She continued to stare at the box but did not reach for it.

Severus frowned and snapped the box open himself. 'It's a ring,' he said, thrusting the box at her again.

Lily took a step back from him. 'I was afraid it might be,' she said.

'It's it's not a cheap one,' he said, despising the desperation in his voice. 'I saved up for it.'

'I can't accept it, Severus,' Lily said sadly.

He took another step towards her, his tone soothing. 'Of course you can girls accept rings from their boyfriends all the time.'

Lily looked at him, then, her face tilted up, her expression pained. 'I thought you understood,' she said softly. 'We can't be a couple anymore, Severus I told you that before. We're just friends.'

Severus clenched his jaw. 'Not a couple? Well, what would you call what we just did? Do you carry on like that with all your *friends*, Evans?'

Lily turned her face away from him, and he was treated to the sight of her lovely profile. Pulling in a ragged breath, Severus fought to maintain control. 'It's a Plight-Troth ring that's all,' he said, his tone coaxing. 'It's an old-fashioned wizarding custom, but it would work for us. Since we can't be together at school, it just signifies that you've exchanged a promise with someone' he let the words trail off, unable to complete the thought aloud in the face of her cold silence.

Lily stepped away from him again, not even bothering to look at the ring he held in his hands. 'I shouldn't have come, Severus. I'm sorry. Let's just pretend I wasn't here tonight.'

She turned then and began to run, and he stood like a fool in the moonlight, a scorned gift in his hand, and a sudden, rending pain in his body as the hope that had been Lily his sustenance and his reason receded in her wake whilst she vanished from his vision.

Finally, he wanted nothing more than to collapse, down into the earth, but he could not bear to remain in the place which had so betrayed him. Moving with great difficulty, as a man who had gone fifteen rounds with a prize fighter, he returned to the clearing. The velvet box tumbled from his benumbed fingers, and he did not bother to look at it again before mounting his broom and flying away.

Pepper woke up with a pounding headache, but a nice hot shower washed away the vestiges of her feeble outburst of the night before. Lily was still sleeping, her duvet pulled firmly over her head. Pepper dressed and went down to breakfast.

'Good morning, dear,' her mother said, looking up from the announcements page, which she read whilst sipping her unsweetened tea and eating her unbuttered toast. 'I hope you won't mind running that folder of paperwork out to your father's office this morning?' She inclined her head toward a manila envelope on the dresser. 'He meant to take it himself, but he forgot it.'

'Oh, all right,' Pepper said, preparing her own tea and toast.

'You should wear the blue dress and fix your hair, before you go,' Mrs Evans added.

Pepper made a face. 'Whatever for?'

Elsie straightened her spoon, making certain that it lay at a perfect right angle to her teacup. 'A girl should always look her best, Petunia Anne you never know when you're going to meet Mr Right and you should always be prepared. Besides, haven't you said you'd like to go to work at Grunnings when you leave school?'

Pepper nodded unenthusiastically she had to work somewhere, didn't she? Unless she found someone to marry, of course. She sighed heavily and pushed her breakfast away, untouched. 'I'll change clothes,' she said and walked out of the kitchen.

Elsie Evans waited until she heard the girls' bedroom door close before she picked up the phone and dialled her husband's office. 'Yes, she'll be along soon. Is the young man there?'

Pepper knocked on her father's office door; when a male voice called, 'Come in!' she did but she was quite surprised to see a stranger sitting before her father's desk.

'I'm sorry,' she said, embarrassed. 'I thought this was Mr Evans' office.' She turned to go, but the man rose to his feet.

'No, please don't go! You're in the right office. Your father asked me to step in and speak with you he was called into a meeting, unexpectedly.'

Pepper turned back, paying more attention now to the young man before her. He was of medium height and on the portly side, with very little neck. His hair was dark, and he had a rather impressive moustache. He was dressed with great propriety, in a business suit with a rather dull necktie. The most appealing thing about him, though, was that he was looking at her with keen interest.

'My name is Vernon Dursley,' he said, offering his hand. 'I'm one of your father's sales assistants. And you're Pepper, aren't you?'

Pepper took his hand and tried out the coquettish, corner-of-the-eyes look she had practiced before the mirror. She had meant to use it on James, but this rather beefy young man seemed pole-axed by it. 'I'm Petunia,' she corrected, favouring him with a smile as she allowed him to take her hand.

After having a nice mid-morning tea with Vernon Dursley, who seemed quite sorry that they had not met in time for him to have been invited to her party as if he could have come to a wizarding party! Pepper went to the Kingdom. It was not the weekend, so Severus would not be present, and Lily was undoubtedly just now rising from her bed. It would be nice to be in the most peaceful place she knew to mull over the idea of a man who was unabashedly attracted to her, unlike James Potter, who had always left some room for doubt as to his intentions.

Pepper stopped by the marble birdbath and smiled, running a fingertip along the edge as she pondered. Why was it that the young men of her acquaintance the ones at school, and now Vernon seemed sadly dull in comparison to Severus and James and Sirius?

She slipped through the passageway they had created through years of pushing through the hedge and smiled at the sight of the stone bridge arching across the stream. She felt strangely light-hearted and hopeful this bright summer's day. She crossed the bridge and spied something bright twinkling from the ground before El Castillo del Viento. From ten feet away, she identified the cube as a jeweller's box and quickened her step, a strange dread crawling up from her tummy into her chest, making her heart beat faster. Unmindful of her nice blue dress, she dropped to her knees and lifted the box before her face. The tiny fire opal sparkled valiantly, in spite of its light coating of dust. Pepper pulled the gold ring from its velvet bed and her eyes went unerringly to the inside band. Pepper had never received such a gift from anyone, but she was fully conversant with the proper customs.

Tilting the ring just slightly, she read *SS/LE Eternally*.

Severus had brought a gemstone ring for Lily one which bore a remarkable likeness to an engagement ring and Lily had left it laying in the dust.

Pepper never understood why she cried for so long, sitting in the dirt in her good dress, the ring which was not hers glinting on the third finger of her left hand.

A/N: SubHub was puzzled by this, so let me remind you that Sirius referred once before to Pepper's likeness to Uncle Alphard's horses, in Chapter 3.

House Points to the clever reviewer who can pick out the hopeful mention of a happy future for Severus in this chapter.

Chapter 6: Summer After Sixth Year

Chapter 6 of 8

We see the aftermath of the "prank," Lily spends more time with James and meets his parents, Pepper and Severus make a bargain.

A/N: I am coming very close to the end of this story we will have one or two more chapters and I am determined to be finished and posted before 7/21. For that reason, I am posting this chapter before receiving notes from my betas and Brit-picker. Keladry Lupin, DeeMichelle, and MagicAlly will return their notes and I will come in and make their suggested corrections. In the meantime, Minuet99 was kind enough to give the text a quick beta, and sshg316 had some terrific suggestions regarding the storyline. If anyone finds a glaring error, please don't hesitate to e-mail me at severuslysubversa@gmail.com so I can make the corrections. Keep in mind that the speech of the intoxicated persons is incorrect on purpose!



Chapter Six: Summer After Sixth Year

Using a long branch he had found in the Forbidden Forest, Severus pushed the knot on the Whomping Willow. His heart was thundering in his chest, his ears filled with its pounding and with the gasping of his breath. He knew he had done this before, that it had been a bad idea, but he could not prevent himself from doing it again. He had to descend into the tunnel, had to find out what Potter and Black were getting up to had to obtain the revenge he so richly deserved for all the wrongs they had done to him. He crouched to enter the opening in the tree roots, noticing for the first time as he did so the enormous shaggy black dog watching him from several feet away, its unnaturally pale eyes bright and unblinking in the preternatural light of the full moon.

Descending into the tunnel, Severus whispered 'Lumos!' as he had done on each of these repetitive, fruitless trips into the belly of the Whomping Willow, his back hunched over a bit so his head would not bump against the tunnel ceiling. An unearthly howling began then, but he went forward, his wand held aloft, casting a weak light before him. The howling was growing closer as he continued and was now interspersed with snarls and growls, as of a ravaging beast. He knew he ought not to go forward, but it was as if he had no choice but to continue on, his terror increasing with every step. Sweat beaded on his face in the close confines of the passageway, and the downward slope of the surface forced him to hurry when he knew he ought to slow down, to turn back.

Finally, he realised that he was seeing some light ahead of him; he was reaching the end of the tunnel. The walls and ceiling gradually widened, and he was able to stand completely as the passage opened towards the source of the light. The beastly sounds had halted, which he found worrying, but he wasn't sure why. When the howling stopped, he became aware of another sound, as of muted footfalls approaching the way he had come.

'Snape!' a voice called, a quiet shout.

Glancing back, Severus saw a figure running toward him.

'Snape, go back!' the voice hissed.

Suddenly, the figure materialised from the gloom, and James Potter was upon him.

'Fuck off, Potter,' Severus spat. 'I'm going to see what you and your little friends have been up to!'

Potter grabbed Severus by the collar and jerked him backwards, even as Potter hurtled past him. 'GO BACK!' Potter bellowed.

Furious at being man-handled, Severus turned to argue, only to be jumped from behind and knocked flat on his face. He felt his right wrist snap as he tried and failed to break his fall.

'Dammit!' Severus swore as four clawed paws scrambled over his back. He heard low-throated growling and wondered how the beast which had been ahead of him had got behind him. Rising gingerly to his knees, he snatched up his wand with his left hand and cradled his aching wrist against his chest. From directly before him came now the growling of two creatures. Still crouched, Severus raised his head, and his mouth went as dry as the dust beneath him. The great pale-eyed black dog had leapt past Potter and had flung itself bodily at the huge creature which had appeared at the end of the tunnel undoubtedly the original source of the howling. The massive, hairy beast caught the dog with a mighty paw and threw it from him as if it was a rag doll; the cur yelped as it hit the wall.

'Get out, Snape,' Potter called one last time, his eyes glued to the wolf-like creature with the tufted tail. 'Go! Now!'

Good God a tufted tail?

Severus staggered to his feet, and in the fraction of a second his eyes had been turned away, a magnificent stag had replaced Potter and was rushing the snarling monster. The antlered head was lowered, catching and pushing the snarling, snapping werewolf back, away from Severus.

With an enraged roar, the werewolf swiped at the stag, and it lurched to one side, its flank colliding with the wall. In that moment, the amber eyes of the monster became fixed upon Severus, and the creature bounded past the black dog and the dazed stag, landing upon Severus and sinking its fangs into his throat.

With an audible cry, Severus sat straight up in his bed, drenched in sweat. His hands grappled his throat, reassuring himself that he had not been bitten - the bite always took place in his dream, but had not occurred in reality. His heart was pounding so fast and his breathing was in such short panting gasps that he felt as if he'd been running a race.

Throwing the bedclothes from his body, he pulled his clothes on and climbed out the open widow of his ground floor bedroom. The nightmares came almost every night, now, and he could seldom get back to sleep. He couldn't bear to simply sit in his room and wait for morning. Striding across Prince Glen's lawn in the dark, his wand at the ready, his senses strained for the sight or sound of danger, he reached the old bell tower unmolested and climbed up to the belfry.

From here, he could keep watch.

Pepper reached the front door first, with Lily directly behind her, and pulled it open to find Remus Lupin standing there.

'Hi, Pepper,' he said, seeming genuinely pleased to see her. 'Hello, Lily,' he added, smiling over Pepper's shoulder.

'Come in,' Pepper said, stepping back to allow the brown-haired boy to enter. She watched with a pinched expression as Lily linked arms with Remus.

'It's lovely to see you without the entourage,' Lily said, smiling up into Remus' face.

Pepper ground her teeth and turned on her heel, heading back for the lounge. She had seen the helpless look of adoration in Remus' face when Lily had turned on the charm. It was disgusting, truly. She flung herself onto the sofa and picked up her magazine again. Blue, the cat, looked up when she came into the room, and he sauntered over and leapt into her lap. Pepper began to pet him, thankful that Blue, at least, preferred her to her sister.

Lily and Remus entered the room behind her and seated themselves on the sofa as well. After a few moments of chatting about their hols thus far, Remus said, 'I actually came for a reason, Lily.'

Pepper cut her eyes over to Remus' face; he was looking very earnest.

Lily smiled at him again. 'Well, then?' she invited.

'Remember when you came to see Severus in the hospital wing the last week of term?'

Lily nodded. 'All of you were there except for Peter. Are you going to tell me what happened? Severus wouldn't give me a straight answer.'

Remus glanced cautiously at Pepper, who immediately trained her attention back on her magazine. Lily followed his glance and said, 'You can speak in front of Pepper we don't have any secrets.'

Pepper didn't roll her eyes, but she wanted to. Lily kept plenty of secrets from her. She had never confessed to her romance with Severus and it had to be a romance why else would Severus have given her the fire opal ring? Still, it was a nice thing for Lily to say and it would save Pepper the trouble of eavesdropping on them. She looked up at Remus, managing a bland, disinterested air.

'Of course,' Remus said diffidently, smiling kindly at Pepper. 'You know why I was in the hospital wing, right?'

Lily nodded and patted Remus on the arm. 'Yes, I know. Don't I always come to see you when you spend a night there?'

Remus took Lily's hand and gave it a squeeze. 'Yes, you do,' he agreed. 'You're the most *accepting* girl I know.'

Lily gently removed her hand from his, and Remus continued. 'James, Sirius, and Severus all received their injuries at the same time.'

Lily shook her head. 'I *asked* Severus if he had been duelling with them again, but he wouldn't tell me he didn't explain anything to me, really.'

Remus took a deep breath and released it slowly. 'Let's go back a bit. Do you remember the night you and Sirius met on the Astronomy Tower?'

Pepper's ears perked up, and she cut a sharp look at her twin. Lily and *Sirius*? Granted, Sirius was a very handsome boy, but Lily had always seemed to despise Sirius as much as she did James Potter. Honestly, did Lily have *no* self-control? Was she going to snog every boy at Hogwarts before she left school there? Did all witches conduct themselves with such a lack of decorum? Well, Pepper would never behave that way although she sometimes thought she would like a chance to.

Lily had the grace to blush. 'How could I forget it? I thought he was going to let James throw him off the Tower! He never even drew his wand!'

Remus looked very grave. 'It was very bad of Sirius,' he said soberly. 'Sirius knows James fancies you he ought never to have asked you out.'

Lily became absorbed in fiddling with the band of her wristwatch. 'He didn't ask me out, precisely.'

Remus let that pass, but Pepper was dying to question her about it. If Sirius didn't ask her out, what was Lily doing alone with him on this Astronomy Tower? Pepper could make a shrewd guess as to their occupation.

'The point is,' Remus said, 'that James found out about your ... assignation from gossip in the common room.'

Lily looked up indignantly. 'Gossip from whom? No one knew I was meeting Sirius except for Alice Frobisher and I know *she* wouldn't tell! Not after as many times as I've covered for her sneaking out to see Frank!'

'No,' Remus said, 'it was a group of third-year girls who were talking about it. *They* heard it from Calladora Yaxley.'

Lily's mouth dropped open. 'That grass of a Slytherin girl? I gave her lines three times last year!'

Remus grinned. 'I guess she wanted a bit of revenge, then.'

'Well, how did you find out about all of this? And what does it have to do with Potter and Company all being in the infirmary at the same time?'

Remus frowned. 'Sirius was pretty angry about James finding you two together that night. They had a huge row not just on the Astronomy Tower, but later, in our dormitory. James basically told Sirius to get lost, and Sirius was furious. Next day, he questioned the third-year girls, tracked down the Yaxley girl, and scared her into admitting she heard all about it from Severus Snape, in the Slytherin common room. Yaxley said Severus didn't tell her personally; he was chatting with his gang, and she just overheard him.' Remus studied his hands, the backs of which were marred with scars of old injuries which looked to Pepper like scratch marks. After a moment, he said to Lily, 'I don't really believe in coincidence where Severus is concerned.'

Lily laughed sourly. 'Neither do I. He must have done it on purpose, knowing that Calladora Yaxley would spread the story far and wide. But how does Severus find *out* about everything I do?' She stared fretfully out the window for a moment, her lower lip clamped between her teeth.

Remus tactfully kept silent, but Pepper couldn't contain herself. 'He *cares* about you, thick-o!' she scolded in a fair imitation of their mum's best recriminating air. 'You should be thankful.'

Lily grimaced at Pepper, then spoke again to Remus. 'I still don't see what this has to do with all of you being in the hospital wing.'

'Right,' Remus said. 'Well, Sirius was very upset to be at odds with James it's not just friendship with them, you know it's almost as if James is the only family Sirius has, because he's not at all close to his brother, Regulus. And, being Sirius, he blamed Severus for the argument, rather than admitting that his own behaviour led to James' anger. As the days went by and James wouldn't accept Sirius' apology, Sirius started looking for ways to get back at Severus. He finally came up with the perfect plan; he only had to wait for the next full moon to put the plan into action.'

Remus stood, suddenly seeming to be too antsy to keep his seat. Beginning to pace, he said, 'Severus hates us, you know, Lily. With some good reason, I will admit. Every time there's a problem between him and us, he goes to his Head of House, trying to get us into trouble. Sometimes it works sometimes it doesn't. After that incident last year the one where you tried to intercede and Severus called you a bad word Severus took his case to the headmaster. He wants us out of school. He watches us all the time, looking for something anything to have us expelled.'

Remus paused for a moment in his pacing, looking back at the girls. Pepper was watching him as if he were a program on telly she had forgotten Lily was even present. Seemingly satisfied that he had their attention, Remus continued his story. 'Sirius knew Severus would jump at the chance to get us into trouble. He wrote a note to Severus, telling him how to reach our secret hideout the place I go to, once a month and told him to go there after moonrise on that night.'

Pepper interrupted. 'But Severus would never be stupid enough to go somewhere that Sirius told him to go,' she objected. 'He hates Sirius. He would never trust him.'

Remus nodded at Pepper, as if she was a student who had given a good answer in class. 'You're absolutely correct, Pepper. So, he charmed the handwriting to appear to be Lily's.'

Lily started up, outraged. 'He did what?' she screeched, her green eyes flashing fire. 'Oh, Sirius Black, you slimy git! Just *wait* 'til I get my wand on you!' She pinned Remus with her gaze. 'What did they do to him when he went there? What does he think I sent him into?'

Remus returned her look resolutely. 'He found ... me.'

Pepper frowned, turning her attention to Lily. What was so awful about Severus finding Remus? As she watched, Lily's expression went from confused to comprehending to horrified.

'Is he ?' she whispered, swaying a bit on her feet.

Remus took hold of her arms and held her steady. 'He's fine, Lily he wasn't harmed.'

'But he was in the hospital wing!' she cried, her hands pressed against his chest.

'Listen to me!' he entreated Lily. 'Sirius was so full of himself he couldn't keep his mouth closed. He bragged to Peter what he had done, and Peter shared the joke with James, thinking James would be pleased to know they had finally got properly revenged on Snape. James went after him, Lily James pulled Severus out before he could be hurt.'

'But James was in the hospital wing, too and Sirius they were *all* hurt!'

Remus looked rueful. 'James didn't pull Severus out before there was some ... excitement. Severus fell and broke his wrist; Sirius had a concussion, and James' shoulder was dislocated. But Madam Pomfrey had them all sorted out within a day.' His amber eyes flicked once in Pepper's direction. 'No one will have any *lasting injury* from what happened that night. It was just a prank.'

Lily threw Remus' hands from her arms. 'Just a *prank*? Severus could have been *killed*! Oh, what *doesn't* Sirius deserve I should do to him?'

Pepper pushed Blue onto the sofa cushion and stood as well. 'Do you realise that you're making no sense?' she demanded. 'Why would Severus going to some hideout where Remus was cause him to die? That's just stupid!'

Lily took a deep breath. 'I'm sorry, Pep I had no idea what Remus was going to say. We should never have discussed this in front of you.'

Pepper crossed her arms. 'Don't be sorry just tell me what you're talking about.'

Lily shook her head. 'I can't. It's a secret, and it's not my secret to share. I *can* tell you that there was a Dark magical creature there; it could have killed Severus, or done him lasting harm.' She looked back to Remus. 'But James pulled Severus out of danger?'

Remus gave her his attractive crooked smile. 'James saved Severus, at great personal risk. The Dark creature could have hurt him just as easily. Even Sirius made an effort to help, once he saw James go to help Severus.'

'Why on earth wouldn't Severus tell me all this when I went to see him in the hospital wing?' Lily wondered.

'The headmaster said it created a life debt between them,' Remus admitted. 'I don't reckon Severus was very happy about that to owe a life debt to the person he most hates in all the world.'

Pepper was fuming. A Dark magical creature? What a load of codswallop! She had never seen a magical creature, and she did not believe in their existence. It was all some stupid dramatic row between the boys, with Lily at the middle of it. Pepper refused to think about how thrilling it would be to have two boys fight over her; she couldn't bear to spend another minute dwelling on Lily's unfair good luck. She flounced back over to the sofa and determinedly picked up the magazine, trying desperately to look as if she was no longer listening to Lily and Remus.

'I want to thank James, Remus will you take me to Godric's Hollow?'

Pepper managed to wait until the front door closed behind them before hurling her magazine across the room.

The next afternoon, the girls took their bottles of Coke out into the back garden, settling down on the lawn furniture in their shorts and sleeveless tops to enjoy the sunshine. When he arrived, Severus was so stricken by the sight of them there, together, that he did not immediately remove his Disillusionment Charm.

Pepper sat very primly in her chair, knees together, ankles crossed, only her smile as she answered a comment of her sister's indicating any relaxation on her part. She still wore her hair in the style Lily had stigmatised as a "Farrah-flick", with the hair sweeping back from her long, thin face in a very unnatural way, held in place by some Muggle hair potion. Although bones jutted from her clavicle and wrists, her legs were rather nice, with particularly delicate ankles. She wasn't pretty would always be unseen, most likely, when in company with her sister but she had a slender body, and for some men, that was enough to make her attractive.

Beside Pepper, Lily lay in a boneless heap in a chaise lounge, every line of her body proclaiming her leisure. The dark red hair, which usually hung half-way down her back, was twisted on top of her head and pinned in a careless manner, permitting loose tendrils to curl about and frame her face. Lily's body was curvaceous, with ample breasts, a small waist, and flaring hips above her smooth, shapely legs. To Severus, she was beauty personified, and seeing her made his groin ache.

Feeling a bit like a voyeur, he removed the charm. Pepper's hand flew to her chest, as if to slow her heart rate. 'You startled me!' she complained.

Lily simply rose from her place and ran to him, throwing her arms around him. 'How could you not *tell* me about the terrible trick Sirius Black played on you?' she said, her cheek pressed to his chest. 'I swear I wasn't the one who wrote that note!'

Severus resisted the urge to crush her to him, contenting himself with patting her on the back, supremely conscious of Pepper's eyes upon them. 'Yeah,' he said, 'I worked that out by listening to Potter and Black scream at each other.'

She released him and stepped back with a cheeky grin. 'I'll bet it was like listening to an old married couple quarrel,' she said. 'Come in it's time for tea.'

Pepper sat at the kitchen table and watched Lily and Severus making their tea, using magic at every possible juncture. She found it fascinating. Now that they were all seventeen, Lily and her other sixth-year friends could use magic whenever they wished. They also now could travel without broomsticks or fireplaces. Magic could be useful for some things, Pepper supposed.

Severus had grown so tall that she and Lily only came up to his shoulder. He seemed to be moving with more self-assurance now, and when he teased Lily, there was an expression in his eyes that made Pepper burn with jealousy. Oh, what she would give to have a boy look at her that way just once in her life!

It was lovely to have him there, though; when all three of them were together, she felt a certain sense of comfort that no longer existed when she and Lily were on their own. Lily was so full of herself and talked so much about all that unnatural wizarding business that Pepper felt as if they barely knew one another any longer. She wished that she could prevail upon them to go with her to the Kingdom, but she knew it would not happen; Severus had never, to her knowledge, been back there since that day last summer when she had found the abandoned ring in the clearing. Lily would go with her, but had no patience for flying the flag or exploring the grounds; Lily had said they were too old to play there like children any longer.

Severus placed the steaming pot of tea on the table before Pepper and seated himself, whilst Lily put a plate of sliced pound cake beside the teapot before taking her place. Pepper waited until they were settled, then said, 'Shall I be "mother?"'

Severus and Lily both smiled at her and agreed, and the three of them settled to a lovely, companionable tea; it seemed to Pepper as if they all felt truly at home for the first time in a long while.

The next Saturday afternoon, Severus was sitting on the sofa in the Evans' lounge between the girls when the front bell rang.

'I'll get it!' Pepper said, popping up from the sofa.

'All right,' Lily said, keeping her place.

Pepper came back smiling, her arm hooked possessively through James Potter's. 'Look who's here!' she said brightly.

James stopped just inside the doorway, his eyes settling on Severus. 'Snape,' he said, inclining his head politely.

Severus sneered from his place on the sofa. 'Potter,' he spat.

James turned his attention then to Lily, and his expression softened visibly. 'Hi, Lily,' he said.

Lily smiled at him radiantly. 'Hi,' she replied.

James cleared his throat and said to her, 'I wonder if I could speak with you about the thing we were talking about before?'

'The ... thing?' Lily said, confused.

James tilted his head towards the hallway. 'Yes you remember'

Lily stood, comprehension dawning. 'Of course!'

'Perhaps we could take a turn down the lane?' James said. 'It's a beautiful day.'

Elsie Evans materialised in the hallway as Lily said, 'That would be nice let's do that.'

James smiled down at Pepper, disengaging his arm from hers. 'You'll excuse us, won't you, Petunia?'

Pepper crossed her arms in what appeared to Severus to be a protective gesture and shrugged her indifference. James held his hand out to Lily, who took it, and the two of them exited the room. Mrs Evans stepped in, eyeing Pepper with some concern.

'He has manners, James Potter,' Mrs Evans said, slanting a disparaging look at Severus.

Pepper laughed scornfully.

Mrs Evans turned her back on Severus. 'Why don't you call that nice Mr Dursley from your father's office?' she said to her daughter. 'He's called four times this summer and you haven't spoken to him yet.'

'I'll think about it, Mum,' Pepper muttered. 'Really, I will.'

Mrs Evans huffed. 'See that you do, Petunia,' she said as she left the room.

Pepper flung across the room and sat down next to Severus, her face stormy.

'Who's Mr Dursley?' Severus said. 'He sounds like an undertaker.'

Pepper sniffed. 'That just shows what you know,' she sneered. 'He's a sales assistant twenty-three years old and he *fancies* me.'

Severus lifted one inquiring brow. 'Then why do you waste your time on Potter?'

Pepper closed her eyes and turned her face away. 'Don't talk about it.'

Severus saw the tears on her cheeks with some dread. Crying girls were not his speciality. 'Just don't be stupid about it,' he said roughly. 'Potter waltzed in here and walked out with your sister right under your nose.'

Pepper turned on him angrily, her eyes red with tears, her face pale and blotched, her lips pulled back over her horsey teeth. Severus had seldom seen her look less attractive. 'He walked out with her right under *your* nose!' she retorted furiously. 'Don't you *care*?'

Severus glanced down, the curtains of his hair falling forward to shield his expression. 'Why should I?'

'You don't care what your *girlfriend* does? Or who she does it with?'

Severus' head jerked up and he glared at her dangerously. 'What do you know about that?' he asked silkily.

Pepper shrugged, attempting disinterest. 'Nothing from what she's *said*, if that's what you mean.'

Severus felt the faint hope plummet; he had been foolish to imagine Lily might have confided something of her feelings for him to her twin sister. 'That's my look-out. You tend to your own business,' he said, his face showing nothing of the rise and fall of his spirits.

'Well, why don't you just *go*, then!' Pepper cried, leaping to her feet, her hands placed petulantly on her hips.

'Are you chucking me out?' he asked lazily, making no move to rise.

'Why would you want to stay? *She* isn't here!'

'Do you mean to say that I'm not welcome to come to see you?' he inquired.

'You're not going to use me just to be near her, the way *he* did,' she hissed. 'I'll see you in hell first!'

Severus chuckled. 'Language, Miss Evans,' he taunted softly.

Pepper gasped, as if a bit amazed by her own heat. 'I mean it!' she blustered.

Severus sat forward suddenly, resting his forearms on his knees, his intense black gaze fixed on Pepper's face. 'Do you believe that I'm the sort to take advantage like that?'

Pepper's brow puckered. 'Aren't you?' she asked.

He laughed briefly. 'Probably. But I wouldn't do that to *you*. You're my friend.' His voiced dropped in volume. 'You were with me in Bolton. I won't forget that.'

Pepper sat down suddenly, her bravado gone. 'That's a really decent thing to say,' she murmured.

Severus smirked. 'It is, isn't it? Don't get used to it.'

Pepper giggled and punched his arm; Severus grabbed her wrists to prevent further attacks, only to have her completely subside, her wide hazel eyes fixed on his face, her breath coming in little panting gasps. She seemed ... excited. He felt strangely drawn to her in that moment, his body responding to her surrender in a way which confused him mightily.

Hastily, he dropped her wrists and stood, suddenly awkward. 'I'd best be going,' he said, avoiding her eyes.

'You'll be back tomorrow?' she asked with breathless expectancy.

'Your mum hates it when I show up on Sundays,' he said. 'Another time. G'bye.' Concentrating on his destination, Severus turned on the spot and deliberately disappeared with great determination, feeling as if he had just escaped a very dangerous situation.

Pepper sat on the sofa in the lounge, her heart racing wildly, looking at her wrists, where she still felt the grip of his long, slender fingers. Good heavens! What had *that* been about? She had never been this ... discomposd before, not even two summers before, when James had given her those long good-bye hugs. She pressed the palms of her hands to her cheeks, which felt as if they were on fire. She needed to think and she wanted to see *him* again. Soon.

Severus entered the bell tower and threw himself down on the mattress in the unused caretaker's room, his brain in a whirl of confusion. What had *that* been? He'd never felt such a thing for Pepper before he's never felt that strongly about anyone but Lily and these emotions were different than the ones he felt for Lily. Where had they come from? What was the meaning of it?

Regardless of the reasons, there was a problem to be dealt with. After warding the door against intruders, he unbuckled his belt.

The previous April

Severus returned from his Easter holiday at the home of the wealthy Slytherin alumnus, Lucius Malfoy, on the Saturday night before classes were to resume for the Summer Term. It was a bit nerve-racking to visit in such a posh place as Malfoy Manor, but Professor Slughorn had told him Malfoy would be a good contact to make; so far, old Sluggie had been bang on the mark. Malfoy had procured a summer job for Severus at Ye Old Apothecary in Knockturn Alley the year before, and Severus had been promised the job again for the coming summer. The putative shop owner was Libatius Borage, the author of the textbook used by the sixth-year N.E.W.T. level Potions class, but Borage seemed to take his orders from Malfoy. Severus had learnt a great deal the summer before working with Borage, and he was grateful to have a

job lined up again. If Borage continued to be impressed with Severus' ability, he might offer Severus an apprenticeship after Hogwarts.

There had been some interesting people in attendance at the Malfoys' home both last Easter and this; the difference between the two visits was that on **this** trip, Severus had been introduced to the guest of honour, Lord Voldemort. The great man had held Severus in private conversation for nearly thirty minutes, speaking with great intelligence about Potions work and flattering Severus about his prowess in brewing. Lord Voldemort had hinted that there might be a job for such a gifted potioneer in his lordship's own organisation when Severus attained his N.E.W.T.s. The casual mention of the types of respect and gold earned by Lord Voldemort's associates was very tempting to Severus as was the unmistakably Dark aura about the older man.

Severus had just dumped his trunk in his dormitory and returned to the Slytherin common room to do a bit of light reading before the fire when the two fifth-year prefects stumbled in. Nicholas Flint and Portia Greengrass were a couple, and they were all over one another the moment the portrait closed behind them.

'Take it elsewhere, Flint,' Severus sneered. 'If Slughorn finds you intoxicated in here there'll be hell to pay.'

Portia hiccupped and the two idiots began to laugh, as if it was a great accomplishment. 'We're not intoxicated,' she objected. 'You should see that Gryffindor slag, Evans she's completely **pissed**.'

Severus sat forward. 'You were drinking with Gryffindors?' he said disgustedly. 'Have you no standards?'

'Well, the fifth-years who stayed to study for O.W.L.s just had a little party to celebrate,' Flint explained incoherently.

'Celebrate what, exactly?' Severus said. 'You don't sit your O.W.L.s for another two months.'

Greengrass giggled. 'Shelebrate studying. But the Prefects horned in on the party the Evans bint drank half a bottle of Firewhisky all on her own.'

Severus stood. 'We can't have the Mudbloods snagging all the best drink,' he said smoothly. 'Tell me where she is.'

Flint nodded vigorously. 'Good show, Snape. Go take it from her. Party's in the Room of Requirement.'

Severus had no problem entering the Room of Requirement to gatecrash the drinking party. The fifth-year Slytherins hailed him as a fellow well-met, but the students from other houses were not happy to see him. He obtained a Butterbeer from one of the Slytherins and wandered about the room, seemingly aimless, until he spotted Lily. She was sitting in a corner with a Ravenclaw sixth-year Prefect on one side and a Hufflepuff seventh-year Prefect on the other; she was obviously a bit the worse for drink, but she wasn't falling down drunk.

'Evans,' he said.

Lily looked up, her eyes brightening when she saw him. 'Yes?' she answered, reserved before others, as they had always been.

'Far be it for me to criticise your herding abilities, but I definitely saw a gaggle of Gryffindor second-years out of bed.'

Lily was on her feet instantly. 'Show me,' she said, handing the bottle of Firewhisky to the disappointed-looking Hufflepuff. 'McGonagall will have my head if she catches them.'

Severus abandoned the Butterbeer on a table as he and Lily left the room together.

'How did you know I was there?' she asked.

'What makes you think I was there for you?' he sneered.

Remus Lupin rounded a corner, and his expression lightened considerably when he spied Lily. 'Thank Merlin,' he said, 'I thought I was going to have to come in after you.' He nodded to Severus, but did not speak. 'Listen, Lily, McGonagall is on the war-path she rumbled a couple of fifth-years with half-a-pint of honey mead. You've got another hour until your curfew. Don't go back until you're sober.'

Lily stood up straight. 'I'm sober,' she averred, swaying a bit.

Remus looked to Severus pleadingly, and Severus nodded. Remus gave a partial smile and continued down the hallway. Lily turned to watch him as he turned into another corridor.

'I'm **fine**,' she insisted.

'By all means,' Severus said snidely, 'go back to your dormitory so McGonagall can expel you.'

Lily grabbed his hand. 'Never mind,' she said. 'Let's go to the Astronomy Tower it will clear my head.'

Severus knew they were not likely to find the Astronomy Tower deserted, but the lure of being alone with her was strong. 'Five minutes to clear your head,' he said, 'then off to Gryffindor Tower with you.'

Lily smiled at him engagingly and led the way to the Astronomy Tower and up the stairs. Severus exited the door behind her, finding, as he had expected, the shimmer of no fewer than three Notice-Me-Not spells scattered about. Lily ignored the other occupants and walked straight to the ramparts, standing with her hands on the stone walls, her head thrown back, taking deep breaths.

Severus stood a few paces behind her, his arms crossed firmly over his chest. He wanted to go up behind her and put his arms around her, to nuzzle her ear and hear her throaty chuckle of acceptance. But other than one rather tempestuous episode in the Potions lab the previous November, he had not touched her since the night she had rejected the Plight Troth ring. She went about with a different bloke, it seemed, every day; no one had won her favour for more than a week. She was sunny-natured and kind, and people were drawn to her as flies are drawn to honey. She was also lovely and enticing; Severus could not comprehend being male and not wanting her.

He had thought, after she rejected his offer to plight his troth to her, that they would be estranged. He had certainly stayed away from Harrogate for the rest of the summer hols. But when the first of September arrived, her smile on the Hogwarts Express had been as radiant and welcoming as ever. She was obviously fond of him, but she was enjoying her popularity too much to tie herself down to him. He could understand that, from an intellectual standpoint. He would keep an eye on her, keep her from harm, and when they left school, she would be ready to talk about their future together.

He never permitted himself to wonder how the acquisition of a Muggle-born girlfriend would affect his relationship with Lucius Malfoy and his ilk.

Then had come that one-off November Saturday afternoon in the Potions lab; Lily had been in a bit of a wild mood, her eyes too bright, deliberately provocative. Unable to resist her challenge, in short order, he had found himself with the teasing wench backed up against a wall, the palms of her hands flat on his chest, his arms bracketing her, preventing her escape. His vows to never again give in to her lures were as dust in the wind of his desire for her, yet he had stopped short of kissing her or touching her, merely standing within an inch of her, his half-lidded black eyes glittering at her in the candlelight.

Lily had been the one who broke the stalemate, reaching up with her hands to tug until he finally lowered his lips to hers, igniting the combustible fascination which existed between them. They had not stopped 'might never have stopped' had not the unintended cauldron on the fire melted, forcing them to give their attention to the project which had brought them together. When the potion had been brewed, Severus had attempted to reinstate the interrupted proceedings, but Lily had kept her distance, evading his every advance, until she had escaped his presence. During the next week, she had avoided eye contact in Potions class and avoided Severus wherever possible outside of Potions class. It had not been difficult to decipher her message: in spite of her flagrant seduction of him, she had no desire to further their relationship.

He had managed to keep his distance for nearly six months, but the idea of Lily inebriated in the presence of those who might take advantage of her sent him on the prowl. He sought only to return her safely to her dormitory nothing else.

Lily turned her back to the stone wall and faced him. 'You came there to find me.'

Severus raised an eyebrow but did not speak.

'Thank you,' Lily said. 'I drank too much.'

Severus studied her expression, but saw no guile. This was his friend, Lily, with no flirtation or wiles to attract. After a moment, he inclined his head in acknowledgement.

'Sometimes,' she said, 'I do stupid things.' She smiled self-deprecatingly. 'I don't think that surprises you.'

He shrugged. 'If I thought about it, it might.'

Lily stepped up to him then, as if she was sure of her welcome in his arms, and she wrapped her own arms around his waist, pressing her face to his chest. Severus found he was incapable of repulsing her; as if of their own accord, his arms uncrossed, making room for her, and then enfolded her in a chaste hug.

'Don't try to fool me,' she whispered, turning her cheek to rest against his jumper, her chin tilted so that she could look up at him. 'Don't pretend that you don't care about me.'

Severus did not answer her, trying to ignore his body's reaction to her proximity and the scent of her perfume.

'We can't be together, here,' she murmured, one of her treacherous hands rising to thread through his long, lank hair. 'But we won't be here forever.'

Severus closed his eyes, trying not to love the feel of her hands in his hair, trying not to believe her words, desperately wishing not to care.

'I've never known anyone else like you, Severus,' she whispered, her other hand sliding up his back to twine in his hair, 'no one makes me feel the way you do.'

Hating himself for going back again on his own resolution, Severus lowered his head and kissed her, attempting to convey in that act the words he could not say to her would not say to her for no matter how much he needed her and longed to possess her, he did not trust her.

She flowed against him like water, her body moulding to him, her lips parting beneath his, inviting him to kiss her more deeply. With iron-clad control, supremely conscious of the danger of discovery in such a public place, he disengaged from her.

'You have ten minutes to make curfew,' he said, stepping back. 'You should go now.'

Lily stared up with him, her green eyes still muzzy with drink; Severus had never, in their times together, been the one to step back from an encounter, and she seemed rather impressed. Rather than speaking again, Lily stood on tip-toe and brushed his jaw with a kiss, then she departed the Astronomy Tower, leaving him to stand beneath the starry sky with her words echoing in his mind.

Lily smoothed her hair with her hand, feeling uncommonly nervous.

'You look really pretty,' James said.

Lily dropped her hands and looked up into James' eyes; he was not nearly so tall as Severus. She liked this calmer, more humble version of James Potter, who had proclaimed to her that the near-miss of Severus and the werewolf had given him a great deal to think about. James seemed somewhat lost this summer in the absence of Sirius Black, who had been called away to attend the deathbed of his Uncle Alphard, then had stayed on, as his uncle's sole beneficiary, to settle the estate. James was still not entirely happy with Sirius, after the practical joke on Severus, but neither was he entirely happy without Sirius' company. He had easily drifted into calling every day at the Evans' home, spending hours in conversation with Lily about everything under the sun. He was gentle, kind, funny, patient and utterly besotted with her.

James gave her a particularly sweet smile, then opened the door, allowing her to enter, before following her into the hallway of the rambling old house. The entrance hall bore the appearance of an ancient fortress, with an uneven flagged floor, rough wooden beams running up the walls and across the fifteen-foot ceiling, and at the far end of the room, an enormous fireplace which appeared large enough to roast an ox, whole. Lily had only time enough for a quick impression before James took her hand and led her through a doorway.

The change in tone from the hall to the drawing room was vast. Gone was the medieval formality; instead, the room was warm and welcoming, with squishy armchairs covered in chintz, polished cherry-wood tables, and a crimson brocade sofa, upon which an elderly couple sat. For a wild moment, Lily wondered if these were James' grandparents.

'Mum, Dad, this is Lily,' James said, looking at her with pride.

The old man stood, and he was about the same height as Lily. His face was heavily lined, but his hazel eyes were bright. 'Welcome to Gryphon Keep, Lily,' he said, taking her hand between both of his. 'I'm Harry Potter, and this is my wife, Anna.'

Lily smiled at James' mother, allowing the old witch to take her hand, as well. 'We're very happy you could come,' Mrs Potter said. 'James has spoken of you so frequently, over the years.'

Lily flushed, wondering just what James had told his parents about her reactions and responses to him.

Mr Potter saw the blush and laughed, offering Lily his seat on the sofa beside his wife with the sweep of a hand. 'Yes, he's told us that you didn't like him very much, my dear and his mother has told him to mend his manners.'

Lily sat down next to Mrs Potter nervously, feeling as if everyone in the room was focussed on her. A house-elf entered, bearing a tray of glasses and a bottle of wine.

'Ah, Nonny excellent timing,' Mr Potter proclaimed. 'This is Master James' friend, Lily Evans.'

Nonny placed the tray on the coffee table and turned to bow deeply to Lily. 'Nonny is pleased to meet Master James' Lily.'

Lily blushed more deeply, wishing she had followed Pepper's advice and refused this invitation to a family dinner at the Potters' home. She wasn't *his* Lily they weren't even dating well, not officially.

James' voice broke into her reverie. 'Could we all please stop embarrassing Lily now? At this rate, she'll never want to come back.'

He darted Lily a look of apology, his eyes with a hangdog expression which Lily found irresistible. She gave him a tiny smile, and his expression brightened perceptibly.

'I told Lily she could see your collection from the War, Dad.'

Harry Potter turned a measuring look on Lily. 'It wouldn't bore you?' he asked.

Lily shook her head, sitting forward slightly. 'Professor Binns, in History of Magic, has told us about the War against Grindelwald, sir. I would be very interested to see anything you have to show me.'

Mr Potter poured wine into the four crystal goblets. 'Then I would be very happy to show you my collection,' he said, handing round the goblets. 'Will you raise your glass with me?'

Lily, James, and Mrs Potter each raised their glasses of wine. 'To the proliferation of the Light,' Mr Potter intoned.

They all drank.

An hour later, Lily's head was buzzing with the wealth of artefacts she had seen, both magical and Muggle. She had wandered in awe through the two rooms devoted to these items, many displayed in glass cases, and others sitting out as if bayonets and flags bearing Grindelwald's insignia were commonly found in one's home.

'Lily,' Mr Potter said, 'I imagine you know there was a Muggle war that went forward at the same time as the wizarding one.' When Lily nodded, he continued, 'Grindelwald was a very Dark wizard, and he had been instrumental in bringing the Muggle dictator to power in Germany, just as Grindelwald himself was gaining power all over the Continent. It was a very grim time.'

James tapped on one of the glass cases, attracting Lily's attention to the glittering ribbon, richly embroidered with gold thread, and its diamond and sapphire clasp. 'Dad was given the Order of Merlin, First Class, for his work in the War,' he said, his voice full of pride.

Lily glanced from the elderly man to his only child and back again, touched by the love which obviously existed between them. James left the display case and came to stand between Lily and his father.

'Dad was a member of the Order of Aurelius Ambrosius it was named for the wizard who was Merlin's father, who was also a great general. That's where Dad met Dumbledore, you know.'

'You know Dumbledore, sir?' Lily asked.

'I do, indeed,' Mr Potter said with a slight smile. 'A braver, cleverer wizard this world has seldom seen.' He cocked his head to one side. 'You're a clever witch, Lily just the sort we in the wizarding world need on our side, if we are to defeat the forces of Dark with the Light.'

Lily stared at her friend's father. 'What forces of Dark?' she asked.

Mr Potter looked at her very seriously. 'The Dark is a powerfully seductive thing, Lily. Many strong, intelligent wizards and witches and many stupid ones, as well are lured into its toils, only to find that the deeper they go into it, the more impossible it becomes to disengage.' He cocked an eyebrow at her. 'Have you never, in all your time at Hogwarts, encountered Dark magic?'

Lily thought for a moment. 'We learn Defence Against the Dark Arts at school,' she said. 'And I know many of the books in the Restricted Section of the library are about Dark subjects.' Lily kept to herself the accompanying thought, that Severus Snape loved those books as teenage girls love chocolate.

Mr Potter nodded gravely. 'There are always Dark influences in our world, my dear. It is up to those of us who know the signs to be vigilant against the proliferation of the Dark Arts.'

Nonny came into the room, then. 'Mistress says you are to come to dinner, Master,' she said.

Mr Potter glanced at his watch. 'Merlin's beard! Look at the time! You children must be starving!' Taking Lily's hand and tucking it into his elbow, he led the way to the dining room.

When the front door was heard to close behind James, on his way to return Lily to her home, Mrs Potter turned to her husband.

'Well?'

He nodded. 'She's as sharp as a tack,' he said. 'If she's as good at potions as James says, she would be a vital tool for us. I'll be sure to mention it to Albus.'

Anna sipped at her tea. 'Do you think he'll marry her?'

Harry chuckled. 'They're only seventeen, my love. Plenty of time to think of that later.' He drank a bit of his cognac, letting the fragrant liquid roll about on his tongue before it slid down his throat, knowing that Anna was watching him with growing impatience. At last he turned to face her. 'All right. Yes, he'll marry her, if she'll have him. He's well and truly smitten.'

Anna smirked. 'He'll keep after her until she *will* have him.'

Harry leant over and brushed a kiss across her cheek. 'It worked for me,' he said.

Severus eyed Pepper warily when she opened the front door.

'Hi!' she said brightly. 'Come in!'

Severus stepped into the entrance hall, ignoring the loud sniff of Elsie Evans, who peeked around the corner just long enough to see who had come to call, before she whisked herself back to the kitchen. He watched Pepper, intrigued by his desire to reach out and touch her. Resisting the urge, he simply looked at her.

'Potter is here, visiting *her*. I can use some reinforcements,' Pepper said wrinkling her nose in disgust.

'I am happy to be useful,' he returned dryly.

Pepper grinned at him and grabbed his hand. 'Come on,' she said.

Severus permitted her to pull him into the lounge, where he saw Lily sitting on the sofa, next to Potter, who was brandishing his wand in an odd way, making strange noises, somewhat between a hum and a swish.

'Put that away, Potter,' he drawled. 'You're going to put someone's eye out.'

Potter gave Severus an unfriendly glare, but sheathed his wand.

Lily giggled. 'We should never have taken him to the cinema it was his first time at a Muggle movie, can you imagine? Now he wants to be a Jedi Knight.'

Severus allowed Pepper to pull him to the loveseat across from Lily and Potter. He slouched down in his seat, torn between the desires to Stun Potter and to kiss Pepper. What was the matter with him?

Blue, the sleek grey cat, walked into the lounge like a monarch surveying his demesne. Potter perked up at the sight of the cat.

'Hullo, Blue,' he said, bending down and offering his hand to be sniffed. 'Animals love me,' he said in an aside to Lily.

'So you keep saying,' Pepper said snidely, crossing her arms and watching as Blue sauntered past Potter's outstretched hand.

Potter moved from his seat on the sofa to kneel upon the rug, extending his hand out farther. Supremely disdainful, Blue continued on his path, altering his course only enough to walk around the kneeling James Potter. At last, Blue reached his goal, and with the lithe grace peculiar to his kind, he leapt into Severus' empty lap, turning in a circle four times before curling up on the denim-clad legs.

Severus, who usually complained bitterly about the cat using him as if he were a piece of furniture, placed his hand upon the animal's fur in a nearly possessive way and stroked it, all the while sneering at Potter.

After a moment, Potter stood. 'Lily, you said you'd come with me to see Sirius' new digs. Let's go.'

'Do you think it's wise to trust Black's directions?' Severus inquired silkily.

Potter made a rude gesture, which gave Severus immense satisfaction, because Lily was offended.

'James Potter, if you do that again, I'll tell your mother!'

Rolling his eyes in disgust at the implied domesticity of Lily's outburst, Severus was relieved, for the first time in his memory, to see Lily leave the room in Potter's company. When they had gone, he looked over to make a snide comment to Pepper, who had been strangely silent, only to find her staring at his hand as he rhythmically stroked Blue's fur. Her fascination with his actions impacted him like a physical blow.

'What are you looking at?' he demanded roughly.

Pepper started, looking up at him guiltily. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips, and now *he* was riveted by *her* actions.

'Nothing,' she said nervously. She looked down at her hands. 'I've wanted to talk to you about something,' she added.

Severus quirked an eyebrow. 'What?'

Pepper continued to stare at her hands. 'I have a proposition for you.'

The renegade portion of his brain immediately began making suggestions for the proposition, but his expression never demonstrated that. He simply waited for her to speak again, only the increased pressure of his hand upon Blue's fur indicating his agitation.

Pepper took a deep breath and she looked up from her hands, imploring eyes fixed on his face. 'I propose that we take this summer and pretend to be a couple. It will annoy *her* and *him*. I want you to go about with me in town when you come to visit nothing major, just walk down the High Street or go for an ice cream and hold my hand, or put your arm around me, so that people I know will see me with a boy and know'

When she didn't speak again, he said, 'Know what?'

She flushed and looked away from him and whispered, 'Know that I'm not repulsive to boys.'

Severus let Pepper sit in her misery, too embarrassed to look at him, and he felt his power in the situation his power over her. It was rather intoxicating especially since he knew he would grant her request. 'That's what *you* want,' he said. 'What will *I* get from this little charade of yours?'

She glanced at him angrily. 'Don't you ever do *anything* without getting something for yourself?'

He sneered at her. 'Why should I?'

Pepper lifted her chin. 'All right. I'll do anything you want.'

Severus looked boldly down her body, allowing his eyes to dwell on her in ways he had never done before. She was too thin, but she was definitely female and inexplicably, she moved his blood. As he let his eyes drift down her form, he continued to stroke the cat. Pepper's eyes were moving from his face to his hand and back again with dizzying speed.

'Anything?' he purred insolently.

Pepper swallowed visibly. 'Nothing that would make me pregnant,' she whispered.

'I can only think of one thing that might make you pregnant,' he murmured softly, the faintest hit of a tease in his voice.

Pepper blushed again. 'Are you going to spend all your time making fun of me?'

'Not all, no,' he said, his voice pitched to reach only her ears, the hand which was not stroking the cat now cupping her jaw, his thumb sweeping over the soft skin beneath her chin.

Her eyes darted to his again, hopeful.

'Have you ever been kissed?' he asked.

Pepper shook her head in the negative.

'Then it's high time you were,' he said, glad of the presence of the cat in lap to disguise his arousal. He did not know why he was reacting to this girl in this way at this time, but he was rather beyond caring. 'Come here,' he commanded.

Pepper scooted willingly closer. Using the pressure of his hand on the back of her head, he drew her face to his, tilting his head to one side, pausing with his lips an inch from hers to gauge her reaction. The shuddery sigh she uttered as her eyes fluttered closed was enough, heightening his desire to taste her.

'Just for this summer,' he said.

'Yes,' Pepper breathed.

Mindful that this was her first kiss, he began with her gently, softly touching his lips to hers, the fingers of the hand at the back of her head maintaining a gentle pressure.

'Petunia Anne Evans!'

Severus felt Pepper ricochet away from him with such force he knew he would have bruises from the strength with which she pushed off.

Bugger.

'May I see you in the kitchen, please?' Elsie Evans' voice was as cold as ice, and she did not deign to look at Severus.

'Meet me down the lane,' Pepper hissed. Then she stood, straightened her clothing, and went out of the room.

Just before her curfew that night, Lily and James Apparated back to her home from Sirius' new flat. Lily had been unable to convince her mother that she was now of age in the wizarding world and without the need of such things as a curfew. Lily had simply been treated to the 'my house, my rules,' rant from her father, to whom her mother had reported her suggestion.

James led her by the hand to her doorstep, hoping, as he always did, to procure a goodnight kiss. Sometimes, Lily permitted it; other times, she did not. There were many things she liked about James his popularity; his good marks; his Head Boy badge, which would match her Head Girl badge so nicely; his strong personal convictions, learnt from his parents, whom she also liked; stately old Gryphon Keep in Godric's Hollow but she also liked his sweetness, his gentleness, his tenderness, his deference, and the way she could imagine a future with him.

Smiling up at James, Lily touched his cheek and offered her lips for his kiss. He held her as if she were made of spun-glass, his hands remaining correctly upon her back as he kissed her with reverence. Lily waited to feel something she *wanted* to feel something but, as always when James kissed her, she felt ... unmoved.

'I'll see you tomorrow,' James said.

'Good night,' Lily replied.

He stepped down from the doorstep, turned on the spot, and Disapparated. Lily watched him go, and it was as he disappeared that she detected the tell-tale glimmer of a Notice-Me-Not spell beneath the large oak tree in the front garden. Frowning, she pointed her wand and murmured, '*Finite Incantatem*.'

The enchantment fell, and she saw Severus and Pepper engaged in a horizontal wrestling match. At first, her mind did not register what she was seeing. Severus kissing Pepper? That was nonsensical. Then, she saw one of Pepper's arms sliding down Severus' back to his bum, where she grasped and squeezed his arse cheek.

The rage which flashed through Lily flared with the speed of a match to kerosene. She had her wand in her hand, and a hex was upon her lips when Severus looked straight into her face. His eyes were in shadow, but his very posture was challenging. Incensed, she turned and stormed into the house, slamming the front door behind her.

Clarence Evans came to the doorway of the lounge and glanced down the hallway at her. 'All right, Salty?' he inquired.

'Fine!' she spat and pelted up the stairway to the bedroom.

When Pepper came into the room fifteen minutes later, her hair was mussed, her lips were bruised, her clothes were disarranged, and her throat was marked in three places.

Lily sat on the edge of her bed, her wand trained on her sister.

'What are you doing?' Pepper said nervously, keeping an eye on the highly polished length of willow pointing in her direction.

'No, Petunia,' Lily said, her voice throbbing with fury. 'What are *you* doing?'

Pepper frowned. 'What are you *talking* about?'

'How *dare* you let Severus maul you about that like!' Lily shrieked, coming to her feet.

Pepper's hands went to her bony hips. 'What business is that of yours?'

'I'm your sister,' Lily responded hotly. 'You're making a fool of yourself!'

Pepper's eyes narrowed. 'You don't care if I make seven kinds of fool of myself, Lily Anne don't pretend that you do.'

Lily's wand arm extended. 'He's *mine*!' she cried.

Pepper laughed scornfully. 'Why can't you be happy to have every other boy on the planet? Why do you have to have the one who fancies *me*?'

'HE FANCIES ME!' Lily shouted. 'Me! Not you!'

Pepper blinked at her. 'You're raving,' she said, finally. 'You could have had him, but you chose Potter. Now / have him. Get used to it.'

There was a flash of light and suddenly Pepper was hanging upside down and screaming like a banshee.

'Put me down! Put me DOWN!'

Lily sneered at Pepper. 'No! You deserve it!'

Their bedroom door burst open, and their parents erupted into the room.

'Petunia!' Mrs Evans cried, trying and failing to tug her down.

'Lily!' Mr Evans roared. 'Stop it this instant!'

Lily's wand arm jerked up and Pepper fell in a heap to the floor. Both of her parents rushed to help her to her feet, murmuring to her, but she ignored them, her implacable hazel gaze fixed on her sister.

'I can't believe you used that *thing* against me,' she hissed. 'Your own sister! I will never trust you again!'

Clare Evans turned angrily to Lily. 'Apologise to your sister at once!' he shouted. 'And give me that wand!'

Lily glared at them with terrific defiance for a moment, then turned on the spot, and was gone.

Lily returned the next morning, having spent the night in the Potters' guest room at Gryphon Keep. She was sweetly penitent and apologetic, but she kept her real feelings locked deep inside of herself. She had never been jealous of another girl, and certainly had never imagined she could or would be jealous of her own sister. Yes, she had been the one to push Severus away she had been the one to see other boys, to flaunt her popularity in his face but he was not supposed to move on! He was supposed to wait for her to wait until she was ready to be with him! Seeing him with Pepper knowing how he would kiss her, touch her, hold her made her feel sick inside.

She knew she was being unfair unfair to Severus, who deserved a girl who cared for him and would make him her focus and unfair to poor Pepper, who was not, apparently, the type of girl that most boys would go for.

Her feelings confused her in the extreme. She resolved to wait and see in some ways, she felt that September first could not come quickly enough.

The rest of the summer passed, with Severus coming Saturday and Sunday to visit, indifferent now to Mrs Evans' disapproval. His best behaviour had not won her liking for him; he would make no special efforts now. Severus and Pepper frequently strolled into town, where she insisted upon hanging on him like a limpet. Severus found he didn't much mind it; it was always amusing when they met up with some acquaintance from Pepper's school. Pepper would introduce him, and he would look dissolute and dangerous and remain silent, just as she wanted. Afterwards, he got what he wanted, most often at the Kingdom, although he never took her beneath El Castillo del Viento he could not bring himself to do it. And, as they had agreed, they did nothing that would result in pregnancy or in the actual removal of clothing, although Pepper did learn to leave off her brassiere, after Severus told her rather testily that she scarcely needed it.

One Saturday afternoon, after rather heated necking in the back of the cinema (Severus persuaded Pepper to return there frequently and had even been heard to mutter that he would not mind being a Jedi Knight, either), they strolled along, Severus looking Dark and dangerous whilst Pepper clung and window-shopped, when they were suddenly accosted by a fat, neck-less man with a bushy black moustache.

'Petunia?' the man said incredulously.

His amazement could have been due to the changes in Pepper's appearance over the last month. She had stopped plastering her hair with the preposterous hair potion and was simply wearing it long and loose. On this day, she wore a cotton skirt and a tee-shirt, which at that moment bore two wet spots, where Severus had suckled her nipples through the fabric in the movie theatre. It was evident that Pepper had been oblivious to the wet spots before the fat man's eyes had become riveted to her chest; then she had immediately crossed her arms to hide them.

'Oh, hello, Vernon,' Pepper said. 'This is my boyfriend, Severus Snape.'

Vernon hesitated a moment, then offered his hand, which Severus glanced at before shoving his hands in his pockets. After a few more uncomfortable sentences, Vernon moved on, and Pepper pulled Severus into the darkened doorway of an empty shop and kissed him with great enthusiasm obviously, something about meeting up with The Suitor heated her blood. The end of the summer was coming, when his agreement with Pepper would expire. He wondered if his strange fancy for her would die away, as well.

Pepper entered the house and went upstairs to her room, her body humming as it always did when she had been with Severus. She closed the bedroom door and opened her cupboard, kneeling down to extract a shoebox. From the toe of one of the shoes in the box, she withdrew a black jewellers box; from the box, she removed the fire opal ring she had found the summer before in the Kingdom. No one knew she had it no one had ever seen her wear it but she had often taken it out and worn it since she found it, and she did so even more often, now that Severus was her boyfriend.

Pepper sat down on the edge of her bed and placed the ring on her finger; as always, she felt a faint sense of relief once the ring was in place. She sighed happily. Dimly, she knew the end of summer was coming and her agreement with Severus would come to an end; she even told herself she was glad of it, that he was unattractive and surly. But truly, her heart sang when she wore the fire opal ring her stupid sister had thrown away; she sat contentedly, time slipping away, gazing at the gemstone and thinking happy thoughts about Severus. She was always at peace when she sat alone and wore the pretty ring.

A/N: Aurelius Ambrosius is an historical figure upon whom the possibly mythical figure of Merlin was based; there is no indication that Ambrosius was Merlin's father.

Chapter 7: The Summer After Seventh Year

Chapter 7 of 8

The seventh-years leave Hogwarts; between Lily and James, there is trouble in paradise; Severus has an appointment he dare not miss; the Kingdom is the site of a meeting of hearts, souls, and bodies.

A/N: There will be one more chapter after this one; I will post it later today, God willing. Keladry Lupin, MagicAlly, DeeMichelle, and sshg316 all did an amazing job of reading and returning within twelve hours. I adore them all, and mistakes within are mine.



Chapter 7: Summer After Seventh Year

Lily sat in a compartment crowded with admirers, the lot of them giddy with excitement their seventh year of school was behind them, and they were riding the Hogwarts Express for the last time. Rafe Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch captain, had the place of honour beside her on the bench, but even though she smiled and laughed at appropriate moments, her thoughts were elsewhere.

In the next compartment, the four so-called Marauders sat together with a number of girls. They were laughing and joking as loudly as the group in Lily's compartment, but

James Potter had a far-away look in his eye. Sirius Black, a faint frown of worry upon his handsome brow, glanced frequently in James' direction.

At the very end of the train, in the car traditionally reserved for the seventh-year Slytherins, a composed, assured Severus Snape sat amongst his gang and their girls, drinking the champagne provided by the founder of the private Leaving Feast they would be celebrating at the end of their journey to King's Cross Station. There was a special meeting scheduled for tonight one that would set his feet firmly on the path to the success for which he longed and nothing would prevent him from attending that all-important gathering.

The previous autumn

Returning to school was disquieting for Severus. Lily continued to behave toward him with affronted sadness, as if he had done her some great personal injury by snogging Pepper never mind how many blokes *she* had snogged along the way. In addition, she was openly Potter's girlfriend now. The two of them, Head Boy and Head Girl, were so squeaky-clean and perfectly matched it made Severus want to vomit.

In addition, it seemed all his gang of Slytherin mates had spent the summer socialising with Lord Voldemort's followers. Severus was the only one amongst them who had to work for his pocket money, and he had been forced to decline two separate invitations to house parties at Malfoy Manor during the summer months. He had made up for it, however, by seeing Mr Lucius Malfoy a few times over the course of the summer at Ye Olde Apothecary, where he was employed. Malfoy had been gracious and generous, telling Severus that he respected a young wizard who worked for his gold, and that Lord Voldemort would feel the same. Severus had felt relief to know that the others in his gang had not got ahead of him in the race to make a good impression on his lordship simply by having been born into families with more gold than Severus'.

At first, back at school, he was surprised to find that he missed Pepper. In school years past, he had seldom thought of her from one summer to the next. However, as the weeks went by, and he did not see her, the hold she had on his thoughts seemed to lessen, and the attraction he had felt for her began to fade. He was pleased when she intruded upon his thoughts less often; he had never understood that odd phenomenon, anyway.

He and Lily were working on their seventh-year Potions projects now, and for that reason, their paths crossed frequently outside of class. In Pepper's absence, Lily seemed more relaxed in Severus' presence, and her usual friendly attitude resumed. She never came too close, though, and she was careful not to be alone with him.

Severus brooded over Lily's elusiveness. Even though they were not a couple, each year had involved one or two occasions when Lily's true feelings would assert themselves, and she would end up in his arms, where she belonged. They were in their final year now they had both said they could be together when they left school. Why was she more distant from him now than she had ever been?

Just before the Christmas hols, he decided to orchestrate a meeting and see what would happen. Early one Saturday morning, he went along to the Potions laboratory. It was his custom to spend the afternoons working on his project, whilst Lily had taken to working on hers in the mornings. Just as he had hoped, he found her there, decanting the first batch of her Wolfsbane Potion project.

Lily startled when Severus strolled into the room. 'Severus!' she gasped. 'I wasn't expecting you!'

He paused in the doorway with a show of diffidence. 'Shall I go, then?'

Lily flushed. 'No, of course not come in.'

Severus smirked and approached her worktable. 'I'm glad you didn't send me away,' he said, slipping his hand into his robes. 'I've brought your Christmas gift.'

He stopped just beside her, standing closer than he had done in months, and smelt the mixture of her herbal shampoo and her perfume. Lily shifted nervously, abandoning her cauldron and stepping away from him.

'Oh, you really ought not to have done that,' she said. 'I don't have a gift for you.'

He pursued her in a lazy fashion, as might a cat who stalks a mouse. 'It's just a trifle,' he said, placing the box of Honeydukes finest chocolates on the table within her reach. 'I remember how you like truffles.'

The green eyes flicked to the sweets. 'Those are my favourites!' she said, and her hand reached forward to take the box.

In a flash he conjured the seasonal parasite over her head and moved forward, his hand closing about her wrist, pulling her deftly into his arms. 'Mistletoe,' he said by way of explanation when she squeaked and pushed against his chest. He held her to him with one arm, and with his free hand, he tilted her face up. 'Happy Christmas, Lily,' he said before bending his head and kissing her.

Lily twisted in his arms, pushing him, trying to turn her face away, but she was helpless against his strength. At last, she relented, becoming passive, ceasing her struggle and permitting him to deepen his kiss. He invaded her mouth with his tongue, experiencing the intoxicating warmth for the first time in over a year. Very soon, her hands were clutching at his jumper, then sliding into his hair.

It came as a complete surprise to him when she pushed away and stood barely a foot from him, panting and staring. Severus felt his heart hammering in his chest and was on the cusp of reaching for her again when she pulled her hand back and slapped him sharply on the cheek.

'Have you lost your mind?' she demanded angrily. 'How dare you treat me like some pub-crawling tart!'

Severus rubbed the sore spot on his jaw, glaring at her. 'Have you lost *your* mind? For the love of Merlin, Evans, it was only a snog!'

Her hands descended to her hips and Severus was eerily reminded of Pepper, in full strop. 'In case it's escaped you, Severus, I have a *boyfriend* now a *real* boyfriend. I don't mess about with other blokes anymore.'

Severus shook his head, speaking placatingly. 'We'll be out of here in six months out in the real world we won't have to be apart any more.' He loathed the desperation he heard in his own voice.

What was worse was the pity flashing across Lily's face. 'I know we used to say that,' she said, 'but we were just kids. I love James and he loves me. We're together now.'

Severus took an aggressive step towards her. 'So, he's in your knickers? Is that what *lurve* is all about?'

Lily's chin came up and her green eyes flashed dangerously. 'Of course he isn't! Not that it's any of *your* business.' She turned her back on him to begin to fill the labelled phials. 'Have you finished your first batch of the Wolfsbane?'

Severus watched her trembling hand on the ladle, the memory of her tongue flicking into his mouth fresh in his mind. His eyes narrowed as she tried and failed to pour potion into the small glass container.

'Keep telling yourself that, Evans that you want Potter. The truth is, of course, that you want me that you always have but that you're too ashamed now to admit it. I'm not popular enough, not rich enough, not respectable enough to suit you anymore.' He glided up behind her and placed his lips next to her ear, careful not to touch her body with his own. 'You'll come back to me. You'd best hope that I've not moved on when you get around to it.'

He turned to stalk from the room, only to feel something solid collide with his shoulder blade. He spun to see the fallen box of chocolates on the floor and Lily a few feet

from him, her face twisted and unlovely in her fury.

'You have Pepper!' she screeched. 'She's the one you want now! You *did* move on!'

Severus stooped, retrieving the battered box of sweets, and walked up to her. 'Pepper and I had an arrangement for the summer, to make you and Potter jealous,' he said silkily, feeling hopeful again at this show of passion from her. 'The summer has been over for months.' With a swish and a flick of his wand, he sent the Honeydukes chocolates floating back to Lily's worktable. 'Go on, be the Head Boy's girlfriend. I don't care. But when summer comes again, you'll call for me and I'll come.'

He didn't stay to observe her entire reaction; the look of confusion on her face as he finished speaking was good enough for him. He walked from the room with a show of confidence he didn't entirely feel.

Lily sat in her dormitory, her brain seething with bewilderment. Why could Severus do that to her? Why could he sweep into her life and complicate everything? She had been feeling very confident about James, very sure of her feelings and her plans, until Severus had swept her up into his arms and kissed her. There was something about him something about the responses he stirred in her which was entirely unsettling.

With a heavy sigh, she broke the seal on the box of Honeydukes chocolates and popped one into her mouth, relishing the creamy rush of flavour.

That was something else a major difference between the sense of a kiss from James and a kiss from Severus. She was becoming more aware now of Darkness in the objects and people around her. There was, and likely always had been, a Dark aura about Severus that she had never known how to detect before now. Kissing James was like drinking clean, fresh mountain water; a kiss from Severus was like ingesting a dangerously addictive intoxicant. James was the purity of life's elemental water; Severus was the Dark enslavement of forbidden absinthe.

It did not help matters that Severus seemed to have matured overnight. He was still whipcord thin, but he carried himself with a new, cat-like grace, and his manner had become less caustic, more enigmatic. He didn't seem to be watching her as he had done in years past she had grown accustomed to that behaviour from him but he seemed quite occupied with pursuits of which she knew nothing. What did he get up to these days?

She realised that in spite of his new poise, Severus was broken. It was not his fault; the loss of his family, followed by living as a refugee in his grandfather's home, had forever damaged him. She knew her attraction to Severus was treacherous but knowing it, why did she still crave him so?

The scarlet steam engine pulled into the station, and the students began to flood the platform, scattering in every direction.

Sirius bestowed a charming smile on the group of girls standing near James and him. 'Don't forget, ladies,' he said, 'my flat, eight o'clock bring nothing but your lovely selves; I will take care of everything else.'

When the girls had said their good-byes, Sirius turned to James. 'Come along, mate our bachelor pad awaits us!'

Remus caught Sirius' eye over James' head. James was watching Lily Evans striding from the platform in the company of Rafe Davies, who was not above casting a smirk at James when Lily wasn't looking.

Severus moved onto the platform with his trunk, joining Avery, Rosier, and Lestrangle. Waiting for them with a smooth smile was Lucius Malfoy; he would escort them to the private party to which they had been bidden. His lordship had preferred not to disclose the address of the place to Severus and his friends.

Lily thanked Rafe for Apparating with her to Claret Drive and assisting her with her trunk. Agreeing to have dinner with him the next night, she waved good-bye to him before pulling out her house key and entering her home.

Blue appeared in the kitchen at the first sound of the key; he had been alone for nearly a week, looked after by Robby, a neighbourhood boy. Blue came up to her and began to twine about her ankles, purring.

'Hullo, old thing,' she said, bending to scratch behind Blue's ears. Picking him up, she strolled through the house, feeling its emptiness. She tried to remember if she had ever been home for more than a day without Pepper being here; she didn't think she had.

Pepper had left school a week earlier than Lily had done, and Pepper had already got a job working at Grunnings Drill Company, beginning on July first. Mum and Dad had sent an owl, saying they wanted to take Pepper on holiday as a reward for her good grades before she began her new job, and Lily had urged them to go. She would be fine on her own for a few days at home. She might even enjoy the solitude.

In truth, she had thought James would be with her, to keep her from being lonely.

Three weeks previously

The seventh-years were studying themselves into a decline, finding the anxiety of their pending N.E.W.T.s much more nerve-racking than what they had experienced two years before with their O.W.L.s. One Saturday night, just before the Monday when the exams were set to begin, Sirius had a brainstorm.

Lily and Remus sat together at the best table, nearest the window open to the mild June evening. On the floor at Remus' feet lay Peter, hair clutched in his hands, lips moving as he read over Transfiguration notes. In soft armchairs backed up to the table sat Sirius and James, desultorily dozing, occasionally glancing at the textbooks in their laps.

'I already know all this stuff,' Sirius said at last, closing his textbook and tossing it onto the table between his chair and James'. 'I'm going to start climbing the walls if we don't get out of here and **do** something!'

James darted a glance at Sirius. 'Like what?' he asked, his eyes lighting up.

Sirius shifted restlessly. 'I wish it was the full moon.'

Remus looked over at him. 'I could not be more grateful that it is **not**,' he said flatly. 'If you've learnt everything in your textbook, you could make yourself useful and help Peter.'

Lily glanced up, annoyed. 'If you're going to chat, would you mind going somewhere else? I could really use the quiet to concentrate,' she said testily.

Sirius leant closer to James. 'I know how we could help Wormtail,' he said. 'Let's help him sneak down the pub for a drink!'

Remus and Lily spoke as one. 'No!'

James turned his most coaxing smile on Lily. 'Just one Butterbeer, Lily then we'll come directly back and study like good boys.' He twisted in his armchair and ran his fingertips down her arm. 'Come with me it'll be our last hurrah.'

Lily shook his hand off. 'Have you forgotten that you're Head Boy?' she hissed at him.

Before James could speak, Sirius said, 'How could he forget, Lily? You remind him **daily**.'

Lily threw a piece of wadded parchment at Sirius. 'If I didn't, you'd have him in detention as often as you did when you were first-years!'

Peter sat up, his eyes darting back and forth from James to Sirius. 'I'd go,' he said excitedly.

James grinned. 'Wormtail is always up for an adventure,' he said, earning the smaller boy's answering grin.

Lily snorted. 'You see what a bad influence you are?' she demanded. 'Of all of us, Peter needs to study the most! Now all he wants to do is follow you into trouble!'

A loud argument erupted amongst a group of fourth year boys, and Remus rose from the table to separate them. 'Drop it,' he said quietly to Sirius as he went by.

But Sirius didn't know how to drop a devilish idea, once he had spoken it aloud; it felt too much like backing down, a practice to which he was opposed on general principle.

In the end, Sirius got his way with James for possibly the last time in their long relationship.

Peter, as always, proved to be the weak link. Vicariously proud of James' and Sirius' putative accomplishments, he gossiped. Before noon on the next day, Lily had the entire story.

Lily knew the entire school was watching the disintegration of the romance between the Head Boy and Head Girl, but she could not stop herself from hexing James mercilessly when she next saw him.

James, being the person he was, would not raise his wand to her. He did, however, beg and plead.

'Lily! It's not what you think! I love you! You know I do!'

Hogsmeade had not been daring enough for Sirius, that night. He, James, and Peter had gone through the Floo at the Hog's Head Inn to The Leaky Cauldron. They began their drinking there, then carried on to Knockturn Alley, where no fewer than four pubs enjoyed their custom. According to Peter Pettigrew, each of these establishments boasted the presence of older witches old enough to have left school, but young enough yet to find the company of the scions of the wealthy Potter and Black families of interest. The boys did not return to Hogwarts until dawn.

Lily was heartsick, hurt, and humiliated. She would never have believed it possible for James to do something so hateful. In spite her emotional turmoil, by the sheer force of her will, she concentrated on studying for and excelling on her N.E.W.T.s. The day she completed her last exam, she retaliated in the only way she knew she reinstated her circle of admirers, and flaunted it in the drawn, worried face of James Potter.

One person's reaction had surprised her. Passing Severus in the corridor outside the Potions laboratory, she steeled herself for sarcasm, and was happily surprised to receive calm friendliness.

'Hello, Lily,' Severus said with a faint smile.

Lily stopped and looked defiantly into Severus' face, her books clutched to her chest, her knuckles white from the strength with which she held them. When her belligerent stance was met with acceptance, she was surprised into speech. 'Don't you know about James and me?'

Severus nodded gravely. 'Yes, I heard.'

Lily raised her chin. 'Then where is your sneer?'

Severus looked directly into her eyes. 'You have an odd notion of the type of friend I am,' he said.

Lily flushed and looked away from him.

Severus reached to her and his fingertips unerringly found and touched the hard crescent of the invisible necklace she wore. 'When you need me, you have only to call,' he said, his voice flowing over her like the warmth of hot fudge, simultaneously comforting and dangerous.

Lily had looked up to speak, but Severus had continued on down the corridor, away from her. For a moment, she had been surprised by the way she had yearned to call him back to her.

Severus was unsure of the location of the house to which they had been brought, but the food had been excellent, as had been the wine. Now he sat quietly in the midst of his Slytherin mates and a number of other young people, whose accents placed their origins on the Continent undoubtedly, the European wizarding academies had ended their academic years, as well. His attention was intent upon Lord Voldemort. His lordship was addressing them all, and he had been talking for well over an hour. All of those listening were riveted by Lord Voldemort's smooth, facile speech and the ideas he put forth. Were not they all deserving of the best life the wizarding world had to offer? Would not all of society be better off if certain types of pure-blood wizards ruled? Each of those present had been specially chosen by Lord Voldemort, himself, to become a part of his organization. Followers of Lord Voldemort would be wizards and witches of influence, wealth, and power in the new society to come. Would not they all like to step into the next room, to formally accept Lord Voldemort's invitation?

In Sirius Black's flat, the drink was plentiful and the music was loud. A number of the recent Hogwarts seventh-years were present to make merry in celebration of completing their wizarding education. Although he was courted and flattered by several of the witches present at the party, James Potter's participation was luke-warm, at best. His heart did not seem to be in the light-hearted carousal.

Lily sat in her parents' back garden watching the fireflies, the summer night air fragrant with her mother's flower garden. She tried to concentrate on her apprenticeship with Master Arsenius Jigger, which would commence in September, but her thoughts kept returning to the young wizards who haunted her mind. Where were they? Were they happy tonight?

Severus was back at Prince Glen by noon the next day. He had to see his mother, explain to her that he would be spending the summer in the company of his new patron before beginning his apprenticeship in the autumn with Master Borage. He would not even need to unpack his trunk; it already contained every possession he wished to take with him from his grandfather's house.

Lily found the day dragging by. After her year as Head Girl, she was entirely unaccustomed to having nothing to do, and away from her noisy dormitory and the often-crowded common room of Gryffindor Tower, she did not know how to adjust to the complete silence of her home. She would have laughed at the notion just the day before, but she missed Pepper and Severus. Summer always meant Pepper and Severus and a sense of belonging even if they didn't always get along.

Unfortunately, her dinner date with Rafe Davies did very little to alleviate her loneliness. His flattery seemed insincere, and she quickly tired of constantly having to fight his roaming hands.

'Invite me in,' he said as he returned her home. 'We'll be all alone'

Closing the door in his face, Lily breathed a sigh of relief. She made a cup of tea and tried watching the telly with Blue curled up in her lap, but she could not find a program which could hold her attention. Next she browsed her bookshelves and chose an old favourite romantic adventure tale, but she could not concentrate on the story. She was restless, and her mood was growing more unmanageable with each passing moment.

Grabbing a jacket, she let herself out the front door and began to walk purposefully down Claret Lane as the setting sun touched the horizon with deep crimson and purple. She had not been to the Kingdom since her last visit there with Pepper, the summer before; surely being in a familiar, comforting place would calm her increasingly wild spirits.

Severus sat with his mother in her room until she fell asleep. It saddened him to see how much she had aged in the last few years; he knew she was barely forty, but she looked much older. She had never taken down all the photographs of Stephy; the framed pictures still cluttered every available surface, but Severus was no longer distressed by the sight of his baby sister. Seeing her simply firmed his resolve. Lord Voldemort said that his Potions masters would search for cures to the diseases which afflicted the children of pure-blood families, and Severus was eager to begin such rewarding work.

He extinguished the candle in his mother's room, and as he walked along the hallway to his own room, the medallion around his neck heated up.

Lily!

He punched the air with satisfaction. She was calling for him, and he had so much to tell her.

She was sitting on the side of the bridge when he Apparated in, but she ran to the clearing when she saw him.

'You came! Thank you!'

'I told you I would,' he reminded her. 'Are you all right?'

She laughed. 'Yes I was lonely. My parents took Pepper on holiday.' She shifted, suddenly awkward. They had not been there together since the night she had shuddered in his arms then refused the gift of his ring. Was he thinking of that?

'New moon,' he said, glancing up at the sky, a swathe of velvet with a handful of diamonds scattered over its surface.

Lily breathed a sigh of relief he wasn't going to be difficult about it thank God. 'It is rather dark,' she agreed.

Severus took a step towards her. 'Why don't you tell me why you called,' he suggested quietly.

'I wanted to be with someone I know,' she said, looking up into his shadowed face, thinking he must have grown another two inches since she had last done so. Her heart was fluttering in her chest and her palms were damp. She wanted to throw herself at him the combination of the anonymous dark and Severus Snape was a potent one.

As if reading her thoughts, he took her hand and pulled it through his crooked arm, walking with her through the stand of rowan trees. 'Let's walk about the lake,' he said, 'and you can tell me what's on your mind.'

And to her complete amazement, Lily poured it all out her disappointment in James, her hurt feelings, her dashed hopes, her confusion about her future, the uselessness of Rafe Davies in general by the time they had made the circuit of the lake and arrived back at the clearing, she felt soothed and comforted.

'Better now?' he asked lightly. 'Come, I'll walk you home.'

'No,' she said, pulling on his arm to stop him before El Castillo del Viento. 'I don't want to go yet. Tell me how you are what you've been doing.'

For the first time, he seemed to become tense. 'If I stay,' he said, 'I'll want to kiss you and I don't think you want that. So, I should see you home and be off.'

'You ... want to kiss me?' she whispered. She could not get the image of him with Pepper out of her mind. 'Still?'

His hand rose to her face and stroked her cheek. 'Always,' he said, his voice suddenly thick with emotion.

It was only natural for them to come together, then, beneath the cover of El Castillo del Viento, in the Kingdom of their youth, on the spot where they had exchanged their first kiss and brought one another to their first sexual completion. There was no Professor Slughorn to bumble in, no curfew to keep, no scheduled place to be, no family waiting at home for either of them. They began with a first, tentative kiss and permitted nature to take its course.

She tasted of the chocolate biscuits she had eaten with her tea delectable but it was the bliss of touching her again which thrilled through his veins like liquid joy. She never stopped him, as she had so often done in the past, nor so much as blocked his attempts to touch her; she was all acquiescence, and she was creating her own brand of havoc with her hands upon his skin.

When her back was arched over his arm and his face was buried between her plump breasts, he wished for light to see what he had dreamt of for so long, but otherwise, he was entirely content with the senses he was afforded: the sound of her gasps and whimpers, the feel of her softness beneath his hands, the taste of her tongue when he sucked it greedily into his mouth, and the smell of her bare skin.

The first time went by predictably quickly. The initial kiss seemed never to end, but only to become more complete with each new barrier crossed. Her facility at unbuttoning his shirt without breaking their kiss made him wonder if she had done it before; by the time she broke away from him to pull her own blouse over her head, he no longer cared. He fondled and suckled her bared nipples until she was writhing against him, and he realised she was going to let him touch between her legs that she wanted him to do it.

Lily unfastened her jeans and wriggled out of them without rising from her prone position. When she tossed them away, she lay next to him in nothing but her tiny knickers, and the smell of her arousal had him aching so badly he thought he would come from that alone. She pulled him down into another kiss, and he stroked down her ribcage, past her navel, allowing his hand to come to rest upon her mons, his long fingers curved down to the crotch of her undergarment.

Dear Merlin she was so wet, the knickers were soaked. His groan was lost in her cry as she squirmed against his hand. Unsure of himself, he rubbed her through the knickers, feeling the clear delineation of her nether lips beneath the fabric. It was too much. He unfastened his jeans, pushing them with his pants down to his knees, and he rolled atop of her, his aching erection, weeping lubrication, jabbing inexpertly against the barrier of her knickers.

'Lily!' he pled against her neck.

'Yes,' she said. 'Get up, I'll take them off you take yours off, too.'

Hating to move, but eager to penetrate her, he stood and shucked out of his remaining clothing; belatedly, he remembered the spell he had learnt and practiced for this moment.

He knelt beside her naked body, a glorious sight even in the dark of the night, and brought the tip of his wand to a spot beneath her navel.

'What are you doing?' she asked nervously. 'I already cast the contraceptive charm.'

'It's a spell to reduce the pain of losing your virginity,' he said. He did not tell her it was a Dark spell in common use amongst the inhabitants of Slytherin House. The incantation spoken, he put his wand down beside them and knelt between her legs.

'Have *you* done this before?' she asked anxiously.

'No,' he said, wishing for a moment that he had done; he wasn't quite sure how to proceed.

'Kiss me again,' she urged, reaching for him with her hands. 'I'll bet we can work it out.'

It was a sensible suggestion. He kissed her and touched her, holding his weight on his forearms, groaning her name as the tip of his erection slipped between the cleft of her vulva, and he thrust a couple of times, eliciting a gasping garble of words from Lily, who clearly liked the stimulation as he slid against her most sensitive spot.

At last, with a combined effort, he found his way into the slick, warm channel of her body and pierced her maidenhead on the second try. Lily did not evince any particular discomfort, and in spite of his best intentions, a few seconds later he cried out as the last vestiges of his virginity found a home deep within the body of the witch he adored.

He lay panting into her hair until she murmured, 'Can't breathe.' He moved to lie beside her, removing his weight, and she turned to embrace him.

'Did you ...?' he asked.

'No,' she replied huskily. 'But never mind ... you'll catch your breath in a few minutes.'

He chuckled, feeling as if he had just created the earth and set the stars in the sky for her amusement. Words failed him, though, so he simply wrapped her in his arms and felt a peace beyond his imagining invade his being.

'So,' she said, her breath cool upon his sweat slicked skin, 'what prompted you to learn *that* spell?'

'I knew we would need it, one day,' he said, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

'We?' she said, surprised.

'Of course,' he answered.

Lily did not say anything else, but took up her wand and cast a cleansing spell on them both before stretching out beside him again and kissing his throat.

He was surprised that his second wind came as quickly as it did, but with a naked, eager Lily beside him, he received a great deal of encouragement. Now, his caresses were more languorous, listening for her breathy gasps and whimpers as he pleased her. It took very little effort for her first time, his tongue tangling with hers, and his fingers buried between her legs, exploring by touch the miracle of her pleasure centre. Two long digits thrust experimentally inside, whilst his thumb travelled in lazy circles above, and then she was crying out. He swallowed her cry and kissed her more deeply still.

To his surprise, she immediately encouraged him to come to her again, and this time, he had the leisure to take note of every sensation as he pumped in and out of her yielding body. Once again, when his breathing had steadied, she pulled his hand to her mons and he fingered her slickness whilst he sucked her nipples, to the accompaniment of her clutching at his hair and calling out his name.

'Dear God, Severus,' she said as she trembled in his arms, 'I love you so much.'

He did not speak, but he held her very tightly indeed, vowing to himself to keep her safe until his dying breath. Soon, they dozed together in the deep dark of El Castillo del Viento.

When he woke, she was fondling his bollocks and nuzzling his chest.

'Are you trying to start something?' he asked, amused.

'Yes,' she said firmly. 'Am I succeeding?'

He chuckled and thrust once into the grip she held on his shaft.

'Good,' she said, and in a moment, she had straddled him, her bum sliding deliciously over his lower abdomen.

As the grey of a pearly dawn began to touch the sky, Severus watched in amazement as stunning, red-haired Lily Evans rode his cock, her hands on her breasts; when she turned her self-satisfied, half-lidded gaze to his face, she smiled at him in such a way that he thought he would gladly die for her. For years, that moment remained his strongest visual memory of her.

When he had grasped her hips and thrust up into her until he shouted her name, she moved to his side. 'Oh, I liked that,' she said smugly. 'That way, I have all kinds of control.'

'Randy wench,' he said, the tenderness with which he spoke belying his teasing words. He rolled onto his right side to face her, reaching with his left hand to stroke her flank, his eyes drinking in her loveliness.

'When do you have to be home?' she asked, brushing a lock of greasy hair from his face.

'I don't have a set time,' he answered. 'When will your family be back?'

'Tomorrow,' she said, giving him a wicked smile.

'You mean, we could shag properly in a bed?' he asked. 'Let's go there now I'm starving. You can feed me.'

She let her eyes drift lazily from his groin to his face. 'I do want you to keep up your strength,' she said. Then, a frown crossed her face and she ran her thumb over the skin of his forearm. 'What is that, Severus?'

He pulled his arm away from her and sat up abruptly, reaching for his long-sleeved shirt. 'It's nothing,' he lied, his heart thudding in an uncomfortable, uneven rhythm in his chest. How stupid could he be?

Lily sat up as well and tugged on his arm. 'Is that a snake tattoo? Is it ...?'

With a sudden move, she dropped his arm and lurched to her feet, staring down at him with her mouth open. 'I've seen that mark!'

'I don't know where you'd have seen it,' he snapped. 'It's just a tattoo. My mates and I got them to celebrate leaving school.'

Lily staggered back a step, her hands pressed to her cheeks, completely unmindful of her nudity. 'It's a Dark Mark!' she cried. 'James' father showed me the design it's the emblem of a Dark wizard, Severus!'

'Don't be stupid, Evans,' he snarled, desperate to derail her train of thought.

She snatched up her clothes and began to dress. 'It's death something about death Sir Death, or' She stuffed her knickers into the pocket of her jeans. 'It's Voldemort,' she said with soft finality. 'His name is Lord Voldemort.'

Severus lunged at her so quickly it startled him as much as it did her, but he had to stop her.

'Don't speak his name!' he hissed, his hand clamped over her mouth.

Lily pulled her wand and in a flash, a welt appeared on the back of the hand he held across her mouth. He yelped and jerked away. She turned, the wand levelled at him. 'Don't ever do that again.'

'Fine,' he said. 'Just don't say it again.'

With a suddenness which confused him, her lip trembled, and she began to cry. 'How could you do that? How could you join with a Dark wizard?'

He sneered. 'You've spent too much time talking to Potter. There's nothing sinister about a Dark wizard. This one happens to have provided an apprenticeship for me and promised a job when I have my master's certificate.' Seeing her standing there, with her hands over her face, sobbing, he melted and pulled her into his arms. 'It's a good thing, not a bad one. I'll be able to provide for you, Lily. A nice flat, nice things and later, when I've had time to save up, our own cottage. We can live wherever you like.' He rocked his torso back and forth. 'Please don't cry.'

She pushed against him. 'I can't be part of that, Severus! Don't make me choose between doing the right thing and loving you!'

He ran his hand up and down her spinal column, trying to quiet her emotions. 'Don't look at it that way,' he said, bending and pressing a kiss to her temple. 'Think of how happy we'll be, in our own place, doing whatever we want. We can work it out, Lily. I can go to my job, and you can go to yours you don't have to participate in that part of my life.'

She suddenly seized him. 'I can't be with you if you pledge allegiance to a Dark leader, Severus I can't! Please, leave them please!'

He held her tighter. 'We can work around it I promise you we can.' Her felt her shaking her head against his chest, but he kept talking. 'I was never good enough for you when I was so poor I won't be poor anymore. I'm doing this for us so we'll have a place to be so we can be together. My work for the Dark Lord never has to touch you.'

She screamed loudly enough to startle the birds in the trees above them, causing them to take flight in a great flutter of wings, and she pushed against him with all her strength. He let her go, and she staggered back from him, her face streaked with tears.

'YOU TOUCH ME!' she shouted. 'You will fill yourself with Darkness, and then you will touch me, and I will be contaminated by it, just like you are!'

Severus felt as if he had received a Bludger blow to the solar plexus. 'You think that about me?' he asked, his voice pained.

Lily looked down, unable to meet his eyes. 'You can't help it but it's part of you I can feel it. I don't care I love you! but I don't want it in me.'

Severus swallowed. 'Let me show you that we can be together,' he said. 'We can work it out I swear we will.'

Lily looked up then, directly into his face, from the distance of four feet. 'If you love me,' she said, 'you won't make me choose.'

For what felt to him like an eternity, he looked at her, admitting to himself fully that he loved her more than life, that she was more precious to him than the breath in his lungs. However, one did not hand in one's resignation to the Dark Lord. He had understood that when he had knelt at the great wizard's feet and accepted the Mark.

He had to be a man had to do the right thing.

With trembling hands, he reached behind his neck and unfastened the medallion she had given him when they were fourteen years old. In all that time, he had never removed it no matter how badly she had hurt him, or how many times she had pushed him away or rejected him, he had never stopped wearing it.

He walked over to her and took one of her hands, turning it up and placing the medallion in her palm. 'All right,' he said. 'I won't make you choose.'

He held it as a point of pride that he smiled at her before he bowed formally and walked out of El Castillo del Viento. He did not permit the tears choking him to fall until he had Disappeared from her sight.

Epilogue: The Consequences of Our Decisions

Chapter 8 of 8

The happenings up until the morning Lily's son is discovered on the Dursley's doorstep are recounted here.

A/N: The Authors Notes may contain spoilers for Deathly Hallows.

I must extend love and gratitude to Keladry Lupin, DeeMichelle, and MagicAlly, who betaed and Brit-picked this chapter for me. Much thanks as well to sshg316 and Minuet99, who alpha read for me.

Please keep in mind that two-thirds of this was written the day Deathly Hallows was released, and the remaining third was written last weekend. Although we discovered the answers to many questions in Book 7, you will see that I did not alter my story to fit hers.

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Epilogue: The Consequences of Our Decisions

September, 1979

Lily Evans laboured over her improvised worktable with great concentration, watched from across the room by a group of men. Her attention was so focussed, she was unaware of the low murmur of their voices.

A door opened and Sirius Black entered, his face distraught. 'Well?' he asked tersely.

James Potter rose from his seat and took Sirius by the arm, leading him from the make-shift cellar laboratory at Gryphon Keep. After a moment, Albus Dumbledore and Alastor Moody stood and exited the room, too.

James was standing quite close to his best mate, speaking in a soothing tone of voice. 'She's working as fast as she can,' he said. 'She's broken down Snape's poison and worked out an antidote; she's brewing now.'

'Fucking Snivellus,' Sirius spat with great heat. He dragged one trembling hand across his face.

'Go up to the kitchen, mate,' James said, putting his arm around Sirius and urging him toward the stairs. 'Nonny would be delighted to fuss over you, and you could use a square meal.'

Sirius relented and headed up the stairs, and James rejoined Dumbledore and Moody. 'This school poisoning has hit Sirius really hard,' he said.

Moody nodded curtly. 'He takes responsibility seriously, does young Black. He volunteered to patrol in Hogsmeade. He'll make a top Auror, if he ever has a chance to accept his appointment to the academy.' Moody darted a glare at James. 'That goes for both of you,' he barked.

James grinned. 'Ah, go on, Mad-Eye. If you had Sirius and me as Aurors, the rest of your hair would turn white.' He sobered after a moment. 'I would have been in the academy if Mum and Dad hadn't died last summer and Sirius didn't want to go without me, you know.'

Dumbledore spoke quietly over Moody's grunt of acknowledgement. 'You and your friends have been of invaluable assistance to the Order, James. You've even allowed us to use your home as our headquarters.' He placed a comforting hand on James' shoulder. 'I, too, believe that you and Sirius would make fine Aurors, but I cannot help but be thankful that you have the free time to assist us as you have done.'

The laboratory door opened, and Lily stood leaning on the doorframe. She had not slept since the sample of the poisoned water from the Hogsmeade Primary School had been delivered. She held out a large rectangular box subdivided into many small compartments; each compartment held a stoppered phial. 'There are enough doses here for each of the poisoned students,' she said. 'I'm sorry it took so long.'

Moody took the box from her, and James pulled her into his arms. 'It's only been six hours since you made the big break-through at about three this morning,' he said, stroking her hair. 'What was it you said? That you had forgotten how he liked to add in the odd anti-clockwise stir?'

Lily nodded wearily, letting James support her weight. 'If I had remembered that little trick of his, I would have been finished hours sooner,' she said and leant against his chest, exhausted.

James put his arm around her and led her to the staircase. 'You're going to eat, and then you're going to bathe, and then you're going to sleep,' he said, as he walked her up to the ground floor. 'You'll be a bride in two weeks we can't have you looking so pale and tired.'

At the top of the stairwell, Lily took James' hand and nursed it to her cheek, smiling at him. 'You're so sweet to me,' she said.

James brushed dark red hair back from her face. 'I just love you, silly.'

Moody and Dumbledore said their good-byes as James shepherded Lily to join Sirius in the kitchen.

'Clever lass,' Moody rumbled as he and Dumbledore stepped out into the sunny autumn afternoon.

'She's gifted,' Dumbledore said. 'I sent samples of the poisoned water to Horace Slughorn and hand-delivered additional specimens to the Potions masters at Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. Only Lily broke the formula.'

'Recruiting her was one of your best coups,' Moody said with a smirk.

'I didn't recruit Lily,' Dumbledore replied. 'Harry Potter, James' father, did.'

Severus roused only when he realised the pounding in his head was coming from the door, not his dream. He stumbled from the bed and opened the door, prepared to eviscerate the intruder.

'The Dark Lord is asking for you,' Lucius Malfoy said, looking him up and down. 'Perhaps you should bathe, first.'

Severus turned on his heel, leaving the door open, and slouched across the room to take his robes from the wardrobe. Malfoy lounged with one shoulder propped on the wall, his gaze riveted upon the tousled hair of the feminine figure in Severus' bed.

'Oh, I say,' Malfoy said, 'is that Lisette McNair?'

Severus glanced at the bed. 'I forgot about her,' he said. He strode to the bedside and nudged the prone figure. 'Wake up, Miss McNair.'

The girl sat up, clutching the sheet to her chest. 'Do I have to go?' she asked plaintively. 'I wouldn't mind waiting'

'Go!' Severus snarled, pointing to the still open door.

Miss McNair climbed from the bed, wrapping the sheet about her, toga-style, and departed, leaving the door open, as it had been. Severus took up his wand and caused the door to slam closed, then performed a hasty cleansing charm on his hair and his body before beginning to dress.

Forgoing the urge to suggest that perhaps actual soap and water would be beneficial to the excessively oily hair and skin of the bad-tempered Snape, Lucius contented himself with general maliciousness. 'Disappointed another one, Severus?' he said, amused. 'You're the talk of the Dark Lord's bed-mate brigade, you know. One wonders where you find the energy for brewing, considering how ... thorough you are with the ladies.'

Severus completed his toilette by washing his face and hands with the water in the bowl on the dresser. 'Sod off, Lucius,' he said, before leading the way down the corridor and into the Malfoy Manor drawing room, which had been appropriated for Lord Voldemort's use.

'My Lord,' he said, dropping to his knees and raising the hem of the garment to his lips. He knew several of his *brothers* were seated behind him, which made him nervous, but he betrayed no discomfort.

'You may rise, Severus,' the Dark Lord said, obviously in a benevolent mood. 'I called for you because I wanted you to know how well your potion has succeeded.'

Severus' eyes lit up. 'The topical application for joint pain, my Lord? You have permitted its use in clinical testing? I think it may prove quite beneficial to curse victims....'

The Death Eaters seated across the room tittered, and the Dark Lord himself was amused, as well. 'No, not *that* potion the one you created for my arsenal.'

Severus lowered his eyes, schooling himself to polite attention. He had two jobs as the Dark Lord's chief potion-brewer: he created weapons to use against their enemies, and if he had free time, he was given the equipment and the ingredients to create palliatives for their allies. He balanced destruction which he viewed as self-defence against those who sought to harm the Dark Lord with healing, which he brought to those of his Lordship's followers who were injured in the line of duty.

'Of course, my Lord,' he said politely. 'Thank you for informing me of its successful use. May I inquire as to which of our enemies were punished?'

Outright laughter erupted behind him, and Severus glanced over his shoulder with a sneer. Bellatrix Black sat upon the knee of Rodolphus Lestrage; they were joined by two thug-like creatures called Crabbe and Goyle. All four were laughing uproariously.

'Silence!' Lord Voldemort hissed, and the room became still. 'Your brothers are amused, Severus, because the potion was quite lethal. Did you know that your old schoolmaster, Dumbledore, has persuaded the governors of the Hogsmead Primary School to offer a boarding school for Muggle-born students? The children who are scheduled to receive Hogwarts letters are approached a year early, and offered the opportunity to live and attend school in a wizarding environment, preparing them in advance for the wizarding world.' Voldemort smiled thinly. 'You will be so pleased, my son. Seven of the twenty-five Mudbloods died; fourteen others are at St Mungo's. Well done!'

Severus retched again, holding onto the porcelain of the toilet with trembling hands. He was thankful for the bathroom in the underground level of Malfoy Manor, where the potions workshop was located. It was the only bathroom in the house in which he enjoyed any privacy at all. Lord Voldemort took pleasure in keeping his Death Eaters on a very short leash.

Standing, Severus turned to the sink and splashed water on his face repeatedly. How like the Dark Lord to give him an assignment, letting him believe he was creating a weapon to be used against a legitimate enemy, only to pervert the use of the potion in some sick way.

Regret was like a bitter, burning fire in his belly, and no potion for indigestion, ulcer, or stomach upset made the least difference to the discomfort. It was with him all the time, constantly souring his appetite and his disposition.

His day was already ruined he might as well make it complete.

Exiting the bathroom, he moved over to the desk provided for his use and removed the ward on the drawer. From within, he extracted a copy of the *Daily Prophet*, dated two weeks previously. Like a man pouring salt on a wound, he opened the paper to the announcements page and let it fall to the desk top.

Lily looked lovingly into the eyes of her husband-to-be, James Potter, above a short article about their upcoming wedding. By the time the happy couple had turned their attention to smile and wave at the reader, Severus had already thrust the newspaper back into the drawer and warded it again, cursing.

In two weeks, Lily Anne Evans would be come Potter's wife and be irrevocably lost to him.

Two weeks later

Pepper sat nervously in the dodgiest-looking pub in Godric's Hollow. The patrons seemed to be there for nothing but drinking, and most of them sat morosely over their pints, paying no mind to the young girl sitting alone at the booth in the corner. For the fifth time in ten minutes, she flipped open her compact and peered in the mirror, checking her hair and make-up by the dim bulb. She had ducked out on the supper the wedding party were enjoying together at the hotel on the High Street. The men and women would separate after pudding for the hen and stag parties; hopefully, she'd be back before Lily missed her.

It would be a shame for the maid of honour to skive off the hen party.

At that moment the door opened and a tall, dark figure entered the pub. Pepper looked up anxiously and could not prevent the smile which touched her lips when she saw him. It had been over two years since last she had seen Severus Snape. Her heart tripped over itself and her tummy swooped.

His black eyes travelled unerringly to her, and he made a nearly imperceptible gesture to the door. He wanted her to go to outside with him. Gladly! She grabbed her shoulder bag and her jacket, passing close by him as he politely held the door for her to exit.

When the door to the pub closed behind them, she turned to greet him, but he laid a finger across her lips, taking her hand and leading her around the back of the pub. Once there, he pulled her into his arms dear God, he wanted to kiss her! and she threw her arms about his neck. However, in the next instant, she felt as if she had been pushed forcibly through an opening too small for her. It was over very quickly, and she was standing again on firm ground.

'What was that?' she screeched when he released her and stepped back, away from her.

'It is not safe for you to be seen with me,' he answered her tersely.

Pepper looked around her and realised he had brought her to the Kingdom. Her anger evaporated; many of their most heated exchanges had taken place here, kissing and touching one another with a desperation she had never felt with another bloke not that there had been many.

She looked at him, marvelling at how tall he had grown since the summer they were seventeen, and how his shoulders had broadened. Her mouth was dry with wanting him.

'You said in your owl that it was urgent,' he remarked shortly. 'Is it Lily?'

Pepper started as if she had been burned. 'Lily?' she said. 'Why would I write to you about *her*?'

He frowned. 'Tomorrow is her wedding day, is it not? Did she ask you to send for me?'

Pepper felt as if her heart were shattering into a thousand pieces. She stared into the face of the virtual stranger, the man about whom she had dreamt for two years, and sought the boy she had adored.

'No!' she whispered. 'She hasn't mentioned you in over a year.' Her voice sounded cracked, as if she were about to cry, but she didn't care. She had wanted to see him so desperately, and all he could think about, even now, was her damned sister!

She saw the glimpse of pain which passed over his face - he had always loved Lily best everyone had always loved Lily best, including their parents! Lily always *got* the best the best school, the best boys, the best luck it was so unfair!

Pepper stepped up to Severus and took his cold hands into her own. She felt him flinch, but she held on to him, looking directly into his eyes, willing him to recognize her, to remember how they had been, together in the Kingdom, and later, together in their summer romance. After a moment, he relaxed infinitesimally, and his hands seemed to warm within hers. If she had to make a complete fool of herself, she would but she *had* to make him see and understand.

'I wrote to you and borrowed my parents' owl because I wanted to see you,' she said, pouring her feelings into her words, hoping he would hear her. 'I've missed you, Severus. I think about us together all the time probably every day. Do you think about it?'

She saw in his expression that he did not, that he felt sorry for her for even asking him. She closed her eyes, goading herself to go on to say it all.

'Severus marry me. Let me be your wife. I'll be really good at it. I can keep house and cook and enjoy...' she flushed '... sex with you. We can have babies or not, I don't care about that. I just want you.'

He stood staring at her, not speaking; he seemed to be stricken to stone. Pepper dug in her shoulder bag and pulled out the square black velvet box. Snapping it open, she showed him the fire opal ring he had bought so long ago for Lily and stupid Lily had thrown it away, like so much rubbish.

'Look!' she said. 'I found this here three years ago, Severus. I saw your initials and hers I knew you had bought it for *her* but I kept it I wore it! I'm the one who cared!'

Now he was moved from his immobile state. He snatched the box from her as if it were a cobra, and she was about to be bitten. 'Oh, Pepper,' he whispered, and his voice sounded sad beyond bearing. 'I wish I had known you had this.'

'I would have been proud to wear it!' she cried. 'She never thought you were good enough, but I knew you were worth a dozen James Potters!'

Severus slipped the velvet box in the pocket of his Muggle coat and took her by the arms. 'Listen to me,' he said, and his voice held such a note of command that Pepper quieted at once.

'That ring is a magical one,' he said, speaking slowly and carefully, in an uncharacteristically kind tone. 'I put a spell on it not a bad one, but a traditional spell used on rings exchanged between a wizard and witch when they are promised to one another.' He closed his eyes as if he were in pain, then opened them and spoke again. 'You put on a ring that was bewitched to plight the person wearing it to *me*.'

Pepper tried to pull away from him, but he held her securely. 'What are you talking about?' she demanded. 'Plight? That's not even a word!'

'It means to pledge to promise. Look the point is, Pepper, that you were never meant to touch that ring. It was wrong of me to leave it lying about. Although, if any other person had found it, they most likely would never have felt the magic'

'Then why did I?' She twisted away from him. 'Let me go!'

Severus released her. 'You felt the magic because you're her twin sister you share enough genetic material for the spell to have worked on you, as well not as it would have done with a witch, but enough to confuse you into thinking you fancied me.'

'I'M NOT CONFUSED!' Pepper shouted. 'I've fancied you since we were twelve years old!' She grabbed his hands again. 'Kiss me,' she said, 'kiss me, and you'll see.' He stood very still, his head moving in tiny increments from side to side, denying her every word. 'No one has ever kissed me like you do,' she said, standing on her tiptoes and reaching to put her arms around his neck, remembering how he always swept her against him and kissed her breathless when she reached for him.

It startled her when he stepped back from her; she staggered a bit before finding her feet, feeling very foolish to have tried to kiss him. When he drew his wand, she froze in shock.

'What are you going to do?' she asked fearfully. 'Please don't hurt me!'

'Pepper,' he said

'DON'T CALL ME THAT!' she screeched. 'MY NAME IS PETUNIA!'

Lifting his wand, he gave a slight flourish and intoned, *Finite Incantatem*.'

In that instant, Pepper felt as if a piece of gauze had been removed from her body. The world appeared in slightly sharper focus, she no longer felt like shouting, and the man watching her with such pity was a great, ugly git with greasy hair and a huge, honking nose. She clapped her hands over her mouth and staggered back, away from him.

'See?' he said sadly.

'I *hate* you!' she said, her voice so tight and full of loathing that her old friend looked sadder still.

'You will have to hold my arm very tightly, for me to return you to the pub,' he said calmly, offering his forearm with courteous formality.

Pepper grasped his arm, and in a twinkling, they had arrived in the alley behind the pub.

'Can you find your way to your lodging?' he inquired considerately.

Pepper did not answer, but brushed past him with as much dignity as she could muster and set out for the hotel on the High Street.

Pepper stepped out of her hotel room and glanced up and down the hall, taking care not to move her head too fast, for it swam uncomfortably when she did. She ought not to have drunk the strangely-smoking whisky Lily's witch friends had brought to her hen party, but Pepper had been angry and confused and it had seemed like a good idea, at the time.

She began to creep down the hall, trying to remember which room belonged to Sirius Black. He was a handsome bloke a bit of a snob, but she didn't feel very choosy, tonight. He was best man, she was maid of honour it made some sort of sad sense.

Choosing a room, she knocked on the door. A male voice uttered a muffled oath, and then the door was opened to reveal Peter Pettigrew. His fair hair was sticking out all over his head, and his fly was partly undone, with a bit of shirttail sticking out of it, as if she had disturbed him in the loo.

'I'm sorry,' she said with what she hoped was a friendly smile. 'I was looking for Sirius' room.'

'Hi, Pepper,' Peter said, his speech as precise as hers was apparently, they were similarly pissed. 'Sirius is two doors down from me.' He looked her over rather closely, his eyes seeming to linger overlong on her chest. 'Can I help you with something?'

Pepper stepped away from him. 'No, thanks bye!' She flipped her fingers at him and proceeded down the hallway. She could feel Peter's eyes boring into the middle of her back for several seconds, and was relieved when she heard his door close.

Pausing before Sirius' door, she patted her hair and straightened her skirt before knocking. She heard deep voices and laughter, and the door was swung open.

'Hello, Petunia,' Sirius said, looking rather surprised.

Pepper was rather surprised as well. Sirius had come to the door wearing nothing but his trousers. Behind him, lounging back against the headboard of the bed and drinking a can of lager, was Remus Lupin, whose shirt was unbuttoned. Pepper frowned, trying to force herself to concentrate.

'Oh, hello,' she said vaguely. 'Are they making you share a room?' she asked, puzzled. 'None of the bridesmaids have to share.'

Sirius looked as if he was trying very hard not to burst into laughter; Remus sat forward, swinging his feet onto the floor. 'Was it a nice party, Pepper?' he asked, smiling at her kindly. 'Did you have a bit to drink?'

Pepper giggled. 'Does it show?'

Remus stood and strolled over to stand in the doorway with Sirius. 'Yes, it does, a bit,' he admitted. 'Can we help you?'

'I was coming to see Sirius,' she said, frowning. 'But you weren't supposed to be here.'

Remus bit his lip. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'James asked me to keep Sirius out of trouble until the wedding is over.'

Sirius turned his back to them, his shoulders shaking.

'What's the matter with him?' she asked, watching Sirius.

'He's got the hiccups,' Remus replied firmly. 'He had too much to drink.'

Pepper nodded wisely. 'I thought so,' she said.

Remus began to button his shirt. 'I'm going to take you back to your room, Pepper,' he said. He stepped out into the hallway and took her arm. 'Come along.'

Pepper happily tucked her arm through his, Sirius forgotten. 'I have a lovely room,' she said confidentially. 'You don't have to share with Sirius you could stay with me I'm much nicer.'

Remus opened his mouth to reply, but a door opened, and Peter Pettigrew peeked out. 'Hullo, Moony,' he said. 'Where's Padfoot?'

Remus frowned. 'Go to bed, Peter,' he said firmly.

Pepper waggled her fingers at Peter again as Remus took her door key from her and opened her door. 'Here you go, Pepper,' he said, pressing her key back into her hand. 'You'd better get to bed, now you want to get your beauty sleep before the big day tomorrow.'

Pepper allowed him to push her into her room and was turning to respond to him when he closed the door in her face. She shook her head, confused, and sat down on her bed. She had gone to offer to spend the night with Sirius, but Remus had been with him she ought of have offered to spend the night with *both* of them!

Rising from the bed, she had her hand on the doorknob when someone knocked. She opened it, saying archly, 'Forget something, Remus?'

Peter stepped into her room, closing the door behind him. 'You want to forget about old Moony,' he said, stepping up close to her. 'I'll sit with you for a while, Pepper.'

Pepper looked him over. 'You're a wizard,' she said, as if it were a little-known truth.

'I'll show you my wand,' he said, beginning to unbuckle his belt.

'All right,' Pepper said.

Three weeks later, when her period was a week late, Pepper knocked on another door rather late one night. A telly was turned off, and the door was opened to reveal Vernon Dursley.

'Petunia!' he said, surprised. He was wearing a dressing gown over striped pyjamas, and he held a spoon in one hand, as if he had been eating ice cream.

'May I come in?' she asked.

Vernon stepped back, self-consciously tucking the spoon into the pocket of his dressing gown. 'Of course.' He closed the door and glanced around the cramped sitting room of his flat. 'The place is rather a mess,' he added with some embarrassment.

Pepper stepped up to him, taking his hands. 'I've made up my mind, Vernon,' she said resolutely, looked directly into his little eyes.

'You have?' he said, a hopeful smile touching his lips.

'I will marry you, on the condition that you accept the transfer to Surrey.'

The burly man wrapped Pepper up in his arms. 'You've made me the happiest man in Britain!' he said in a shaking voice.

'I want to married right away,' she said, wrapping her arms as far around him as she could reach. 'I want to have a lovely place of our own and start our family straight away.'

Vernon tightened his arms and kissed her on the temple. 'Anything you want, my love.'

Pepper swallowed. 'Take me to bed, Vernon.'

The night was cold and wet, and Severus sat at the dingy bar, nursing a firewhisky. He had been up to Hogwarts to see the headmaster, only to be told that the headmaster had gone into Hogsmeade. Bugger.

The Hog's Head Inn door opened and a damp draft blew in before the newcomer wrestled the door closed. Severus pulled his already damp cloak closer around him and cursed the early spring weather.

'All right, Hagrid?' the barkeep rumbled.

'Fair enough, Aberforth,' the half-giant responded. 'Been down ter Dervish and Banges to pick up a package for Professor Dumbledore,' Hagrid confided. 'Thought I'd stop in for a drop against the cold!'

'Albus is upstairs,' the man called Aberforth responded. 'If you want to leave it here, I'll give it to him when he goes save you a trip to the castle.'

Hagrid patted the pocket of his moleskin coat. 'I've got it safe, right here,' he said, stepping up to the bar to take the pint the barkeep offered.

Severus slipped quietly from the bar and moved stealthily up the steps to the first floor of the inn. If Dumbledore was upstairs, he was meeting with someone perhaps Severus could pick up some information to take back to the Dark Lord. His master had been in a fury ever since the defiant Mudblood, Lily Potter, had refused to hand over her Wolfsbane Potion formula to the fearsome Fenrir Greyback. She and her husband, joined by other members of the Order of the Phoenix, had driven back the attack of Greyback and the Death Eaters, escaping with their lives and the formula intact. It had not been her first instance of insolently flouting the Dark Lord's will since she had married Potter.

Severus, personally, had endured four bouts of the Cruciatus Curse from the Dark Lord in the last month. He had not been part of the attack on the Potters, but he had been near to hand when the Dark Lord had desired to punish someone. He was desperate to do something anything to win his lord's favour again.

Severus moved along the corridor until he heard voices coming from within one of the rooms, then he crouched, and for want of a better method, he placed his ear to the keyhole. It was Dumbledore, speaking to a woman, who was telling the headmaster about her teaching experience. The headmaster was thanking the woman, telling her he did not think she would be suitable for the post, when suddenly, the quality of the woman's voice changed, and she began to speak in harsh, hoarse tones.

'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches,' she said, and Severus' heart speeded up to a fever pitch. He was going to hear something that would buy him a reprieve from Unforgivable Curses!

'Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies'

'Listening at keyholes, are we?'

Severus jumped up, but too late; the barkeep had grasped the back of his robes and now jerked him back from the door.

'Who are you?' the man demanded. 'You don't look familiar to me I wonder if you're one of *his*?' A strong hand grasped Severus' left wrist, the other hand reaching to move his sleeve up.

With terrific determination, Severus concentrated, and a non-verbal stinging hex sent the smelly old man staggering away from him. Severus never looked back, but ran down the back stairs and out the door into an alley, then he turned on the spot and was gone.

Straggly and wet, Severus prostrated himself on the floor at the feet of his master, waiting to see what the Dark Lord's response would be to the information he had provided.

'You have done well, Severus,' the Dark Lord said. 'Perhaps your true gift is in espionage, rather than potions brewing.'

Severus kept his face averted, scarcely breathing, waiting to see which direction the Dark Lord's whim would take him.

After a moment, his master spoke again. 'Lord Voldemort rewards his servants when they excel. I will grant you a favour you may make a request, whenever you will.'

Severus did not look up, but placed another kiss to the hem of his master's robe.

'Thank you, my Lord.'

July, 1981

Severus sat with the framed master's certificate in his hands, his face blank. He was alone in his room, save for the very nice cognac Lucius had given him as a congratulatory gift.

He wished his mother had lived to see him attain this goal.

When he had been younger, it had been the pinnacle of his ambition to teach, thinking it would be a perfect position, wherein he could earn a living while doing what he loved best, and have time and facilities for research, as well.

He poured another snifter of cognac, allowing the aroma to waft below his sensitive nose, his eyes closed.

The only wizarding secondary school in Britain was Hogwarts, and Severus had never been a favourite of Dumbledore's no, Potter and Black had been the headmaster's favourite boys. In addition, Severus knew his affiliation with the Death Eaters was not something he could hide from Dumbledore the man was a Legilimens of uncommon skill.

A random comment of the Dark Lord's popped into Severus mind, and he was electrified.

'Perhaps your true gift is in espionage, rather than potions brewing.'

Lord Voldemort motioned for Severus to rise and be seated. 'What did you wish to discuss with me, my son?'

Severus leant forward. 'I have long remembered your comment to me, my Lord, suggesting that I might be gifted in the art of espionage. It has just come to my attention that Dumbledore's Potions master, Horace Slughorn, is planning his retirement'

The headmaster smiled. 'Severus, you are undoubtedly qualified for the job, but I do have a rule regarding the hiring Death Eaters to work in my school.'

Severus inclined his head. 'I appreciate your concerns, Headmaster but has it occurred to you that I might provide useful information for you?'

Dumbledore sipped from his cup of tea. 'At the behest of Lord Voldemort, no doubt?'

Severus sipped, as well. 'No doubt,' he replied.

Dumbledore chuckled. 'I think not, Severus but it is very nice to see you, of course.'

Severus stood at his worktable in the underground room at Malfoy Manor, chopping daisy roots in precise quarter-inch lengths. He did not look up when Lucius Malfoy sauntered into the room and seated himself at Severus' desk.

'You stay locked up down here all the time,' he complained. 'There's not a decent conversationalist amongst the sycophants upstairs.'

Severus did not slow his chopping, but he did raise an eyebrow. 'I was certain that you were fascinated with the Dark Lord's tales of his travels in Abyssinia.'

Lucius snorted indelicately. 'Well, you missed the hullabaloo last night,' he said.

'Indeed?' Severus moved the daisy roots to one side and began to skin a Shrivelfig with a marvellously sharp silver dagger.

'Oh, yes,' Lucius said. 'The Dark Lord finally determined his primary target, resulting from the prophecy you overheard he is quite pleased.'

Severus lit the fire beneath his cauldron. 'I suppose you will tell me when it pleases you.'

'I think you may have been at school with them, Severus those obnoxious Gryffindors?'

Severus sighed. 'Surely you don't imagine I can recall every obnoxious Gryffindor who attended school when I was there?'

'I was referring to James and Lily Potter oh, and their son, Harry. The Dark Lord ordered an attack for last night. It was the tyke's first birthday, and the whole family was visiting at the Mudblood's home, in Harrogate.'

Severus continued stirring the concoction in his cauldron. 'How convenient,' he murmured, placing his stirring rod on the table and slipping his trembling hands into the pockets of his robes.

'Not for me,' Lucius said, standing and brushing a speck of lint from the sleeve of his impeccable robes. 'I had to lead the raid.'

'And I was not invited to the celebration feast?' Severus said, sounding aggrieved.

'The Potters weren't there but we taught the filthy little Mudblood a lesson. Her parents are dead.'

'Well, that hardly merits a celebration,' Severus remarked neutrally, seating himself to disguise the trembling of his knees.

'Dead Muggles?' Lucius said disdainfully. 'Certainly not.'

'You wished to see me, Severus?'

Severus remained on his knees, his eyes averted. 'Thank you, my Lord.'

'Rise, my son, and sit.'

Severus murmured his thanks and sat in the chair indicated by his master. Lord Voldemort inclined his head graciously and gestured with one hand for Severus to speak.

'My Lord, there was a time when you granted me a favour.'

The Dark Lord nodded, watching Severus' face. 'I see already, my son you wish to claim your gift and it is a woman.'

'If it pleases you, my Lord, I should like to have the woman, Lily Potter.'

Voldemort laughed, a high-pitched, thin sound which chilled Severus to the very marrow of his bones. 'A Mudblood toy for you! Of course! It would please me, indeed, Severus. You must bring her before me, when you have her.'

Severus leant forward. 'You do mean to dispose of the husband and the child?'

The Dark Lord reached out a hand, like a large white spider, and patted Severus on the arm. 'Yes, the Mudblood will be broken and bereft when she comes to you, my son, never fear.'

Severus fell to his knees and kissed the hem of the robe. 'You are too good, my Lord.'

Albus Dumbledore looked gravely at the young man seated before him.

'You will not oppose me?'

Severus laid his wand upon Dumbledore's desk. 'I will not, Headmaster.'

Dumbledore looked deep into Severus' eyes. Without a wand, and without speaking a word, he slipped into Severus' mind.

October 31, 1981

Petunia Dursley picked up the spoon her darling had hurled at her and placed it with the other dirty spoons on a plate before her. From the pile of clean spoons, she chose another and dipped it into the heavily sweetened porridge in the plastic bowl stuck to the tray of the high chair by a suction cup on its bottom.

'Eat your breakfast, Duddikins,' she cooed, smiling with absolute adoration at her little love. 'Finish your porridge, like a good boy, and Mummy will give you a sweet,' she promised, lifting the porridge to the baby's mouth.

'No!' Dudley bellowed, his hands flailing, and he knocked the spoon from Petunia's hand with such force it bounced off the wall before landing on the floor.

'Clever Duddy!' she purred, taking the sponge and spray cleaner from the table and rising to wipe the goo from her wall. 'You say "no" just like a big boy!' she praised, smiling at her son. His fair hair and blue eyes made him look just like a little angel.

She was disturbed from her admiration of her lamb by an uncomfortable warmth on her bony chest. Her hand flew to the neckline of her pink housedress and she rubbed at the medallion. She couldn't see it, but she could feel it. Lily had forced it on her after their parents' funeral, three months before.

'We can use it to call for one another in an emergency,' Lily said, thrusting it at her.

'It's horrid!' Petunia objected. 'Common-looking I wouldn't wear such a thing.' She sniffed and looked away from the pleading in her sister's almond-shaped green eyes.

"You won't be able to see it, Pepper "

'Don't call me that!' Petunia hissed, suddenly rigid with fury.

'Daddy still called you that ...'

'Our parents are **dead** because of you and your lot!' Petunia screeched, rising and fleeing to the door of their parents' bedroom. 'I'm not going to sit here with you as if nothing happened! This is all your fault!'

Lily stood and pursued her. 'All right, Petunia; I'm sorry. Please wear the medallion. If you're ever in danger, you can call for me and I will come immediately.' She reached and fastened the necklace about Petunia's neck, tucking it beneath the black crepe de chine of her mourning dress. 'Severus and I used them when we were children.'

Petunia threw up a hand as if to ward off a blow. 'Don't mention that **awful** boy to me!'

Lily ignored the comment and reached into her exquisite leather handbag when she had seen Petunia eyeing it on their last visit, she had giggled and whispered, 'It's dragon hide!' as if such a bald-faced lie were a laughing matter and she withdrew an old sweets tin.

'If you ever need to come to me quickly, just hold this tin and say my name,' Lily said. 'This is a Portkey. It will only work once, but I can always charm it to work again.'

'I don't want it!' Petunia cried, backing away from her. 'Keep your filthy magic tricks to yourself!'

Lily stalked after her, determination on her face. 'I love you, Pep,' she said, grasping Petunia's forearm. 'I love you, and I love Dudley, and I don't want something terrible to happen to you because of me. Please reconsider and come to stay with us at Gryphon Keep there's plenty of room; you wouldn't have to see us if you didn't want to ...'

Petunia pulled away from her. 'I have a lovely home of my own, thank you,' she snarled. 'I have a husband and a baby and I am not going to chase after you and that freak you married and your freakish baby just because of some imaginary war!'

Lily's face reflected first sadness, then anger, then hardened into resolution. 'My son's name is Harry,' she said. 'And there is nothing imaginary about the war, Pep. Are you sure you won't come back to Godric's Hollow with me? We can tell Vernon we just want to catch up and let the babies play together. Sisters have visits like that all the time.'

Petunia refused to let herself be swayed by the wistful note upon which Lily had ended. 'My husband needs me at home,' she said, turning away.

Lily came up behind her and tucked the old sweets tin into her hand, giving her shoulder a squeeze at the same time. 'Be safe, Pepper,' she said, and Petunia swept out of the room without a backward glance.

Impatiently, Petunia tugged the necklace out and glanced down at the medallion. The message was the same as it had been every day this week. Well, she had no intention of going to stay with Lily. Vernon really loathed the Potters; sometimes Petunia thought he disliked them more than she did. No, she would stay home, and take care of her baby and her husband and try to forget she had ever had a sister.

'No!' Dudley squealed gleefully, and Petunia dropped the medallion back inside her collar and bent to pick up another spoon. She had quite enough to keep her occupied, as it was.

The night was uncommonly cold for Halloween, and Petunia was thankful she had worn her warm coat. The horrible Port-Thing had left her feeling nauseated. She covered her mouth with her hand and looked around, wondering where Lily had sent her. After increasingly frequent medallion-calls throughout the day, she had been extremely annoyed with her bothersome sister, but it had not been until the calls stopped that she became afraid. As soon as Vernon was snoring, she bathed, dressed, checked one last time on Dudders, and took the sweets tin from her handbag. Staring at it with terrible uncertainty, she said, 'Lily?' and was jerked from her warm, safe kitchen and dumped on the damp grass in the unfamiliar dark.

She was on her knees in front of what appeared to be a very old and dilapidated manor house of some sort. It was derelict, boarded up, and looked very unsafe. From a long way down a winding drive, she heard voices raised, and her curiosity drew her forward.

'Give him to me, Hagrid I'm his godfather. I'll look after him '

Petunia froze. She knew that voice! It was Sirius Black! She crept forward further and saw the elegant, shaggy-haired young man in speech with what appeared to be an oddly shaped tree.

'I've got me orders from Dumbledore,' the massive shape replied. 'Harry's ter go ter his aunt an' uncle.'

'Those Muggles?' Sirius cried. 'You can't give James and Lily's son to those people!'

'Sorry, Sirius, but I've got me orders,' the other voice replied doggedly.

Sirius stepped forward, his hand outstretched. 'I've got the motorbike here you take it and get Harry to safety. I won't need it anymore.'

Petunia watched in horrified wonder as the enormous shadowed figure took what Sirius offered and lumbered out of sight. When she was sure it was gone, Petunia ran up to Sirius.

'Where's Lily?' she cried, grabbing the front of Sirius' wizard's robes.

'Petunia!' Sirius stared at her as if she were a ghost. 'How did you find out?'

'Find out what? Where is she?'

Sirius took a firm hold on her forearms and looked down into her eyes; for the first time, she saw that his handsome face was uncommonly white and streaked with tears.

'She's gone,' he croaked, and she was horrified when tears began to fall from his eyes. 'She and James both. But Harry's all right Harry's going to be just fine.'

Petunia looked up at him, wishing he would make sense. 'Gone where, Sirius? Why has she been calling me to come to her all week long?'

Sirius suddenly pulled her into a hug, and she was horrified to smell spirits on his breath. 'They're dead, Petunia!' he cried. 'He killed them!'

Petunia pushed Sirius indignantly away from her. 'You're raving! Where is she?'

Sirius now wrapped his arms around himself. 'It's my fault I might as well have done it with my own hands ...'

'Where am I?' she shouted at the distraught man. 'Where is my sister? You aren't making any sense!'

Sirius looked over his shoulder. 'Their bodies are still in there,' he said. 'In the gate house. James said it was silly to put the big house under the enchantment when we're using it for our headquarters.'

Petunia jabbed a finger at the space behind Sirius. 'There's nothing there, you dolt!'

He closed his eyes and drew a ragged breath, then looked into her face. 'The house is under an enchantment; I'm sorry, I forgot. You can't see it, but it's there, and Lily and James are inside, and they've been murdered.'

Petunia staggered back a step and pressed her palms to her cheeks. 'Who killed them? Why?'

Sirius began to laugh then, and Petunia was very frightened, because he sounded mad. 'Why, Peter Pettigrew killed them, Petunia he sold them to the Dark Lord, who cast Killing Curses on them.'

Finally, Petunia began to cry, harsh, angry sobs, prompting Sirius to place a placating hand upon her arm. 'I hate you!' she sobbed. 'All of your kind! You took her away from me and now she's *d-dead!* And she called for me to come, and I stayed away!'

Sirius spoke with scant patience. 'Be thankful you stayed away,' he said grimly. 'She thought you would be safer here, with them she and James thought there was no way on earth fucking Peter Pettigrew would betray them to the enemy.'

Petunia threw his hand from her arm. 'What does Peter have to do with it?' she demanded, the worst of her storm of tears past.

Loud popping noises began to sound in the air around them.

'Never mind that!' Sirius snapped. 'We have to get out of here the Aurors are coming. Where in Surrey do you live?'

'Privet Drive in Little Whinging, but '

Sirius pulled her into a rough embrace and she was shoved unceremoniously through the squeezing void. 'Stop that!' she gasped, pushing away from him, and she fell to her knees and was sick.

Sirius looked dispassionately down at her when she raised her face and wiped her mouth. 'Can you find your way home from here?'

She glanced over at her own front door, across the street, and nodded.

'Good,' he said. 'I have to find Peter and kill him. You'll excuse me?'

Petunia opened her mouth to tell him once more he was insane, but he grinned at her fiercely, turned on the spot, and was gone again.

Severus burst into the headmaster's study without knocking, startling Dumbledore and stirring a storm of reprimands from the portraits around the walls.

'That's enough, thank you,' Dumbledore said sternly, and the previous headmasters fell silent.

Severus stared across the room at him. 'Tell me it's a lie.'

Dumbledore stood and crossed the room to him. 'Last night, Lord Voldemort entered the cottage where the Potters were hidden, and he murdered them. Harry is safe.'

At the mention of Lily's infant son, Severus made a motion as if to brush away an insect buzzing too close to his face. 'He promised me ...' he muttered, and he turned from Dumbledore and began to pace the floor. 'You're mistaken. He promised me she would be spared.'

Dumbledore grasped his arm. 'You *bargained* for her life with the life of the child?' he demanded.

Severus looked up defiantly. 'Yes! And I would do it again!'

'That will be impossible,' Dumbledore responded heavily. 'The Dark Lord has fallen. I am not sure yet, but I believe Lily died defending the baby, which invoked ancient magic the curse rebounded on Voldemort, and he is vanquished.'

Severus had always dreamt such news would bring him great joy, but he felt less than dead an utterly hollow thing.

'Don't you care about the child?' the headmaster said as Severus moved blindly through the door, heading for the stairway.

'No,' he answered shortly.

'Severus, I could use your assistance making the arrangements to keep Harry safe you know Lily's sister, do you not?'

But Severus simply descended the winding stairs.

Dawn of the next day found him standing across the street from number four, Privet Drive, his eyes riveted upon the basket bearing all that was left of Lily. He clearly recognised the tabby cat which kept watch just beneath the hydrangea bushes. When he had arrived, he and the cat had given one another long, measuring looks and finally exchanged nods of acknowledgement. Through it all, the infant son of James and Lily Potter slept on in his basket, unaware of how the entire world had been dismantled and reassembled for his sake.

Severus stared at the banal little semi, identical to all the others on the dreary little street, and tried to imagine Pepper living behind its insipid blue door. She had grown to loathe her twin sister that much had been evident to Severus the last night he had seen her, when he had declined her proposal of marriage and taken the fire opal plight troth ring from her. Would her hatred of all things magical spill over onto the baby sleeping on her doorstep? Would Pepper look at Potter's son and see the sister she had once loved or the magic she hated?

Resolved, he crossed the street and looked down at the baby. Severus had never yet divined the method by which one looked at a baby and discovered a resemblance to an adult person; he certainly did not see that the child looked 'just like James,' as he had heard Dumbledore say more than once. For the tiniest fraction of a moment, he could look at the black-haired baby boy and imagine Lily had presented him with a son, and that he and the child were waiting for her to return from a trip to the shops

Shaking himself from his abstraction, he reached within his cloak and withdrew a silken bundle of fabric; vivid colours peeked here and there amongst its pristine white folds. Bending, with infinite care, he tucked the hand-sewn standard in and around the blanket already covering the child, finally making sure that Dumbledore's letter rested directly on top. The tabby cat watched him with intense interest as he smoothed one fold from the impromptu baby bunting and returned to his place across the street from Pepper's home.

Soon the front door opened and Pepper was there, a skinny young woman with bleached-blond hair who stared at the baby on the doorstep, then stared across the street at Severus, before slamming the front door closed.

Severus felt a moment of anxiety, and he and the tabby cat traded looks of alarm. If Pepper did not follow Dumbledore's instructions and suggestions as outlined in his letter to her, the child would be at risk, should the Dark Lord's followers or, heaven help them, the Dark Lord, himself ever choose to attack Harry Potter.

After a moment, raised voices could be heard from within number four.

Very soon, the door opened again, and Pepper walked out onto the doorstep, closing the front door behind her. She stepped around the baby and began to walk purposefully down the front path, an object clutched in her fist. Immediately galvanised, Severus moved to meet her at the curb and stood awaiting her approach, a very alien presence on Privet Drive, with his unfashionably long hair, in his long, dark travelling cloak.

Pepper's face was contorted with a terrible sneer; he scarcely recognised her. Yet within her eyes there lurked another emotion one more familiar. He disregarded the sneer and stood passively before her, awaiting her judgement.

Pepper pulled her arm back and threw the object she held; it hit Severus on the chest and bounced off, clattering to the pavement.

'This is all your fault!' she screeched and tears began to fall from her eyes.

Severus bent automatically and picked up his half of the brass medallion Lily had given him on a long-ago summer's day; his fingers closed convulsively upon it as he rose and looked into the blotchy face of his accuser.

'I know,' he said simply, willing to accept whatever punishment she dealt to him.

For a long moment, hazel eyes brimming with tears looked into the abyss of the black eyes of Severus Snape. With no trace of remorse, Severus probed Pepper's mind and found a morass of guilt, grief, and resentment; he felt quite at home in Pepper's thoughts.

Too soon, she gave a disgusted snort and turned from him, marching away in her quilted pink dressing gown and matching slippers.

'Shoo!' she exclaimed when she spied the tabby cat beneath the hydrangea bushes; the cat hissed, but held her ground. Harry Potter's closest living relative stooped to lift his basket, first slipping Dumbledore's letter into her pocket. Then she paused for a moment with her hand upon the white silk covering. With a swift move, she ripped the flag from about the baby, and with a strength borne of utter despair, she did what Severus had never been able to steel himself to do: she rent the standard of the Kingdom of Wyrd from end-to-end and threw the tatters upon the path, taking care to trod upon the fabric with both feet as she carried the baby into the house.

Severus walked swiftly down the pavement and bent to retrieve the sundered flag. Looking at the door, his voice hoarsely pleading as he spoke past the lump in his throat, he croaked, 'Pepper.'

A movement at his feet drew his attention to the tabby cat, which watched him with keen interest.

'Don't ask,' he said, tucking the scraps of silk into the pocket of his cloak.

The cat was still watching his retreating back when he turned on the spot and was gone.

A/N: Thank you all so much for reading this story, which has been nipping at my heels and rattling in my brain since January, 2006. I was right about some things and wrong about others, as we have all now learned. This story of a teen-aged Severus required a whole new soundtrack for me. I found an loved many songs over the two months I spent feverishly writing this story, but I think my favourite was Vertical Horizon's *I'm Still Here*. If you are not familiar with the song, or even if you are, I invite you to paste this link to YouTube and listen once for Severus and Lily. Oh, and ignore the video it's Harry Potter, but it's Harry/Hermione, I think.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8lgoZ-KHil>

The tragic end to this tale has me aching to write Severus' happy ending. I will begin writing my DH-compliant story tonight and by DH-compliant, I mean in-which-Severus-did-not-die-from-a-snakebite. The story will be a Severus/Hermione story. I hope you will keep an eye out for that prologue, which I hope to post within the week.