

Part Twenty-One B
March, 1977

"Pads," James hisses next morning, grabbing Sirius' elbow as they meander out to the beach after breakfast. "I need to talk to you."

"Talk away, my friend," Sirius says, slinging an arm generously around James's shoulders. He is too full of muffins to be in a bad mood, and James' drawn pallor and general air of frightened rabbit make him feel even more cheerful by comparison. "Where's your auburn-tressed love pastry?"

"I don't know," James mutters. "I think she slept in the bathtub. Look, I need you to promise me you won't be an idiot."

"Can't help it," Sirius says cheerfully. "It's part of my charm." On second glance, James really does look unhealthy: all drippy and sunken and not at all like his usual blithesome self. If it were in Sirius's nature to be concerned, he would be; fortunately for him, it isn't. "Do you want a banana or something? You look like a wilted cabbage. It's hols, for God's sake, please try to perk up. I want you in top form today, it's been ages since we had a good game of Sand In Your Bits."

"About my bits," James says. "But Sirius, you *have* to promise me." He grabs Sirius by the arm and pulls him in the direction of abandonment and drowning, a rocky unpleasant cove no vacationers are attempting at this hour of the day. "You have to *promise* you won't tell anyone. It's the biggest secret of my *life* and if you tell *anyone*--"

Sirius holds up a hand, suddenly grave. "James," he says. "I try not to be an idiot when it counts."

"You're going to have to do better than try," James tells him. "You're going to have to do better than succeed. You can't tell anyone. Not Peter, not Remus--"

"Not even the love pastry?"

James makes a dark face. "Especially not the love pastry. The love pastry *cannot know you know*. Do you understand?"

Sirius nods. "I do solemnly swear," he says, but he isn't joking. James sighs in relief, slipping into a shadowy corner and looking all around before he begins.

"We sort of," he whispers. "We sort of. You know."

Comprehension dawns very slowly on Sirius' face, blooming like a shadow. He turns, looks away, scuffs his foot against sand and dried up bits of seaweed. For a long time he says nothing, tickling the seaweed with his toes. It takes him an eternal kind of moment, but finally, he grins. "Well, you know, it was only a matter of time, wasn't it? The course of true love leads to the bedroom after all. Well done, mate. Well done." He claps

James' shoulder with one hand. James is impressed. He's doing an admirable job. All of a sudden James is delighted and happy and grateful that Sirius Black is his best friend in the world, and always will be, and isn't an idiot when it really counts. All of a sudden he is hanging from Sirius' arm, relieved beyond imagining but shaking like a jellyfish.

"It was terrible," he says. "It was awful. I was awful. She was awful. We were awful. It was the most awful thing I've ever kept doing of my own free will. And do you remember that time, with the toaster? It was like that only a hundred times worse and a hundred times longer and less burning and more squeezing. Sirius, it was *spectacularly* bad."

"Oh," Sirius says, rather stunned. "Er. Well." It is somewhat difficult to picture how bad bad sex could possibly be. You sort of do or you don't, as far as Sirius can imagine, and if you do, then that's quite nice, and if you don't, it doesn't really count, does it? "I mean, was it just -- you know, I mean, she hasn't got scales or something, right?"

"No!" James yelps. "No. Jesus." He winds his hand deep into his hair, as if attempting to yank off his own scalp. "God, I don't -- I had no idea what was going on! It was like -- I was trying so hard, but it was just -- and I was, like, watching myself, and it was just, I mean, oh God. I make noises, Pads. Like little -- oh, God, little gerbil noises. And I just sort of thought something would happen with her, but it was -- I don't know! I didn't know what to do!"

"It's all right," Sirius says, trying not to look as stumped as he is. "I mean, er. Right? I imagine it takes practice."

"I think it's a big joke," James says grimly. "And no one talks about how awful it is because everyone's too embarrassed to admit they're crap at it." He shoots Sirius a sideways glance. "You didn't, right? I mean, with Sophie. Because you'd've told me. You couldn't have shut up about it for three seconds."

"I didn't," Sirius says, not looking at him. *You are being a pillock*, he tells himself, firmly. *You need to stop being a pillock*. But he can't stop it if he can't tell where it's coming from, and he just wants to shut up and be helpful but everything in his head is childish and competitive and unbelievably stupid. "Look, maybe she doesn't know how bad it was."

"She slept in the bath," James says darkly.

"Well, all right, maybe she knows it was bad. But maybe she doesn't know *how* bad."

"If anything," James says, "she's the one who knows how bad it was, and I'm the one who's in the dark about it all. *I* should have slept in the bath."

"A gentleman would have," Sirius agrees, but he sounds rather affectionate. "Look, James. Maybe you're right. Maybe everyone's awful at it. Maybe she'll go off and find that out and come back to you after she's learned the truth and everything will work out all right in the end."

"But the way some people talk about it," James moans. "Not *everyone* can be *that* good at lying." His eyes spark up in hope. "Can they be?"

"Er," Sirius says. "Look, I'm really *trying*. But you know," he adds, feeling particularly generous, "it's possible that it's all going to work out anyway. Did you think of that? Maybe she's not all *that* bad and realizes that you work best second time around. You always have, you know. That's quicker than most."

"Some people get it the first try," James mumbles, sinking down onto the sand. He puts his forehead against his knees, speaking into the dark secret places of his blushing soul. "I mean, you know. I was *actually looking forward to it*."

"That's rough." Sirius sits beside him, slinging a companionable arm around his shoulder and giving him a good shake. "Come on. Have you talked to *her* about it, then?"

"Not yet." James groans. "I can't even look at her. She can't even look at me. She's probably moved to Africa already. She's quicker than I am, you know."

"Or," Sirius says, "*or*, and this might seem crazy, but *it is possible*, James, that she's willing to give it another go because she feels all those love pastry gooey filling-things for you. If not, and she is in Africa, then she certainly isn't going to get any better sex *there* so you can cheer up about it all. Can't you?" James groans again. "All right. Look. Either you're going to snap out of it or we're just going to have to drown ourselves together. But I know you don't really like being wet that much for that long and that one time I held you under in the bath you got *pretty* mad, so I think you're going to be all right and -- you know. Not drowned. What d'you say, James old boy? Breakfast? Brunch? Those little juicy drinks in coconuts? Celebratory sex meal?"

"Celebratory awful sex meal," James mutters. "Something damp and sticky and oddly unsatisfying."

"Well," Sirius reminds him, "at least it can't get worse!" It could, but he thinks that James may not want to hear the many imaginable ways this could happen. "Look, just...don't go back to the hotel. Stay away from your place of shame for a bit. Wander by the sea. Consider, I don't know, the majesty of nature. And then bring her a jellyfish to show that you care."

"A jellyfish may hit a little too close to home," James says, disconsolately.

"Well, I don't know," Sirius says. He finds himself struggling, oddly, surprisingly, with his temper. There is no reason for him to be upset. *He* has not spent the last night engaged in unpleasant jellyfish sex. "What do you want to do? Mope?"

"I'm going to go sit somewhere," James says. "Hey, er." He passes a hand over his face and exhales, a little shakily. "Thanks, mate. Sorry. I just needed to -- anyway. You're a friend and an Englishman."

"No worries," Sirius says. James doesn't look any more mature. He doesn't look transformed, or anything. He looks like old James, but distinctly less sure of himself. "Do you want me to romp along behind? You could throw sticks."

"Thanks for the offer. It's very noble of you. But I think I'd better be alone for a little while. And, you know. The majesty of nature. Ask God for a sign. Burning bush. Parted sea. Remind myself how much I hate the idea of drowning. The usual. You know. And I know," James adds, "I know you won't tell anyone. Just -- don't tell

anyone. That's all. Thanks." He moves, for a moment, as if he is going to hug Sirius, and then something embarrassed and ridiculous comes over his whole body and he shies back, shrugging. "I don't want to be touched. By anyone. Ever again. Or at least for the week. Sorry. Thanks." He backs away, slowly, distractedly. "Really, Sirius. You're -- you know. Thank you. *Thanks.*"

After he has disappeared Sirius counts the number of times James has thanked him before he considers drowning *himself*. In the end, he thinks better of it for all the same reasons as James did. It would be unpleasant, though it would suit his soggy mood entirely.

This, Sirius realizes, is the worst vacation. It started out all right, only then Lily had come along, and now James and Lily had *actually had sex*, which leaves the frightening taste of permanence in Sirius' mouth. It isn't that he's old fashioned. It isn't that he thinks they're going to run out and get married and make lots of sexually awkward babies together. It's that now there's some deep chasm between James and himself and even though James thought to come to him first -- cold comfort in a time of simple tragedy and humiliation -- even that trust won't bridge it. They're going off in separate directions. They're two different people. They are, to put it simply, separable.

Sirius wants to punch someone.

However, the beach is empty. He jams his hands into his pockets, instead, and starts morosely down the shoreline. It's a warm, colorless morning, the kind where once the sun really comes up the whole landscape will be bleached with heat, and Sirius will be incapable of doing anything but lie around, feeling his brain dribble out his ears. That being so, it's important, he supposes, that he get all this -- whatever it is -- out of his system while he can still muster up the motivation to move.

Try flinging rocks into the ocean, suggests a helpful voice in his mind. *You can pretend they are at someone's head*. But he doesn't want to fling rocks at someone's head, not really; he doesn't want to hurt people or run around in circles or put things down Peter's trousers or construct dungbombs with James or any of the things he usually does when he's uselessly angry. He doesn't have any idea what he wants to do, what will make him better, what will make all the dark, muddled, pointless stupidity that has been brewing in his head stop, just *stop*, and he yells, finally, helplessly, "*Fuck!*" and does an idiotic little hopskip of frustration into the water.

And then, "What's the matter?" a familiar voice says from slightly behind him, warm and amused. "Sand in your bits, I suppose?"

Sirius turns. Remus looks ridiculous. He has a layer of white zinc oxide over his nose, which makes it look even more enormous than usual, and he is carrying what appears to be an entire encyclopedia volume.

"You look like a plonker," Sirius informs him.

"You look like you've gone mad," Remus counters.

"Maybe I have. What would you do then? Plonk me?" Sirius scowls down at Remus until the sight of him becomes too blurry and too ridiculous and Sirius has to blink. That just ruins it. Letting out a defeated sigh, Sirius deflates next to him. He wraps his arms around his legs and pulls his knees in close to his chest. "What do *you* do when you're angry for *no reason*? And it isn't even really angry, that's not the right word. Bad mood.

That's it -- bad mood. When you *are* a bad mood, what do you do?"

"Look like a plonker, I think," Remus says, but he puts down his enormous volume and wipes at the white zinc oxide on his nose and leans forward, looking appropriately concerned. At least, Sirius thinks, there is always Remus Lupin, plonker or no, taking him seriously when he needs to be taken seriously. Remus will have the answer, Sirius tells himself, and if not then Sirius will take him very far out to sea in a little paddle boat and leave him there.

"You always look like a plonker." Sirius stares out over the water. The sunlight glittering over its surface hurts his eyes when he stares too hard at it.

"I don't know," Remus answers honestly. "It depends on what kind of a bad mood I am. What kind of a bad mood am I, Sirius?"

Sirius thinks about it. "Now *I'm* going to sound like a plonker," he mutters finally. "I don't know. Sad, maybe? I don't know."

"I'm a sad maybe bad mood," Remus thinks out loud. "Hm. That's the hardest one, actually. If I'm a sad maybe bad mood, reading doesn't get rid of it and I certainly can't talk to my friends about it, because they'll call me a plonker and tell me to write it down in my girly diary until my vagina finally blooms." Remus smiles, trying to be helpful. It is helpful. Only, Sirius realizes, it's not exactly helpful for the right reasons. It's helpful by accident. If James Potter is completely awkward at sex, Sirius wants to say, then Remus Lupin, you are doomed. He doesn't. That would break the confidence he's promised, and he isn't going to do that. When the secret counts, Sirius keeps it. "Well, if you want an honest answer," Remus says.

"An honest answer. And I won't say anything about vaginas. *Believe me*. As far as I'm concerned the world has no more vaginas. I wash my hands of them."

Remus gives him an odd look. He deserves it. "It's not a very good answer," Remus begins. "But normally I just wait for it to go away. After all, most of the time I'm around very distracting people. And they help. They're distracting."

"Distract me," Sirius says dryly. He looks halfway over to Remus, who now has white zinc oxide smeared all over one cheek and one half of his nose, so that his entire face looks lopsided and comical. There is even some white zinc oxide in the ridge of one uneven scar. You are doomed, Remus Lupin, he tries to think, but he can't even muster it. Of all of them, it's likely that Remus is the least doomed. He will probably outlive all of them and chuckle wisely to himself at the very end, hoarding all his secret werewolf wisdom.

"I could read to you," Remus offers. "I could read to you from this large book, which I carry about with me everywhere I go, because I am a plonker."

The thing about Remus, Sirius thinks -- or at least one of many things -- is that he thinks that the best way of making other people feel good is talking himself down. Sometimes it works -- it's working now, if for no other reason than that it means Sirius isn't thinking about James and sex and families and other stupid things -- but sometimes it's sort of sad and irritating, and there's no way to make him stop that won't simply exacerbate the problem. "What would you say is the average syllable count in that book?"

"Couldn't tell you," Remus says. "I can't speak German. I only read."

"Sometimes I want to throw you in a vat of something," Sirius says, but it's better, somehow. He thumbs Remus's face. "You have stuff on you."

"Well, you know, the Nose. It's so--" Remus makes vague, uncomfortable gestures "--*out there*. It's like the Equator; it just gets more sun. I like to be careful."

"What if your bad mood doesn't go away," Sirius says, looking carefully over Remus' head, "what do you do then? Like, if it's months and months? And if you've tried, hypothetically, alienating all your best friends, and nearly getting expelled, and associating with really fit French girls, and all kinds of things that usually make you feel better -- hypothetically -- what then?"

"I don't know," Remus admits after a short pause. "Go on holiday, I suppose."

"What if it only gets worse on holiday?" Sirius frowns down into his knees. "What if it gets so much worse on holiday you contemplate striking out to sea as a pirate and never coming back?"

"If it gets that bad, the bad mood," Remus says, "then, when you strike out to sea as a pirate you really should take your giant-nosed friend with you because you know nothing about piracy and he cannot buckle any swashes and only together can you rule the high seas."

"The giant-nosed friend cannot help rule the high seas with that glop on his nose," Sirius says. "He will have to settle for a burnt nose or he cannot come."

"The giant-nosed friend figured as much. He also figured he could wear one of those very large-brimmed hats, which would solve his problem."

"He'd still look an enormous plonker," Sirius says. He grins, however, feeling comforted. Remus rubs his nose, a little self-consciously, but being rather good about it, all things considered. In fact, with all things considered, Remus is the best sport Sirius knows -- perhaps even better than James, because no one ever makes fun of James that much, and James is a different kind of boy. It's all very confusing. "And I'd still be an enormous bad mood."

"Even indulging in random acts of piracy?" Remus looks sympathetic. "Well, perhaps. Which is probably why it's better to talk about it than run off to pillage and plunder and rape and what-have-you."

"It's hard to say," Sirius mutters. "Some of it I *can't* say. You know. Top secret, hush-hush, not important really."

"Has it really been that long?" If Remus is upset by the secrecy, he doesn't show it. He's still all ears and all concern, leaning close and getting his nose everywhere. He smells a little funny, like seawater and something smeared all over to avoid sunburn. "You should have said something. I mean. I wouldn't have been so--"

"Don't apologize. It isn't your fault. If it's anyone's fault it's James' fault, but actually I think it's *my* fault, so I'm

going to blame my bloody parents and have done with it. Do you want to go exploring? I think we should. Distraction, you said. Distract away! I dub thee Remus, Distractor of the Mood."

"I'm not much of an explorer," Remus attempts, "you should get James," but something in Sirius's face sort of twists sideways and Remus is sharply, remorsefully aware that this is a mistake. "I could try, I suppose."

"There's coves," Sirius tells him. "Buried treasure, and that. I don't know." He laughs mirthlessly and digs the heel of his hand into his eye. "Treasure! Moony -- am I eight forever?"

"In every way that counts," Remus assures him, trying to help. "Look, come on. Let's go find interesting shellfish. I can tell you everything I know about mollusks."

"There is a lot, I suppose," Sirius says.

"The most colorful sort is the Nudibranch," Remus says. "It's a member of the sea slug family."

"You're joking," Sirius says. Remus can see the smile twitching in the corner of his mouth. He doesn't have Sirius' talent for pulling those incipient smiles out of people once he senses them; he can only notice them in time to appreciate them, to file their possibility away in his own mind. "The Nudibranch?"

"There's also a thing called the Flamingo Tongue Cowrie. We should go in here," Remus says decisively, pointing to the dark mouth of a handy cove. He's not much of an explorer, but it seems clear that Sirius needs him to try. Besides, it isn't every day there's the dark mouth of a handy cove nearby. The cove is just going to have to cover him. "This one. It's pleasantly dark. It's swashbuckling. I have no doubt we will step in something disgusting. And that's the point, isn't it?"

"I am going to call you Flamingo Tongue Cowrie," Sirius says. "Agent Flamingo Tongue Cowrie. And I shall be Agent Nudie Pants."

"Nudibranch," Remus attempts, without much hope.

"Forward!" Sirius declares. "Forward into blessed, distracting darkness!"

Three coves later and Remus has been attacked by something that looks like a squid, moves like a butterfly and stings like a bee. He has also got a scarf made out of seaweed and keeps getting sand crabs in between his toes, while Sirius has been shocked by coral, twice, jumped by an angry seagull, and is currently wearing an unhappy looking fish. There is sand everywhere. At the very least, Remus is certain Sirius has forgotten all about being a bad mood and is in full explorer mode, sweating and smelling quite unsavory. Or perhaps the smell has something to do with his current fish. In any case, it is tremendously hot and very late in the afternoon by the time they arrive at the fourth cove, far away from the regular and actually safe part of the beach. It looks foreboding. "This looks foreboding," Remus whispers. "We should definitely go in."

"Let's see if we can find another one of those killer attack squid," Sirius replies. "I want to capture one, and train him. Or perhaps he will capture *me*, and take me to his leader."

"The sea is a very strange and unfathomable place," Remus says. "And it is not friendly, either."

He follows Sirius inside, where the echoes of far off dripping sounds reverberate over the dank jagged walls. Remus is half-expecting a crocodile with a clock inside to cross in front of them at any moment. It has all been a wonderful exercise in Sirius' idea of fun. Think like Sirius and you end up with sand in your pants and bits of shell in your ear, but at least the day is half over before you know it.

Something squirms and flubs in the darkness. Remus cringes instinctively, but Sirius has already started forward, with great purpose and eagerness. His eyes are practically glowing.

"It won't be your pet, you know," Remus calls after him, scrambling over an unpleasantly slimy rock. "If anything it will enslave you and mate you with its squid women to ensure the survival of the species."

"You're just jealous because you lack my natural affinity with animals," Sirius says, rather sniffily. This is true. Animals are afraid of Remus. He is sometimes, to be honest, a little afraid of them. "I'm going to name it Monkey, and keep it in a bowl, and--" He stops -- freezes, actually -- head cocked to one side, alertness in every line of his body.

"What," Remus pants, catching up to him, "what are you--"

Sirius throws out a hand into his chest, universal sign for Stop talking you great big idiot. His eyes are flicking from side to side, his mouth tight, and he says, "There's something -- I can't get a hold of it."

Sirius has magic in his blood. Literally. So does Remus, he supposes, but he doesn't have it like Sirius has it; there's a reason the Blacks are wizarding aristocracy. Sirius doesn't need books or paraphernalia or any of it. In the presence of interesting magic, magic that really absorbs him, something happens to him. It's as if he breathes it in, as if he's tangled it around his body and his every movement is a careful measurement, an almost imperceptible manipulation. He seems to get tighter, darker, more sharply delineated, as if the air is getting smaller around him or he has grown to fill a lot more air.

"Don't move," Sirius whispers, scarcely more than a breath. He is a little dangerous like this, alight with fascination. It's the reason, Remus supposes, that he has to be so scatterbrained most of the time; the full focus of his attention borders on frightening. "It's just on the edge -- I can get it."

"Are you sure," whispers Remus uncertainly, "are you sure we shouldn't just leave it alone? I mean, what's it doing in a squid-cave anyway? I mean -- it's not really our business--"

Sirius spares a moment to regard him with scorn. "Don't be a prat, Moony. You'll like this. It's -- like, a curtain, or something -- all thick, and--" His wand is already in his hand, sketching a faint, white circle in the air in front of them. It scorches Remus's eyes for a moment and then sort of collapses into itself, and the cave seems to shift underneath him--

And then, where the burning circle was, as if through a window, Remus can see something. It's unclear, voices like static, figures like light on water, but then as the enchantment weakens they grow stronger, clearer. Sirius hisses, "I--!" but Remus, who can sense a victory dance coming, throws a desperate arm over his face and Sirius goes down kicking.

When they look up, it is through a haze of sand and a small circular opening like a hidden porthole, a large knot in wood, only it is a hidden porthole or a large knot in nothing, in the air, just in front of their noses. It's small enough that Remus realizes immediately they can't be seen, hidden just beside a large rock, and large enough for both of them, faces pressed together, sticky and sweaty and prickling with sand, to see through. Remus presses one finger to Sirius' lips. Sirius nods against them. They are both so quiet Remus can hear, before anything else, the sound of Sirius' agitated heartbeat, thumping in triumph and curiosity against his forearm. Then, sound from in front of them, muffled through the canopy of magic, passes through their spy-hole.

"It isn't anything -- just a scratch -- stop *pacing*, you're going to -- *auugh*--"

"Be quiet. Don't move. You'll make it worse. Hold on, Minerva's got you."

"Well, I'm not a *healer*, you know. Not my specialty. Hold still, Fabian, or I'll *make* you still, and you'll like that much less."

"Tell him to stop pacing, it's making me *nervous*--"

Remus suddenly feels ill. There's the smell of blood, always recognizable, and saltwater and magic all mixed together, and urgency crackles like fire and electricity and thunderstorms in the air. He recognizes the voices all too well; at first, his brain refuses to recognize them, until Sirius has turned to face him, eyes wide. They stare at one another. Just in front of them, cloaked by magic made too quickly to be quite impenetrable, are McGonagall, and the Prewetts, and that Caradoc fellow they met the day before. And others, shadows, not speaking, lurking around the periphery. None of them seems particularly happy.

"Hold *still*," McGonagall says, "Fabian, if you don't hold *still*--"

"I think you're making it worse," Fabian says, laughing nervously. Something is off about the color of his voice. There's too much breath, maybe, or too little, and the words are running over each other. Remus pushes a little closer to the keyhole, the tear in the cloak, whatever, and for a moment he thinks, idiotically, that is the strangest tattoo I've ever seen, and then he realizes it isn't a tattoo, bright unreal red spiderwebbed across Fabian's stomach. It's blood, loads of blood, unreasonable, cartoonish amounts of blood. Sirius' hand fists in his shirt. Remus wants to throw up.

"It can't be made worse," McGonagall says sharply, "it *is* worse. Caradoc, for God's sake, sit down. Alistair, will you hold his arms, please?"

"Minerva, give me some credit, please, I can hold still, I am not seven," and then Fabian makes a sharp, hissing noise, like a cry cut off. Caradoc the man-panther turns back to him briefly, and then turns away again, and then back, running his hands through his hair helplessly. He looks less shiny. Even Fabian's hair looks limp and defeated.

"It was a trap," Gideon speaks up, blurry at the edge of the porthole. He's holding his arm a little oddly. "They were...in and out so fast I could barely get a lock on them. The house was a trap. We went in to find the bodies and they were everywhere."

"Like rabbits," Fabian puts in. "Like aphids -- *ahh*--"

"Stop talking," McGonagall says. "You are clearly delirious."

"They *were* like aphids," Gideon says. He moves out of view. Remus catches a last glimpse of his oddly-held arm, sees that it, too, is swathed in red. It's possible it's from Fabian. It's possible it isn't. Remus wants, suddenly, to look away, but he can't bear to. It's sickening. It's frightening. He doesn't know what could possibly have happened, but whatever it is must be something more important than he can imagine. He can feel Sirius feel it, too. He lets out the slowest, quietest breath of his life, wondering if his heart is as loud as he thinks it is. At any moment, they could be caught. They shouldn't be watching. They know, now, that they have to.

"I'm not all that delirious," Fabian is saying. "For example, I am not delirious enough to miss the enormous hole in my stomach. Someone really ought to -- do something--"

"Gideon," Minerva says. "What am I *fighting*, here?"

"It happened," Gideon replies, "it happened very quickly. Too quickly. They knew we were coming and they were waiting for us and I didn't even know Fabian was *hit* until they were gone -- thought we were dead -- ha, ha." He makes a sound -- at least Remus thinks he's making the sound -- like too much breath being squeezed through a very thin reed. It sounds rough and wet and on the edge of crying. Remus has only heard the sound of a grown man crying once before, in the deep recesses of his child's memory. It was his father. Something cold grips at his belly. The gravity of the situation punches him just above the bathing trunks and settles in like a lump of ice.

"I am not dead," Fabian says.

He doesn't sound very sure.

"And I am, frankly, shocked," McGonagall says. She sounds competent and controlled and as firm as she is when dealing with a student who has accidentally Transfigured himself into a teacup. Her wand hand is weaving complicated shapes in the air over Fabian's body, her other hand hovering lightly above the damaged skin. Over the long tracks of blood blue light is coalescing in loops, like thread. Remus is suddenly unspeakably grateful for the mere fact of her existence, her solid, thin, capable presence in this place. "You went in without backup. You practically went in blindfolded. I can count on *one hand* the number of brain cells it requires to do a basic check before charging headlong into the scene of a fatal attack!"

"Not exactly our most textbook hour, you know," Gideon snaps. "They were *parents*. It's not like they went down fighting! They were at the *dinner table* when -- it's a miracle the boy wasn't in the house!"

"I don't care if it was a playground full of three year olds," McGonagall snaps back. "This isn't children's hour. You've done this before, and *you have more sense*. Fabian, are you doing all right?"

"I have a hole through myself," Fabian says faintly. "But no, no, I am fine. I imagine it is quite sexy, actually. I hear stomach piercings are very fashionable."

"If you live through this, I'm going to kill you," says Caradoc, who is still pacing.

"Don't bother," McGonagall says. "I'll do it for you."

"Don't," Gideon says abruptly, "it was my fault. Don't joke about it now."

"If not now, when?" Fabian points out.

"All right," McGonagall says, raising her wand. "I'm going to pull the stitches in. It's going to hurt rather a lot, I'm afraid. Alistair?"

"Got 'em," growls the large, hulking figure behind Fabian.

"You're breaking my elbows," Fabian protests. "I am going to be bent all funny--"

"On your count, Minerva."

"Right," McGonagall says, colorlessly. "One -- two -- *three*--"

Fabian's body arches and he makes a sound. It's not a sound that Remus has ever heard before, but he's felt it before, in his bones, his teeth, the back of his throat when the moon shifts him. It's bitten off, forced down, and that makes it worse. It grabs Remus by the intestines and yanks him sideways.

But it isn't the sound that's holding him, it's Sirius, of course, grabbing his arm, pulling him away from the window, the blood, the blue light. Not knowing what else to do, Remus lets himself be pulled.

They stumble out into the air and run, slipping over slick stones and wet kelp and sand until they come pounding to a stop, so far away they can't see the cove anymore. Sirius looks white and ill. He's sliced his hand on something in their flight, and it's bleeding quietly on the sand. Above them the sky is absurdly blue, the sun absurdly bright; the seagulls wheel and cry as if nothing is happening. Remus feels lightheaded.

"I," Remus starts, and doesn't know where to go.

"I don't understand," Sirius says. "I don't. What is--" He takes a deep breath. "I can't. I mean. That was."

"Please don't say 'cool,'" Remus says quietly.

"I wasn't going to." A pause. "Important."

Remus tries to nod. His neck feels stiff. He wipes the sand and the sweat off his cheek and looks away, out over the water. It was more important than anything they've seen before, something more important than he can quantify, something so important he has no name for it at all, only a jumble of words out of order, jingling their wrongness in his joints and turning sour in his mouth. His lips are dry and cracked; the rest of him is cold beneath the sweat. A breeze comes in from the sea, rippling the tide that laps their toes. Remus nods at last. He feels as if his life is in danger, residual from the sense of urgency they have just witnessed, but something more than that, too. Despite McGonagall's firm unwavering voice, her face was the color of seashell, too white. He's never seen it look that drained of blood before. He presses one hand to his mouth and turns away.

Sirius' hand on his back breaks him out of it. "You all right?" Sirius asks. His voice sounds distant, tight, a little too high. Remus swallows down the bile and turns back.

"It's the smell," he says. "It was a little -- much."

Sirius' face is drawn into a pinched frown. His eyes are nervous. Remus pats him on the shoulder awkwardly. "What do we do?" Sirius asks. "We can't -- they can't know we know -- but it isn't safe there. For them. The spell they've used, it's -- well, I just -- I poked right through. Anyone could--"

"I don't think anyone's going to be looking for them in the middle of a tourist attraction," Remus says slowly. The lingering unknown *anyone* is electric in the air. He shakes his head, wards off a shiver, and suddenly feels all right again. Strong. Competent. Sirius' lips have been drained of all color and Remus' stomach is somewhere down by his ankles, but there's something to be said in the face of life and death about not being in the face of it alone.

"I'm going to sit down," he says, and is surprised to find that he has already done so.

"Yeah," Sirius says unnecessarily, and sits beside him. His bare arm against Remus' is cold in the sunlight, but it's there, present, physical, simple, Sirius, and Remus is stupidly glad.

"You still have a fish," he observes suddenly. It is unbelievable and oddly comforting, but there it is: the floppy, pathetic tail sticking out of Sirius's pocket, adding its distinctive touch to the bouquet of pungency that accompanies Sirius everywhere. There he is at the forefront of Remus' brain, in the face of blood and shadowy figures and mysterious death: Sirius, dirty and smelling of fish.

"You still have--" Sirius makes a vaguely insulting gesture "--on your face."

"Does that make you feel better?" Remus inquires.

"Yes," Sirius says, examining his hands. Remus understands, and says nothing. What comes will come. They'll figure it out.

James stares across the bed at Lily, who is busy staring across the bed at something fascinating just over James' left shoulder. If they continue like this for any longer without blinking someone's going to lose an eye. James clears his throat nervously. Lily blinks, but doesn't refocus her attention. This is almost the hardest thing James has done in his life. The hardest, if he manages to wipe all of last night from his memory, and Lily's, too. They could do that, James considers. If they forgot completely, it would solve everything. But, James admits, it would also be cheating. He clears his throat again.

"So, uh," James says, "glad we're talking about this."

"Yes," Lily agrees. "Me too."

They are quiet again. James realizes they aren't talking about anything at all. He'd gladly give a limb or an important organ to listen in on Lily's thoughts right now, but that isn't an option. It really is impressive how things that couldn't possibly get any worse are in the process of doing so quite rapidly. James slumps tiredly. "We're not actually talking," he points out. "Though, of course, you know that, being in full control of your -- mouth and -- things."

"I think it was a good experience," Lily says suddenly. "I think we can learn from it. Or we can die quietly together in a corner of our own shame and misery. So far we have been going with option number two and I think it's rather unpleasant as options go." Her voice sounds shrill and she still isn't looking at him. It's making James incredibly nervous. "But," Lily continues, "I don't really know what we're supposed to *learn* except that I never want children and should consider becoming a nun."

"I have often considered that option myself," James says. "Who doesn't like nuns? With their -- you know. The habits." He takes a deep breath. Clearly there is nothing to be done. The situation is what it is -- what's regrettably taken place has regrettably taken place -- and, if he were being completely honest, he's not sure a convent is the place for him. It's certainly a waste of Lily. "No, look. It's -- maybe it was the room? It's a very small room."

"It wasn't the room," Lily says in a dead voice.

"No," James says, painfully. "No, you're right. It was the Us. It can't be that awful all the time. Can it?"

"Did you think it was awful?" Lily says, rather shocked. "I mean, I know you did. But I suppose I thought -- I don't know. I thought boys had it sort of all right regardless."

"Sort of," James says. "But there are ways to make it awful, and we succeeded in finding all of them."

"I don't understand," Lily moans, collapsing on the bed. "We were doing so well!"

"It's mechanics," James says. "Apparently we are pants at mechanics. I have pamphlets at home," he adds with dark humor, "if that would help."

"No," Lily says firmly.

"I didn't think so," James agrees. "I mean, you know, what can pamphlets know that people can't? Well, obviously -- well, no -- well, I'd like to think that I know more than a pamphlet does about -- well, I guess I don't, though." James looks down at his hands. He maybe wants to use them to throttle himself, or at least cut off all air into his lungs so he'll stop talking. Barring that, they would make an excellent gag. "But, you know, admitting it by succumbing to the pamphlets, that's..."

"James," Lily says. "I don't think this is the end of the world. We were terrible at, you know, having sex, but I think that means we might be able to improve, once the wounds heal. Metaphorical wounds," she adds quickly. "Bad, uhm, choice of words there. Wasn't it."

"The emotional scars will last lifetimes," James offers, "but we are a resilient people?"

"I still like you," Lily says. "And if I still like you after *that* then I probably like you an *insane* amount." She fixes him with a direct green gaze and he remembers all the things he loves about her, more overwhelming in the face of all their failures.

"Uh," James says. "Wow."

"I know," Lily agrees. "I am as perplexed as you are."

"Tell you what," James says. "I am a bit leery of being touched. But we could stick to what we know." He sits beside her on the bed and slips his fingers between hers.

"For now," Lily decides, and yanks him backwards rather forcefully. When he kisses her he remembers that there are some mechanics at which he is all right, there are some mechanics which more or less make his world go round, and if there are freckles and green eyes involved then he is willing to keep trying the others until the end of time, even if he never gets them right.

And then someone knocks on the door.

"Go away, Sirius!" James yells, with some difficulty, "bit busy," at which Lily smacks him with a pillow.

"Er, Mister Potter," says someone who is decidedly not Sirius- - who sounds, in fact, horrifyingly like Professor Minerva McGonagall. "This is rather -- urgent, I'm afraid. If I could speak to you--"

"*Nghaa*," James whimpers. Lily hits him again, hisses "Go!" and pushes him the three feet to the door. He opens it, straightens his glasses, and says, in as responsible a voice as possible, "Hello there, professor! Just, you know, taking a break! From the sunshine! To do...Head Boy things!"

"Yes," McGonagall says. She looks tired and sad and entirely unlike yesterday's trim, beachy incarnation. "Could you step into the hall for a moment, please?"

"Er, okay," James says. He closes the door behind him.

It is not unusual for Peter not to know where everyone else is and what they're doing. Of the four friends he has often enough this sneaking suspicion he is somehow expendable. When he is with his friends this feeling is banished completely; but when he is alone it returns, nagging and gnawing and it makes him cranky. Now, for instance, he can only guess where Sirius and Remus are, whether or not they're together or alone. James is easier. James is with Lily because James is with Lily more often than not, and when Peter is left alone it's usually because James is with Lily. James is like their glue. James holds them all together. Without James, Sirius goes flying off like an unanchored kite and Remus, who has always struck Peter as more of a loner than a people-person, disappears often enough that Peter doesn't think twice about it. However that leaves Peter, Pete Old Man, on his own and a little bored and susceptible to the suspicion that haunts him like a shadow or a particularly devoted ghost. He can't shake it. It seems unfair to him, that he should be on vacation, presumably

with his friends, and come under the suspicion's attack. *They just keep you around*, it whispers in his ear. *You're a little bit boring, you know*, it hums in his blood. *They're all much better looking and much smarter and much better friends and they've probably left you alone because you do embarrassing things*, it sing-songs in his gut.

"James is with Lily," Peter says stubbornly. "Sirius is off doing something I don't want to do and Remus is off doing something I *really* don't want to do."

Ah. The suspicion is too clever. *Well, it could be...*

Peter decides he will collect seashells, at least to distract himself. He is halfway down the beach and has bathing trunk pockets full of heavy lumpy things when he spots the glistening young man who was with McGonagall the other day. He barely recognizes him, as the young man is no longer glistening.

"Hallo," Peter says, because if he didn't then surely that would be further evidence that he is a hopelessly embarrassing person. There are only the two of them on the beach, and this way he pre-emptively ignores.

"Oh, hallo," the young man says. "I know you, don't I? The exploding toilet."

"That was James," Peter feels compelled to point out. *It was James and Sirius and Remus*, whispers the suspicion. *It was Sirius's idea and James really did it and Remus let them steal his prefect's key. You were asleep.*

"James Potter?" the young man says, straightening. "That was him? From yesterday?"

"Er," Peter says, "yes." *And I'm Peter Pettigrew. Nice to meet you.*

The young man seems to lose shine right before his eyes. Even his abdominals seem to have wilted. "Oh. Well. Hard luck, old man. He's a friend of yours?"

"He's my best friend," Peter says, a little sharper than he meant. *But you're not his.*

"Well. Well." The young man looks away for a long minute. He seems to be at a loss for words. Peter wonders if this is sort of embarrassing behavior, but there's a grave set to the man's hard jaw that tells him it isn't. It strikes Peter as being distinctly noble, something which Peter has not yet been able to achieve. *And you never will, what's more.* "Well," the young man says, for a third time. "That's -- you ought to be getting back. To the -- to your friends."

"I don't know where they are," Peter says, without thinking. "Er, I mean -- all right." *You don't know where your friends are. Some friend you are. Some friends they are.*

The young man, unexpectedly, claps a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about it," he says, distractedly. Peter stares up at him.

Don't take it to heart, the suspicion murmurs, but as Peter trots back to the hotel to find James it's already fading into silence.

James closes the door behind him. At first Lily thinks he's gotten into trouble; he has a slump to his shoulders and a queer silence about him, which are the usual markers of *I've been caught, hang it all*. She's about to open her mouth and make a joke about it, *Can you get your broom privileges revoked for being awful in bed, then?* but all of a sudden her better judgment and her impeccable instincts advise against it, and all that passes her lips is a somber "James?"

James says nothing, but presses himself against the door as if he is envious of the flat strong mindlessness of being wood.


Lily doesn't say *Are you all right?* because she is not stupid, and she's learned from years of being top in her class never to ask a question to which you already know the answer. She gets up and moves to him, puts her body between James and whatever it is in the air around him that presses him down and backwards. This is something about being a girl that Lily has understood, without really understanding, for some time: her way of protecting him, in the absence of an ability to overpower him with idiotic love the way he does with her. He makes a soft sound, the breath pressed out of him, and turns his face into her throat. She waits.

"It's my mum and dad." His voice, finally, is almost unrecognizable, harsh and wondering against her skin. Lily understands, with cold, horrible force: she pulls him against her as if she could take all that knowledge into herself. She is, as she knows perfectly well, very emotionally mature and extremely competent and rarely at a loss for action or words, but this makes her realize with frozen immediacy the helplessness of being seventeen, and the strange, paradoxical futility of loving people.

"They're dead," he says, "they died." Lily doesn't know anything to say.

She will always remember that he doesn't cry.



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 [dorkorific](#) specializes in **Sirius**;  [ladyjaida](#) specializes in **Remus**.

 [dorkorific](#) is Mlle. Artiste;  [ladyjaida](#) is Mlle. Bits-n-bats.

The handwriting of Remus J. Lupin, Severus Snape and James Potter is done by  [ladyjaida](#).

The handwriting of Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and Lily Evans is done by  [dorkorific](#).

Don't worry; Peter won't be stupidified. **Trust us** on that one.

We would like to take a moment to thank  [windjinn](#) for leaping down the stairs with  [ladyjaida](#)'s bra on his head.

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