

Title: Quiet Desperation

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Rating: R

Word count: 11,100 words

Warnings: Infidelity.

Summary: A few hours is all they have, so they must use it well.

Disclaimer: These characters obviously don't belong to me. They're all Rowling's. I just like to play with them on occasion.

Author's Notes: Betaed by esmestrella/elethian/dronarron.

Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.

- *Henry David Thoreau*

Xxxx

The rain pounded down mercilessly on the roof of the small flat, the endless staccato lulling Lily into a boredom-induced stupor. It had been an exceptionally damp March thus far, raining for days; an endless monotony that alternated from a thick, clinging mist to a steady thrum and back again. She had gone out to the market once, but other than that she had been relegated to the dim little kitchen and her copy of *Mrs. Dalloway*. She really shouldn't read Virginia Woolf; it always put her in a somber mood.

A few whimpers from the bedroom swiftly turned to outright bawling. She let Harry cry for a bit. It wouldn't hurt him, and she was rather enjoying her tea.

“Lils! The baby!”

James and Sirius were deep in the throes of yet another chess tourney. They had been at it for a week now. The best two out of three had become the best three out of five, and on and on. She berated herself for secretly hoping for another assignment for them. If they were here in the flat with her, at least they were safe. Out there – who knew? She always felt like she would die with worry when James was away.

But still, it was odd that they had been tucked away since late November without even the slightest whisper from Dumbledore. Moody had come once to strengthen the wards on their flat, to impress upon them the absolute necessity of keeping their wands close, but since then they had been almost completely cut off.

With a sigh she took one last sip of tea and then got up and moved to the next room. She leaned against the door jamb for a moment, staring at the two boys hunched over the chessboard, oblivious to her presence.

“You could fetch him once in a while, you know, James.”

“Mmm,” was the only reply she got. He hadn’t really heard her.

He had just finished making his move and Sirius had suddenly got a glint in his eye that told her he was moving in for the kill. He leaned back in his chair, eyes focused on the board, as though deep in thought. After a moment, he slid his queen into place. “Checkmate.”

James looked down at the board, incredulous. Sirius just looked amused.

“Again,” James demanded. He stared down at the board a moment more, and then leaned back in his chair and looked her way as the board reset itself. “Harry’s crying, Lils.”

“I know, James.”

“Well, are you going to...?”

“Yes, James.”

A small furrow formed between his brows at her tone. No doubt he was worried about her; she did sound rather disinterested. She should be taking more of an interest in Harry, in the flat – hell, in anything.

Harry was squirming around in his cot when she finally got to him, his face purple from all the crying. She picked him up and held him out at arms length as the smell from his full nappy hit her. “Well, little man. It seems you’ve left a real treat for me now, haven’t you.” He blinked at her, the last few tears squeezing out from the corners of his green eyes to stream down his flushed cheeks. He hiccupped.

“Come on, then.”

She dispatched the dirty nappy as quickly as possible, and then picked him up and pulled him close as she walked to the window of the nursery to look out on the dull, damp pavement below. “Still raining,” she whispered to no one in particular. Harry squirmed a little in her arms and leaned forward as though looking down at the street with her.

A pedestrian sheltered beneath a bright rainbow-hued umbrella strolled by below and the flash of color in the midst of so much drab grey was like a shock to her senses. It seemed to reach down inside her and wake something up, something she hadn’t even known was sleeping. She watched the woman until she hurried under the awning of the pub at the end of the street, folded up the umbrella and ducked inside.

“You know what, my little man? Mum’s going to step out for awhile, and dad is just going to have to watch you.”

Harry gurgled and then smiled, reaching out to wrap his pudgy fingers in the tangle of her hair. She smiled back down at him.

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“Here.” She plopped Harry down into James’ lap. “If he’s hungry while I’m gone, I’ve left a bottle in the refrigerator. You know where his nappies are if he needs a change.”

James jumped a little, as though she had just doused him with scalding water. “What? Why? Where are you going to be?”

“I’m going out. I can’t stay in this flat for another moment. I’ve been cooped up for weeks with you two useless sods, and it’s driving me mad.”

He looked up at her, and something passed over his face, something soft and slightly sad that she couldn’t quite identify. “You look nice.” He didn’t ask her where she was going; it wasn’t lost on her.

She lifted a hand to her hair, which she had worn down. She was wearing a little lipstick as well. “I... I’m just going to the pub at the corner. I need a drink and a little time to myself without the baby. You understand.”

“A little early for getting pissed, isn’t it?” Sirius was smiling with that irritatingly charming, lopsided grin of his.

“I didn’t say ‘drunk’,” she snapped.

He held up his hands in surrender. “All right, all right, Evans. Merlin, you *do* need a drink.”

“Potter,” James mumbled.

“What?”

“What?” she and Sirius asked in tandem.

“It’s Potter now, mate, remember? There was that wedding a year ago, and that ring on her finger.”

Sirius waved him off as though her name didn’t really matter at all. “Yeah, yeah. Potter, Evans, whatever.”

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

James was still scowling at Sirius, but he smiled softly when he looked up at her. “Be safe. Take your wand. Moody seemed...” Running a hand through his hair, he scowled, as though at a loss for words. “He just seemed ‘off’ the last time he was here. I think that maybe something’s going on, and...”

“Of course.” She patted the pocket of her coat to indicate that she already had it stowed safely away.

“And if anything goes wrong, anything, and you find yourself in a situation where you...”

“I’ll send my Patronus. Yes, James.” She smiled down at him, and then leaned in, and kissed him softly on the forehead. “You worry too much. I’ll be back in time to get tea.” Reaching down, she fluffed his hair, and then turned and headed for the door.

“Lils...?”

She turned.

“I love you.” He sounded almost desperate for her to know it.

“I love you too. I’ll see you in a while.”

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The pub was warm and a little stuffy. It was thick with smoke even so early in the afternoon, but it felt good to be some place other than the flat, to be amongst adults, even if the adults in question were the sort of layabouts that hung around a pub so soon after noon. Ordering a beer, she slid into one of the smaller booths up against the far wall and fished her book out of her bag.

The quiet hum of the pub was somehow a more invigorating quiet than the one back at the flat. She found herself engrossed in her book, lost to it in a way that she rarely had the opportunity to enjoy at home. Poor Septimus had just thrown himself from the window, mangling himself on the railings below, when something made her look up and over at the bar. A lean shadow of a man was leaning up against it, ordering a drink. The barkeep brought it, a small shot of something amber. The man tossed it back, and then ordered another.

He had his back to her, but he had long, lank black hair that fell like trails of ink over the dark grey wool of his coat, and the hands that held the shot glass were pale and fine-boned. They were a healer’s hands. That was what she had always told Severus he had – healer’s hands. Pity he had chosen to channel his talents in other directions.

It did not surprise her that this young man should remind her of Severus. Every lean, dark-haired boy she saw seemed to, especially of late. She worried that perhaps it was becoming something of an unhealthy obsession with her. She could logic it out, of course; it was the inevitable game of “what if” that she supposed all married women secretly played with themselves eventually. What if I had made a different choice at this juncture? What if I had married this bloke instead of that one? What if the choice I made

was the wrong one? What if I wake up one day and realize that I never once did a thing for myself and now I'm far too old to do a thing about it?

Taking another mouthful of beer, she continued to watch the man. After finishing the second shot, he slid onto a stool and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the bar head in his hands. From the set of his hunched shoulders she could tell that he was exhausted. She felt her heart twist a little at the thought. What might be troubling him, weighing him down so?

Without knowing what possessed her, she snatched up her book and her beer, slung her bag over her shoulder, and moved toward the bar. As she drew closer, she was astounded at just how like Severus this particular young man truly was: the long, pale neck, the angular set of the jaw. She felt a heat start to build in her center, and by the time she slid onto the stool beside him she was fighting hard to keep the flush infusing nearly every inch of her from traveling to her face where it would be embarrassingly obvious if he looked up.

"Been one of those days, eh? Can I buy you a drink?" she offered as brightly and appealingly as she could manage.

The man froze, every muscle in his body suddenly tensing before releasing again in something that almost looked like defeat. He looked up and her heart stopped.

"Severus..." She barely recognized the strangled whisper as her own.

He looked a sight: eyes bloodshot, rings beneath them so dark that she wagered he hadn't slept in a fortnight. His eyes traveled over every inch of her face in less than a breath's length. He seemed to be looking for something, but she had no idea what. He smiled wryly. "A drink would be appreciated, yeah..."

She just stared. He shouldn't be here. And if *he* was here, she *certainly* shouldn't be here. She could feel the light pressure of the wand in her pocket as it pressed against her hip. She had felt so safe with it there, but now she realized what a fool she had been. If he was really here to... Surely he had brought others with him. She would be dead before her hand even reached her pocket.

And then there was the question of how long he had been standing at the bar. Had he already been here when she came in? She looked down at the beer in front of her and swallowed hard. If he had been, if he had managed to slip something into her drink in the few moments she had looked away to dig about in her bag for her wallet, then, well, she might already be dead.

An odd tugging at the back of her mind snapped her back to the present, and made her realize that she had been sitting there staring at him dumbly for several seconds, at least. "Oh, I... Yeah... More of the same then?" She nodded toward the empty shot glass on the bar in front of him.

He nodded once and she waved the barkeep over. The man smiled at her appreciatively as he approached. "One more of those for him, and another for me if you please."

"Right up."

She waited for him to slide the drinks in front of them, and then snatched hers off the counter and downed it gratefully. Severus didn't touch his; he only sat staring at her, his dark eyes infuriatingly unreadable.

"Don't you think that if I was here to kill you, I would have done it already?" he finally said.

"How do I know you haven't?" She glanced down at her beer and then back up to his eyes.

He sighed, and shook his head slightly, turning away to look back down at the bar, the same tight, wry smile on his lips that had been there when he had first heard her voice. "You know, I used to think that the reason you hated me so much was because you just didn't know me. And I think maybe I was right." He looked back up, and the eyes that had been blank, dark pits only a moment before were suddenly filled with emotion. His voice was harsh and raw with barely repressed hurt and anger as he continued. "You don't know me at all..."

She stared down his hands. He was scratching a small furrow into the oak with his fingernail. "I don't hate you," she murmured. "I've never hated you, and if you think that, then you don't know me very well either."

"You shouldn't have left the flat." She was thrown a little by the sudden change of subject and tone. He sounded almost petulant.

"Why not? Wait – what? How do you know I live around here? Maybe I'm just..."

He looked over at her, and the intensity of his gaze sent a jolt of electricity through her. She could feel the heat building again, and she found that she hadn't the slightest inclination to squelch it.

"Potter and Black are rash, careless. You're careless. Someone..." His voice trailed off and he glanced briefly around them before his eyes returned to hers. He lowered his voice. "Someone needs to keep an eye on you."

She bristled a little at that. "I can take care of myself, thank you very much. This is a Muggle pub. I could hardly be expected to guess that it was the haunt of local Death Eaters. And speaking of – the only reason that you would be 'keeping an eye on me' is so that you can more efficiently off me when the time comes, so just what exactly are you on about?!"

He scowled at her and finally knocked back the drink she had bought him. “Keep your voice down,” he growled. “We can’t talk about this here.”

“Then get a room.” Her heart stopped the moment the words were out of her mouth. What on earth was wrong with her? Get a room, indeed.

He looked at her curiously, one eyebrow arched toward the ceiling. “A room, Mrs. Potter?”

She swallowed hard, and plucked up her courage. “Not like *that*, you twat, and you know it. Just do it.”

He smiled, a real smile this time, and it looked almost foreign. She couldn’t remember the last time she had seen him smile. Sometime late in fourth year, she supposed, though she couldn’t rightly recall.

“All right. Come on then.” He slid from the stool and started across the pub.

Snatching up her book and bag, she followed. “But don’t you have to...?”

“I keep a room here.”

“Since when?”

“Since December.”

She clamped her mouth shut in shock, and followed him silently, as he exited the pub and entered a narrow corridor with an even narrower staircase leading up to the upper floor. The corridor at the top was just as cramped, with something like a dozen doors painted the ugliest green she had ever seen leading off of it. He stopped at a door with a crooked number nine nailed to it, pulled out a key and slipped quickly inside. He held the door open for her and then locked it again, straightway, when they got inside.

The room was a dingy little affair, but it was homely too, in its own way. It reminded her a bit of Spinner’s End. Perhaps that was why he had chosen it. And then she remembered: she still didn’t know why he was even residing in the neighborhood in the first place.

“So...” she started, looking around her for a place to sit and finally settling on the edge of the sagging mattress. She flopped down ingloriously, kicking off her shoes and dumping her bag on the floor. “You were going to tell me what you’ve been doing in this neighborhood since December.”

He was standing at the window. He parted the tatty lace curtain a little with a single long finger to stare down at the street. “Was I?” He sounded distracted.

“Yes.”

“I don’t think I was.”

“Severus Snape, stop being a pill and tell me!” She pouted a little. It was an old game: she would act affronted until he relented, and then she would break into gales of laughter while he just stared at her with a sort of confused awe.

“That’s not going to work anymore, Lily.” He didn’t even miss a beat.

She sighed. “Fine. Then just tell me, and stop being difficult. Why are you here? and why am I still alive? You should have killed me thirty minutes ago.”

“I’ve told you. I’ve no intention of killing you, and I’m *here* to ensure that no one else does either.”

“What?” She could hear the tightness in her voice, attesting to the tentacles of fear that had just wrapped themselves around her heart. Her mind raced back to the flat, to Harry all alone with James and Sirius. “Who? What are you talking about? Severus, if you know something, you have to tell me. I have a child to think about.”

“I don’t care about that,” he mumbled flatly.

Her eyes widened. “Well, you bloody well should!”

He let the curtain fall back into place and leaned up against the wall beside the window, arms crossed over his chest. “Why?”

“Why? Why?! Merlin, Severus!”

He squirmed a little, looking suddenly hot and uncomfortable, and a scowl formed across his brow. He was sulking. In his own patented Severus Snape way, he was sulking. She remembered it only too well.

“Is this still about me marrying James? Because really, Severus, it’s been more than a year, and…” She paused. He was glaring at her darkly. “And really,” she continued, feeling rather huffy herself, “it’s not as though we were even really friends anymore. Why should you care who I marry?”

He turned his frigid glare to the carpet and mumbled something under his breath that she didn’t quite catch.

“What?”

“Nothing…”

“Not nothing. You said something. Now, what?”

“I said, I’ve always been your friend!” he snapped, and his voice broke. She saw him swallow hard and look away again quickly. “I’ve always been your friend, and I always will be,” he finished, the familiar chill back in his voice.

She stared down at her hands, folded neatly in her lap, and took a deep breath before she looked up again. “Well, you sure have an odd way of showing it. Did you know that Macnair nearly killed James last year? And Bellatrix Lestrange came a hair’s length from hitting me with *Avada Kedavra* at that Cardiff incident last autumn. It seems that your friends, your ‘master’,” she spat out, “want us dead. So why should I believe a bloody thing you say?!”

His head snapped up and he advanced on her so fast that she didn’t even have time to scramble away. She fell back onto her elbows. Once he reached her he swooped down, pinning a hand on either side of her hips, and leaned in so close she could smell the whiskey on his breath. “Walden Macnair and fucking Bellatrix Lestrange are not my friends!” he spat, his eyes wild, almost feral. His arms were trembling, she noticed.

She felt a little dizzy from the surge of adrenaline now racing through her veins. This was why she had ended it with him: this intensity, this seeming imbalance, wavering back and forth between cold stoicism and hot, searing passion without a moment’s notice. It had terrified her once. How could she have so soon forgotten?

This was why she had married James, sweet, predictable, uncomplicated James, who even now was sitting at home, waiting for her, without even the slightest knowledge that she was lying in a room just up the street, pinned beneath the lean, taut body and white-hot gaze of his oldest enemy.

Something warm and wet splashed onto her cheek and she blinked in surprise. The black eyes staring into hers were full, spilling over to trail tears down his hot, flushed cheeks. He seemed oblivious; miles away. She could tell by the blank look in his eyes. He got like that sometimes. He’d probably forgotten she was even there.

Reaching up, she trailed a thumb lightly over his cheek to wipe the tears away. He started a little at her touch, and his eyes refocused suddenly. “Then what are they?” she whispered.

“What?” he gasped, as though short of breath.

“Lestrange and Macnair. If they’re not your friends, then what are they?”

His eyes searched hers for the briefest of moments. Then he winced and pushed back off the mattress, standing to his full height again. “They’re... they’re just people I work with...or... people I used to work with, and I...”

“Wait – *used* to work with?”

He looked momentarily stricken as though he had already said too much. “Still work with. It... it’s complicated...”

“I’m sure it is.” Sitting back up, she folded her legs under her and stared at him expectantly.

After a moment, he walked around to the other side of the bed and sat down, his back to her. “They should have moved you by now.”

“Who?”

“The Order.”

“Moved us? Where? Why?”

She turned a little and scooted forward on the mattress so that she could at least see him in profile. He reached up and pinched at the bridge of his nose. “He promised, Lily, and they should have moved you months ago. I... I can’t keep the wolves at bay forever, and... it’s why I went to him in the first place.”

“Who?!” she demanded. She was starting to get frustrated now. It seemed as though he was purposefully being vague, trying to drag out the conversation as long as possible. She supposed that she couldn’t entirely blame him. The longer she sat here with him, the more she realized just how very much she had missed him. As unpredictable and moody as he could be, at least he made her feel alive. She couldn’t help but wonder if he felt the same.

His hand dropped away. His eyes were dark and slightly irritated. “Who do you fucking think, Lily? Fucking Albus Dumbledore, for fuck’s sake!”

She held up a hand in acquiescence. “All right, all right, calm down. And you might try broadening your vocabulary a little while you’re at it.”

He stared at her blankly for a moment and then broke out into a weary smile. “Still trying to clean me up and set me on the straight and narrow, I see.” The smile faded. “I’m afraid it’s a little late for that.” He sounded completely broken, and it worried her.

With a deep breath, she crawled across the mattress and sat down beside him, her leg pressed up against his, and reached down to take his hand. When she looked up at his face, he was staring down at his long, pale fingers cradled between her tiny freckled ones as though he could hardly believe that she might still want to touch him.

“So...” she murmured. “You went to Dumbledore, and he promised to protect us, but to protect us from what? And what ever possessed you to do such a thing? You know it could very well mean your death.” She squeezed his hand a little, suddenly nauseous at the thought. It had been one thing to lose him as a friend, but to lose him altogether...

“Lily...” His voice was raw and barely above a whisper. “What I’m about to tell you, if it were to... you have to promise me that you won’t tell Potter, or Black. Do what you will with this information, but you can’t tell anyone else. Do you understand?”

She had never heard that tone in his voice before. He was terrified. She nodded.

“There is a prophecy. It tells of a child born at the end of July, a child who will overthrow the Dark Lord. He... he knows of this prophecy, and he thinks...”

She felt all the blood drain from her head in an instant. It left her dizzy and her mouth dry. “He thinks it means Harry...” she whispered.

“Yes.” The hand held tightly in hers had gone ice cold.

“And you went to Dumbledore when you found out?”

“Yes.”

“But I... I don’t understand. Why? Why would you do that?”

Pulling his hand from hers at last, he rubbed it wearily over his eyes before turning them back to hers. They were haunted. “Penance.” He let out a rough bark of a laugh and shook his head before burying it in his hands.

It took her a moment to fit the pieces together, but she had always been adept at reading Severus, and she suspected he was doing nothing to prevent her now. It was easier that she should guess it than for him to have to confess it outright.

“My God...” she whispered, lifting a hand to cover her mouth as the truth hit her.

“You...”

“I didn’t know it would lead to you,” he murmured between the cage of his fingers. “If I had, I never would have...”

An uncomfortable silence fell over them both. She could sense the tension coming off him in waves. He thought she would hate him now, more than ever. Truth be told, she had had to fight the momentary urge to slap him soundly, but she had meant it in the pub when she had told him that she had never hated him. She could never hate him. She meant it whether he believed it or not. Still, the weight of everything he had just revealed changed everything.

Their lives had been in danger for well over a year, she knew that. But now... now everything would change. Now she knew their days were numbered. She wagered that Severus knew it too, even though he wanted to convince himself otherwise. He wanted to feel that he could somehow save her from what was coming, but it was a darkness bigger than them all. Soon it would overtake them, and bury them deep. Well, it could take her, but she would die before she would let Tom Riddle have her son.

Taking a deep breath, she sat up a little straighter. “What is it that Dumbledore promised you? What is it he should have done and hasn’t?”

“Protect you. Put you somewhere safe; somewhere safer than that fucking flat.”

“He sent Moody back before Yule to strengthen the wards, but you’re right. That’s not near enough. We need something... something better...” Getting to her feet she strode over to the window and stared down at the street below. It had stopped raining and a thick fog was starting to roll in. The light in the room had gone from a pale grey to a sort of artificial dusk, but she felt on edge, and didn’t dare turn on a light.

“He promised.”

“Well, then I’m sure he has a plan, Severus. There must be a reason he’s waiting. And he’s sent you here, hasn’t he, so—”

Severus looked up. “He doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Well then, why...?”

“No one knows I’m here, and I’d like to keep it that way, if you don’t mind. Why do you think I didn’t have the door to this room warded? If I use magic I run the risk of being tracked. Easier to live like a Muggle, yeah? To lay low for a while?”

“Oh... yes, of course.”

“Dumbledore’s offered me the Potions post at Hogwarts come September. I’ll take it. I don’t really have a choice, I suppose.”

She returned to the bed and sat down beside him again. “But that’s brilliant, isn’t it? You love Potions!”

“I love Potions. I hate children.”

She laughed, and the sound of it seemed foreign and out of place in the cramped, tension-filled little room. It grew silent again, and she reached out, brushing a wayward lock of his hair away from his face and back over his shoulder. “And what about *him*? What about Riddle? You don’t just walk away from something like that, Severus.”

“No.” He made no comment on the familiarity of what she had just done, but his neck had burst into goosebumps and grown suddenly flushed.

“So then you’re... what? You’re working both sides now?” He didn’t say a thing, but the sudden tension in his body was answer enough. “Severus, that’s dangerous. And it can only go on for so long. Eventually, he will find out, and when he does... I mean, I... I think of what they say happened to poor Regulus Black, and...”

He swallowed hard. “I’ll get on all right.”

She sighed and reached down to take his hand again. “You always get on all right, don’t you, Severus Snape?”

He just shrugged. “Yeh do what yeh have teh...”

She smiled at the hint of a northerner’s accent. It only came out when he was exceptionally tired, and even then only if he trusted you implicitly. She wondered how it was that she had somehow managed to hold that place of trust in his heart after all this time, after all she had done.

Reaching up, she ran a hand lightly over his hair, down the inky length of it, until it came to settle between his shoulder blades. His eyes slid shut. She smiled and watched him breathe slowly in and out, as she rubbed his back gently through the rough wool of his coat. The room was stuffy and close, and she imagined that he must be rather warm still so bundled up. She was.

Standing up, she took off her coat and tossed it over the end of the bed. His eyes had snapped open at the sudden movement, and when she turned back around he was staring at her in a way that she hadn’t seen in years, in a way that had terrified her once, but which now sent little shivers running the length of her spine. To say he was hungry would have been an understatement. He looked famished.

“Aren’t you warm?” She fanned her hand in front of her face and unbuttoned the top button of her blouse. “It’s like a furnace up here.”

His breathing had grown shallower, and he looked flushed, but he tried his best to cover it. “I think it’s over the kitchens. It gets warm, yeah.”

“Well, take off your coat at least.”

He just stared.

After a moment of pregnant silence she giggled a little. “Well, are you going to take it off, or are you waiting for me to do it for you?”

He swallowed. “Don’t you need to get back?” She could hear the tightness in his voice. He wanted her to stay.

“Not quite yet. I said I’d be home in time to make tea. I have an hour or two.”

“Oh. Well... we could go back downstairs and get something to eat, or...”

“No, I think I’d rather stay here,” she said, astounded at her own courage. She wasn’t exactly sure what it was she was doing, or even why she was doing it, but something in the hungry way he was looking at her was making her aware of just how ravenous she was herself.

She thought about James. She thought about Harry. She looked across the room at the dark and desperate eyes of a man who had once been her dearest friend. It was only a matter of time until one or all of them were dead. What did any of it matter? If she walked away now, she would always wonder, and, she suddenly realized, she would always regret.

Severus had grown impossibly still. She could always tell when he was nervous, because instead of becoming fidgety like most people would, he instead got more and more still until it was hard to tell if he was even still breathing. She would have to make the first move; that seemed clear.

She smiled softly, and walked over to stand in front of him. He still looked extremely reluctant to give up his coat. “Your coat, if you please?” She held out a hand in anticipation, but he just stared up at her. With a sigh she stepped forward and pried a knee gently between his until he relaxed and spread his legs, allowing her to step between them and reach down to unbutton his coat.

She was leaning in so close now she could feel the warmth of his breath against her forehead and hair, and when she finally undid the last button and slid the coat down over his shoulders she was close enough to see just how hungry he actually was.

He was aware of her knowledge of it, too. His face had gone from flushed to outright scarlet. She stared down at the burgeoning erection throbbing beneath the thin fabric of his trousers, and letting a hand drop to hover just there, she trailed a single finger over the hard length of it. “Oh... I see...” she murmured.

He hadn’t made a sound when she touched him, but his eyes had slid shut again and a tiny shudder had passed through him. He had let her remove his coat; she wondered if he might let her remove more. He was tense, though, anxious even. The desire surrounding him was almost palpable, but there was something else too, something almost akin to fear. Perhaps it would be best if they went slowly.

His eyes were still closed, and so she reached down and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulling him in close to her chest, combing her fingers softly through his hair.

After a moment or two she felt his arms creep up to wrap around her thighs, and then he pulled her in close and held on tight, like he was drowning and she was the only thing keeping his head above water.

“Is it... is it all right if I stay?” she whispered, desperate that he not turn her away now, not when this was all she had left to give, the only way she knew to say she was sorry – more sorry than he would ever know.

He nodded against her chest, and she sighed with relief, tightening her grip around his shoulders. “I’ve missed you, Sev. God, how I’ve missed you,” she breathed.

He buried his head deeper against her, and she felt a damp warmth begin to soak through her blouse, bathing her skin with his tears. She wondered how long it had been since he had been held like this, how long since he had been touched with kindness.

Suddenly he slid forward on the mattress, pulling her legs up against him, until she could be left in no doubt, until she could feel the pulsing, throbbing need. “Please...” he whispered raggedly against her. He was so tense, and burning hot now, warmer than she had ever felt him.

Looking down at the sight of his dark head cradled against her, she ran a hand softly over it. “Look at me.” He looked up, so hopeful, so needful, so afraid that it would end here, that it was, perhaps, only a dream from which he would awaken at any moment. She lifted a hand and smoothed the back of her fingers slowly down his cheek. “Yes, Severus...”

He blinked once, and then stood up so suddenly she had to step back a little, almost stumbling, but he caught her around the waist, and pulled her in against his body, crashing into her with a passion and desperation she never could have imagined. His lips were everywhere, and the thing inside of her that had been sleeping for almost longer than she could remember burst into life. She was burning with a desire that she hadn’t felt since she was a girl; a desire, she suddenly realized, that only he seemed able to awaken.

She kissed him back with equal fervor, and if it surprised him he gave no indication. His fingers were fumbling with the buttons at the front of her blouse now, and she knew that in a moment he would probably just tear at them in frustration. Breaking their kiss, she softly batted his hands away and reached down to do it herself. “Let me, okay? It wouldn’t do to have to explain a blouse’s worth of missing buttons, yeah?”

He was still radiating heat like pavement in summer, but he had grown strangely quiet in front of her. And when she finally released the last of the buttons and shrugged out of the garment, she thought she heard the tiniest intake of breath. When she looked up she expected to see his eyes fixated on the expanse of skin she had just revealed, on the pale pink peaks rising beneath the lace of her bra, but instead they were fixed on her face.

“You... you don’t have to do this,” he choked out. He looked wound tight, ready to bolt, and she wondered at it.

“But I want to.” Reaching behind her, she unhooked her bra and let it fall to the ground between them before taking a step forward and pulling him into another kiss. He seemed far more self-conscious and tentative now than he had been at first, but when he lifted a hand to run the tips of his fingers down the length of her spine she gasped and then moaned against his mouth at the unexpected pleasure of it.

This seemed to encourage him, and his kiss deepened again. His hand continued its journey until it met the waistband of her skirt and then moved back up again, fingers finally coming to rest tangled in the waves of her hair. He drew her head in closer, as though he couldn’t get enough of the taste of her, the feel of her body pressed against his, and she felt herself becoming lost to the sensation again.

She reached for the hem of his jumper, and slid her hands up under the coarse black wool to run over his sides. He hissed at her sudden touch, and then moaned in turn. She could feel the length of him throbbing against her stomach, straining against the confines of his trousers. It must be nearing the point of pain. Surely he wouldn’t object to her making him a little more comfortable.

As though reading her mind he pulled her closer, and broke his lips from hers to trail along her jaw, stopping at the soft spot just below her ear. “Not yet...” His breath was hot and moist, and it sent shivers of pleasure through her.

“Severus, please...” She let a hand escape from beneath his jumper to fumble with the button on his trousers, but he reached out and grabbed her gently by the wrist.

“Not yet.”

“But why?” It was more of a moan than words, and she could hear the almost childish neediness in her voice.

He must have heard it too, because he pulled away a little, his eyes soft, a tiny twitch playing at the corner of his mouth. “Lily, make it last. You... you know this chance won’t come again.”

There was something about the finality of his tone, the complete acceptance of that fact, that hit her like a punch in the gut. She had been so lost in the moment, in the overwhelming wave of sensation and bliss, that she had not stopped to think of just what this might mean to him – of what it might mean to her.

This would not happen again. He knew it. She knew it. And yet, it felt like everything in her life had been leading to this one moment, as though it were the climax of some secondary narrative. Other things had yet to play out in the days and months to come, but at this moment, in this place, the only things that really mattered were the beating of his

heart in time with hers, the feeling of his flesh molded to hers, and the sensation that even their very thoughts and emotions were becoming one. Everything else was dross.

“Make it last,” he whispered again against her hair, as he moved back in to scatter kisses over her neck. “Lily...” Her name, like some sort of benediction whispered against her skin, brought tears to her eyes.

“I hate this war.” Her voice broke in a cracked whisper.

He shook his head. “Not here.”

And she knew what he meant: here in this dingy little room, all the horrors surrounding them did not exist. Within these four walls there was only *this*, only *them*.

“Then make me forget, Severus,” she breathed. “I want to forget.”

His lips broke away for a moment as he shrugged out of his jumper. She whimpered in protest, but he was back again just as quickly. This time the whole of his chest pressed against hers, and the growing chill in the room was forgotten as she felt her softness meld with the impossible leanness of him. He had always been thin, but he seemed even more so now. She let her hands travel down the length of his spine in an echo of his touch only moments before, and she could count each vertebra one by one. It was as though he was fading away, as though in a few more months he might simply disappear.

His hands were tangled in her hair again, and his lips, his lips were everywhere. “You... you’re forgetting to... to eat again, Severus. You... you really must try to remember to...” But his lips found hers again at that moment and she forgot about the desperate, wasted look of him. All she seemed to be able to focus on was the way his tongue slipped between her lips to caress her own, and then left again, his lips moving over hers, driving her mad, until he plunged into her again, taking her breath away.

She had kissed him once before, just once. They had both been barely more than children, but it had left her breathless even then, dizzy, her young body tingling with a sensation she didn’t understand. She had forgotten the power of his kisses until now. She was drowning, and all she wanted was to die beneath the flood.

He was leading her gently toward the bed, and then he was pulling her down on top of him. She couldn’t help but try to get closer, rocking her hips slowly as they settled onto the old, musty mattress, grinding against the hard, hot length of him still trapped inside his bloody trousers. He let out a sound that sent a renewed surge of fire through her, a sort of whimper mixed with a moan.

She wanted him, *needed* him inside her. She was burning, dissolving with need. Her knickers and stockings were wet, soaked through with the evidence of how ready she was, and as much as she knew he was right, as much as she wanted to make this moment last as long as it could, she wasn’t sure how much longer she could bear the separation.

“Sev, please...” she moaned against his lips, and she felt his hips rise to match her rhythm.

“Not yet...” But despite his words, she felt his fingers trace down the flushed skin of her back until they came to rest at the waistband of her skirt. She felt the button release, and then the zipper, and then his hands slid down to glide over the wool of her stockings. They stopped, to cup gently over the rise of her arse, and then he pulled her closer. His lips slowed, and she pulled back a little to look down at him. He had a becoming flush to his cheeks and the darkness of desire in his eyes captivated her. He was, she suddenly realized, quite possibly the most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

“Are... are you all right?” she whispered.

“I want to look at you,” he murmured in return.

She smiled, and lifted a hand to cradle his face. “I know you won’t believe this, but you... you are so...” She let her thumb trail along a pronounced cheekbone, and then leaned down to kiss him softly on the tip of the nose.

“Don’t,” he begged in a choked whisper.

“I have to, Severus. You have to know it.” He shook his head and his eyes, though still dark with desire, had grown suddenly sad as well. “You are so beautiful, Severus...”

He squirmed slightly beneath her, and tore his eyes away from hers, as though suddenly very uncomfortable.

“I never told you enough,” she continued. “I should have, and I didn’t.”

“Don’t.”

“But why?” She lifted her hand from his face, and combed her fingers softly through his limp hair.

“You don’t know what... you don’t know me, Lily. You never knew me. You don’t know what I’ve done, what I am.” He still refused to look at her, but was instead staring across the room at some random patch of faded wallpaper.

“Then tell me.” He was tense now, his skin cooling, the hard length that had been throbbing against her since they came together becoming tellingly flaccid. “What is it?” she whispered, but he had left her. She could feel him pulling away, and she silently cursed herself for telling him with words what she would have been better off showing him with kisses, caresses, and moans.

With a sigh she let her head drop to his chest, and then settled against it, listening to the gentle and insistent thrum of his heart. She didn’t want to leave.

His hands were still resting, cupped against her arse, and one of hers still lingered in the long strands of his hair spread out on the pillow. She brought the other down to run the length of his arm, feeling the raised and slightly scarred flesh of the Dark Mark on his forearm, before finding his fingers and pulling them in to mesh with hers. She wasn't going to say anything else.

They had never needed words as children. She had loved the sound of his voice, the stories he had told her of a foreign and magical world. She had loved to listen to him read aloud from arcane potions texts in the library, his eyes glowing with passion and excitement. She had always loved to hear him talk, but he had told her much more about himself in the spaces between his words, in the silences shared between them, than he ever had out loud.

She waited. And when it came, when his mind overlapped with hers, the images were completely unexpected – an onslaught, an endless theatre of horrors, one after another, things done by him and to him, things that she could hardly have imagined in her worst nightmares. Pieces fell into place one by one, and if she had thought it impossible for her to despise Bellatrix Lestrange and her beast of a brother-in-law any more than she already did, if she had thought her hatred of Walden Macnair complete, she had been highly mistaken.

She trembled with rage as the images played out before her in an endless litany of abuse and degradation, and for the first time in her life she knew what it was to truly want to kill. She held onto his hand tightly and bore it as long as she could. She could not fathom the courage it must have taken him to open to her in this way, to show her everything. The soul of her old friend was a closed book; it always had been. Even with her he had always shared very little, but perhaps he had needed this; perhaps the weight of it was finally too great for him to bear alone.

And then it was over, just as abruptly as it had begun. She continued to tremble, not so much with rage, but with a strange cold that had settled over her. She wondered if he would ever feel clean again. She doubted it, but at least she could try to wipe away some of the pain of it, to replace the filth with something good and pure and clean.

Releasing her hold on his hand, she pushed herself up to stare down at him. He still wasn't looking at her, but there were unshed tears in his eyes, and his cheeks were tellingly damp. "Sev," she whispered, "Get up. Get up, okay? I'm cold. I'm going to turn down the bed."

He shifted beneath her and she rolled off him as he obeyed her wordlessly. He stood beside the bed, staring at his jumper on the floor at his feet where he had deposited it in their shared passion moments before. She stripped down the blankets quickly, and then pulled off her skirt, and stockings and knickers and climbed back in. "Come on, Sev. It's cold." She held out a hand to him.

His eyes flitted to her briefly, and then froze at the sight of her spread out fully naked before him on the threadbare sheets. He swallowed hard, as though trying to work up the courage to leap across some great precipice. Then, looking down at his trousers like there was nothing for it, he quickly unzipped and divested himself of them as well. She only caught the quickest flash of dark hair trailing down to that part of him that she had so wanted buried deep inside of her only moments ago, before he climbed back onto the bed, and pulled the blankets back up to cover them both.

He lay on his back staring at the ceiling, and she laid a hand on his chest, comforted again by the sensation of his heart beating beneath the pale flesh.

“Maybe... maybe you should go,” he whispered, his eyes still refusing to meet hers.

“I don’t think you would have gotten rid of those trousers and crawled in here with me if that was what you really wanted.”

“I’m sorry.” It was barely a whisper.

“I’m not.”

He let his head roll to the side then to look at her, and she lifted a hand to his face, cupping it tenderly. “There’s something I want you to know, and it might be a cruelty to say it now, but despite what you think, I think that I do know you, Severus, at least a little, and I think you would rather know than not.”

She had his attention now, she could tell. His black eyes were searching hers, a look of anxiety and unabashed curiosity married in their depths. “Downstairs, when I said that I didn’t hate you, that I could never hate you, I... I meant it, Severus. But there’s more. I could never hate you – ever – because...”

Her eyes began to fill, but she did nothing to try to stop it. Let him know the fullness of it. Let him know it all. “Because I love you. I have always loved you, and I always will. There hasn’t been a day since fifth year when I haven’t thought of you at least once. You – your memory – has been my greatest comfort and my greatest grief, and I...”

His eyes had gone from stunned to pained in a matter of seconds, and he lifted his fingers to press against her lips, stopping her mid sentence. She thought he meant to interrupt, but he just lay there, his face pale as though he might be ill. Perhaps she had been wrong after all. Perhaps she didn’t know him, and he would rather have not known. But she had not been sorted into Gryffindor all those years ago for nothing. There was only one way to be certain.

Reaching up she slowly pulled his fingers away from her lips. “Let me show you, Severus. Let me show you how much I love you.”

It seemed to her that he went even paler, but he didn't object, not even when she propped herself up on her elbow and leaned down to kiss him. He felt cold, hard, closed, but after a moment or two she felt him yield, and he kissed her back with a sort of sad tenderness, which she knew she would remember for the rest of her life. All the burning passion they had shared moments ago seemed to have dissipated, and all that was left was this sad and gentle need.

It would never come again, and she intended to savor it, to burn every moment and every inch of him into her memory. She pulled away and gazed down into the depthless pools of his eyes, half closed with contentment, and smiled softly. "I want to look at you... all of you. Please."

He looked stricken, but seemed to be considering the request. After a moment of silence, of his dark eyes piercing hers as though to beg her to change her mind, he finally nodded.

She smiled. "Roll over..."

Anxiety flickered across his eyes, and given what he had shown her before, she could imagine why. "It's okay. Remember when we were children? I would write words on your back and make you guess..."

A softness came over him at the memory, and he rolled over, turning his head away from her as he did. No doubt it was easier for him. She peeled the blanket back to his waist. The same hatching of thin, feather-like scars she remembered once catching a glimpse of as a girl remained, but they had been joined by other, deeper ones. She cringed a little at the thought of how he had come by them.

She dropped her fingers to his skin. It was warm from having just been pressed against the mattress, and she traced small trails over the expanse of pale scarred flesh, until she felt him begin to relax beneath her touch. And then she began to write.

She traced the words slowly, carefully. "I'M SORRY". She knew he understood; she moved on. "BEST FRIENDS?" She waited; after a moment he nodded. She rubbed a hand over his back as though to clear the slate, and then wrote one last promise. "ALWAYS". Then and only then did she lean down and press her lips softly to first one scar and then another, moving lower and lower until she reached the edge of the blanket around his waist.

He had grown warmer and warmer beneath her ministrations, his breathing slowly changing, and she felt that perhaps it might be all right to move lower. His breath hitched as she lifted her lips from his lower back and slowly slipped the blanket down further, stopping just below his knees.

The scars trailing across his back furrowed deeper as they moved lower, some of them still an angry red as they ran the length of his arse and down the tops of his thighs. The horrors he had shared with her earlier rushed back in on her, but she pushed them down,

and let her fingers continue their journey downward. He tensed the moment her fingers skimmed over the worst of the scars, and she stopped.

“Come here,” she whispered, as she eased him onto his side, and slid over to spoon in behind him. The light in the room was getting more and more dim, and she knew that her time with him was running short, but she tried her best to push the thought of it from her mind. Draping her arm over his waist, she pulled him up tight against her, and held him close. After a moment he reached down and took her hand in his, meshing their fingers together, and then bringing them up to rest against his chest. Burying her nose in the hair piled at the base of his neck, she reveled in the warmth and comfort of it.

She was just starting to drift off when he rolled over. She blinked blearily at him as his head settled against the pillow again, his eyes and lips inches from hers. His eyes were even more red and bloodshot than they had been before, and she wondered if he had been crying again. Reaching out, he pulled her close until she was pressed up against the full length of him. He was hard again.

“You have to go soon,” he whispered.

She nodded. “Yes.”

His eyes dropped to her lips for a moment before returning to her eyes. “I love you.”

The words hung between them in the quiet of the room.

And then he kissed her, sweetly and tenderly, like he had as a boy, letting it deepen bit by bit until she felt dizzy, until it was hard to know whether she was awake or dreaming or something in between. The ache in her had never gone away; it had only ebbed and flowed in different degrees since the moment he had looked up at her in the pub downstairs. Now it was building again, to a place of almost unbearable need, and when he finally shifted beside her, tightened his grip around her waist, and pushed inside of her, the relief of it, the way he filled her up body and soul, caused her to moan wantonly against his lips.

She could tell he was trying to make it last, but it wouldn't last long. She shifted only a little and he gasped and whimpered against her mouth, his tongue plunging between her lips as he rocked against her in a perfect rhythm, his skin growing flushed and warm again as he neared his climax. “Say it,” he begged almost breathlessly. “Say it again.”

“I love you,” she promised. “I love you, Severus. Always.”

With a moan that crescendoed into something that sounded almost like a small cry of surprise, she felt him find his release inside her. There was only just time enough to take in the mesmerizing sight of him arched beside her, head thrown back, the pale expanse of this throat glistening enticingly close to her lips before her own climax washed over her in wave after wave of bittersweet release.

She clung to him desperately, tears she couldn't seem to stop, soaking the pillow beneath her. He lay spent beside her, but she could see his brow furrow through the veil of her tears, and after a moment he lifted a hand to wipe tentatively at her damp cheeks. "Shh... don't. I... I'm sorry."

She shook her head and sniffed rather inelegantly, before tightening her hold on him. He was still sheathed inside her, and she relished the feeling of him softening there, desperate to hold onto the connection. "No... it's just... I can't... I don't know how to leave."

His eyes searched hers; then he leaned in and pressed his lips against hers for only a moment before pulling away again and trailing the backs of his fingers over her cheek. "You're strong, Lily."

She shook her head. "No..."

"Yes," he insisted gently. "Where's all that Gryffindor courage you were always so proud of?"

Two more tears squeezed from the corners of her eyes to slide down her cheeks. "You were always braver than me, Sev."

"No, I wasn't."

She didn't bother to contradict him again, and when he shifted, pulling himself from inside her, she let out a little whimper of protest and reached over to pull him closer. "You have to go," he insisted.

"No."

"Just promise me one thing. Promise me that you'll do whatever it takes to convince Dumbledore to move you. He'll listen to you, and if not to you, then at least to..."

She nodded, understanding his hesitance. "I promise."

His eyes raked over every inch of her face as though making one last memory before he pulled her in and pressed his lips against her forehead. "There's a bath down the hall. Third door on this side, if you want to wash up," he murmured.

"Okay," she whispered back.

Slipping from the bed without another word, she pulled on her skirt and blouse, stuffing her stockings, bra, and knickers into her bag, and ducked out into the hall. She cleaned up quickly, and put her bra and stockings back on before returning to the room.

He was still lying in bed, eyes fixed on the darkening grey sky outside the window, a lit cigarette balanced between the fingers of the hand above his head. He turned as she walked in, sat up, and extinguished it in the ashtray beside him before swinging his legs over the side of the bed and getting to his feet.

He must have cleaned himself up while she was gone, because he slipped into his trousers and walked over to her. "It's nearly five. You'd best get going. Go quickly. I'll shadow you. Be careful."

"I will." She stopped. She wanted to ask him, to know if this was all there was, if...

"You won't see me again, Lily. It's for your own safety. Trust me. Maybe... maybe if Dumbledore succeeds, maybe when all this is over..."

"We... we could meet somewhere – for tea, or..."

He nodded. "Yes."

And then she left.

The rain had turned back into a mist, and she didn't bother with her umbrella. It felt good, and she knew it would cool her flushed cheeks and swollen lips. By the time she reached the flat she could see the glow of lamplight from the windows. She had got back just in time. Any longer and James would have started to worry.

Turning at the base of the stairs, she looked back over her shoulder into the prematurely gathering dusk in the hopes of catching just one last glimpse, but there was nothing but the thick swirling mist punctuated here and there by pools of streetlamp light as they began to flicker on one by one. With a sigh, she ran a hand through her damp hair, then turned away and slowly mounted the stairs.

The flat was quiet when she slipped in, and when she peeked into the sitting room it was as though she had never left. James and Sirius were exactly as she had left them, and Harry was curled up in a small ball on the carpet in the corner, blanket held tightly in his hand, thumb in his mouth, snoring quietly. With a sigh, she strode over and scooped him up, pulling him close.

"Have you two even moved while I was gone?"

"Gave Harry a bottle," James replied, eyes never leaving the chessboard.

"Well, I'm going to put Harry down and then take a shower before I make tea. The pub was rank."

"Sure, Lils."

She paused, staring at the back of James' head for a moment. Then, pulling Harry even closer and burying her nose in the sweet smell of his head, she left the room and walked down the short hallway to his nursery. There was something precious and comforting about the weight of him in her arms. Perhaps it was the knowledge of just how much danger he was in that suddenly made her realize afresh just how measured each moment was. It was almost painful to have to move him away from the warmth of her breast to lay him down in his cot.

He brought his pudgy little thumb back to his mouth the moment she laid him down. She tucked the corner of his blanket up into his small fist for comfort, trailing a finger softly down his cheek. His nose wrinkled momentarily and then relaxed again.

"I'll not let anyone hurt you, little man, I promise. Mummy will take care of things. You'll see." It was barely a whisper, but his eyes blinked open blurrily to stare up at her for a moment, before sliding slowly shut again. With a sad smile, she ran her hand gently over the top of his head, fingers twining with the waves of his fine dark hair, then turned away quickly before the tears could come.

When she stripped out of her clothes in the bath she could still smell Severus on her. His smell was everywhere, and she wondered that James hadn't picked up on it as she stood behind him in the sitting room. Or perhaps it was only her nose that sensed it, the way one's eyes are instantly drawn to someone dear, even in a crowd. Filling the sink with soap and warm water, she fished her knickers out of her bag and dumped them and her stockings in to soak.

She leaned against the cool tile as the water of the shower washed away his smell, her tears mixing with the tepid water and the pain in her heart. She watched them swirl down the drain and out of sight. After standing beneath the flow for as long as she thought she could get away with, she finally took a deep breath and reached for the soap. There was too much to do, too much to arrange, to dwell on might-have-beens.

Nothing in her cramped kitchen had changed, either, when she went in to prepare their tea. The gas to the stove still flowed intermittently; Sirius had still tucked into the leftovers from the night before without telling her, leaving her scrambling. Even her teacup from earlier in the afternoon sat forlorn, still half filled with cold tea.

Nothing had changed, and yet – everything had.