

Part Twenty-Three
May, 1977

"What's happening, soul brother?" Sirius says, perching rather unsteadily atop a pile of books on Remus's desk.

Remus gazes up at him without much hope. "I'm trying to read," he explains. "I mean, I was, until you sat on my reading material."

"Right," says Sirius, clearly not interested. "So, are you going to swing by our pre-exam shindig this afternoon? Going to frolic with us in the beautiful May night under a warm and balmy moon?"

"That doesn't make any sense." Remus heaves a sigh and attempts to tug one of his books out from under Sirius' rear. "And no. I think I'm going to the library, actually, because I'll panic if I don't look this over regularly, as you knew perfectly well when you asked me that question."

Sirius regards him mournfully. "Baby, that is not a righteous groove."

"What in the name of all that is holy are you talking about?" asks Remus faintly.

"Moony," says Sirius rather severely, "I am getting the distinct impression that you are not hip to my jive. Are you or are you not hip to my jive?"

"Something is wrong in your brain," Remus says.

"I'm not the one going to the library to celebrate my last few precious hours before I am squeezed between the iron thighs of NEWT-cramming hell," Sirius points out. "You dig, daddy-o?"

"I'm not the one who's going to have to be squeezed between those thighs," Remus returns. "You're just going to have to be squeezed between those thighs without me." He doesn't look up from an enormous dusty tome, but does add, quietly, in between the flip of the musty crackling pages, "Hep cat."

"No," Sirius says. "It's only funny when I do it."

"Perhaps it's not funny when either of us does it," Remus offers.

"Well then." Sirius swings down from the desk and dusts himself off. "At least we will be unfunny together. But only for a brief and shining moment, before I leave you to your insanity for my own more preferable madness." He ruffles Remus's hair. "You're not honestly worried about it, are you? You'll be fine. You'll just recite things at the professors until they're forced to give you top marks because all they want is lunch."

"Right," Remus says. "Well, we can't all be natural geniuses like Sirius Black and James Potter. Some of us must work at it."

"Careful about all that dust," Sirius suggests. "Ta. *Hep cat*. I do not know where you come up with this."

Remus glares at his vanishing shoulders as he saunters off. It is irritating, really, the way he and James can spend the next three days engaged in the most egregious kind of hedonism and then, with only a week left, will still be able to pull outstanding marks on their exams. It is irritating. It has been irritating for seven years. Remus suddenly realizes that it will never be irritating again. That's good, surely.

He sighs and closes the book. In about ten minutes, his peaceful, twilight common room will be full of clumped seventh years from all four houses, chattering and drinking and making insecure small talk and doing other things for which Remus has no time. It's nice, he supposes, that they've cohered enough to have a party like this. Just because he doesn't want to be a part of it doesn't mean he doesn't appreciate it.

It's mostly due to James. Since the funeral, he has been different. It doesn't seem sufficient to say he's been more grown-up, but that's exactly what he has been. He watches out for people (and now more than ever people need to be watched out for: James isn't the only one to lose family members, friends, neighbors.) He's a little bit thinner. The observations are equally stupid, but what's changed in James is too quiet to put into words.

Against his brittleness, the slight cold in him, Sirius has warmed as if to compensate. He is more affectionate than ever, more laughing, louder, his worried eyes more bright, his arm around James' shoulder lingering there a little longer. Remus has tried to be a relief for him, a friend who's easy to be around, who doesn't require the effort.

It's harder than anything. Remus doesn't know how to press himself into an empty place and swell to brighten it. He doesn't have the easy arms Sirius has and so the burden falls on Sirius' easy shoulders. Maybe Sirius doesn't show it all the time, a tenseness that lingers now in the corners of his mouth, but now and then Remus catches sight of it by accident. He only sees it when he's not trying to. That's the kind of expression it is.

How are they supposed to take the final exams of their teenagerhood, Remus wonders, when so much of that teenagerhood has already been sundered? The sudden maturity doesn't make him feel any more competent, only sobered. There is more in life to worry about than NEWTs, and, knowing that, Remus doesn't actually feel comforted. If he studies all this time, it's less time spent on what comes after. Less time spent on wishing he'd been taught when he was younger how to hug someone properly. Less time spent catching the hard new quirk of Sirius' mouth out of the corner of his eye.

Lily worries about James, Remus reasons. No one else worries about Sirius.

Someone has to. It is a full time job.

There is a thick layer of sticky dust on one of his books. Remus wipes at it absently, flicking all his fingers to get the dust off, but the sticky feeling remains. The simple truth of the matter is, he isn't thinking about his studies. That's the problem with studying. Clear out a time, clear out a place, get all the right books, but it doesn't necessarily mean you're going to study; just that you want to.

Remus sighs. The library, he thinks. In the library he won't be able to think about Sirius and James because there is no place less Sirius and James than the library. It will be the solution. It has to be. He gathers the books together and hoists them lovingly in his arms and then he flees.

The library, which should be full of people -- at least a few panicked fifth years, Remus thinks morosely -- is completely empty. Except for the comforting shuffle of pages as air weaves against the volumes, there is no sound. Madam Pince gives him one of her Looks as he comes in, but mounts no real objection. Remus moves aimlessly through the stacks to his favorite carrel, the little rejected one alone in the very back between linguistics and classical history. He likes that it's a little crooked, as if its deformity has led to its being banished from the ranks of orderly carrels up front.

Remus is also aware that it is thoughts like these that make it unlikely that he will ever be able to form a meaningful relationship with anybody.

Setting the books down softly, he flicks on the dim green lamp and starts to settle down into the slightly splintery chair, and then the sound of voices away behind him, somewhere off in the restricted section, arrests his attention. They sound oddly familiar.

It is none of my business, he says to himself firmly. *It is none of my business and what's more I really don't care.*

"This is just like when I was a student," one of the familiar voices says. Remus finds he can't *not* listen. He could stuff tissues or bits of his sleeve in his ears and hold his hands firm over them and still somehow his fingers would wander and the tissues or bits of sleeve wouldn't cut it and the voices would come through. He clenches his jaw. If he just leans a bit back in his seat he can peer around the corner into an oblique slant of light cast against two distorted shadows -- and then he can see them, but they can't see him. "Used to sneak in here all the time."

"Who'd you sneak in here with?" says the other familiar voice.

"Sometimes Gid," says Fabian Prewett. "Sometimes, without him."

"You were attached," Caradoc Dearborn replies. "You were attached at the hip. You were like Siamese Twins, is what. Why were you in here without him?"

A silence. Remus feels something funny in his throat, like that time Sirius made him eat a sock, or tried to, anyway. It doesn't go away when he swallows. He shouldn't be doing this, but now he's afraid to move, afraid to be caught.

"Like I said," Fabian says, voice a little strange and dark. "*This* is just like when I was a student."

"Hell," Caradoc replies. He shifts and his shadow shifts, growing long strange angles. For a moment he disappears behind a shelf and then comes back into view once more. His face is backlit by their lamp. Remus can't see it. "Look," Caradoc continues. "Not that I want to keep going over, you know, old stories and that. But I -- "

"I'm as careful as I can be," Fabian interrupts. "It's not like I don't piss myself silly all the time about you."

"I'm trying to say something," Caradoc says. "Just let me -- I mean -- it's not easy."

"You don't," Fabian attempts.

"Shut up, shut up, Fabian Prewett," Caradoc insists. "I really sort of love you."

"Do you say that to everyone you get up against -- " Fabian reaches with some difficulty behind himself, flicks out a book, and examines it -- "up against A Brief Treatise Upon the History and Practice of the Spyglass Charm?"

"That's not fair," says Caradoc. "In March, I thought -- "

"Stop it," Fabian says sharply. "It's not March anymore. There's nowhere safer than where we are, and I don't know if you've noticed but everyone is just fine. Besides -- " his voice drops a little -- "I think you like the scar."

"I don't," says Caradoc hoarsely.

Fabian murmurs, "Well, you shouldn't be so nice to it then."

"Listen," Caradoc says. "Shut up for a second. I can't go around thinking things like...what I thought in March...when I'm not sure you know. About the thing where I sort of am in love with you."

Fabian is quiet for a moment. The only sound Remus can hear is his own tortured, eavesdropping breath roaring all around him. Then Fabian says quietly, "I don't think it's going to surprise you that, you know, I love you to a degree that is truly stupid."

"Don't," Caradoc whispers. Remus has to strain to hear. No he doesn't, because he's not trying to hear, he just happens to be here at this time when they are also here and it is not his fault. They should be more careful. They should put up charms, wards; they should look around them once in a while. Only now they shouldn't, because if they find him and he's watching by accident it's going to look like he's doing it on purpose. At the very center of his stomach something untouched for a long time is warm and desperate and shattered. How it can be melted and shattered at once, Remus doesn't know. Perhaps it shattered and then melted. Perhaps his mind is babbling. The silence is insane -- how are they doing this? -- isn't it awkward? "Don't be such a pooker," Caradoc says finally. Fabian laughs and the sound is rough. Then there is another silence but it's a silence of a different character, and when Remus strains back again to see, Caradoc is cradling Fabian's face in his hands with strange, intent gentleness, and against the lamp their bodies cast one shadow. The most detail Remus can see is that Fabian's eyes are closed and Caradoc's hair has taken on a strange lamplight-warm glow.

Fabian touches his shoulder, the nape of his neck, the back of his head, his hand moving in fluttering useless graceful caresses. Remus thinks, *I will never be able to touch anyone like that*. Remus thinks, *I want to*. It comes from nowhere, an unbidden hunger, something like under a full moon but completely horribly wonderfully human. It's wanting to howl from the depths of his boyhood, his teenagerhood, his incipient manhood. It has everything to do with the workings of his human body. This howl is another kind of madness.

"I thought," Caradoc says. "I thought I was going to have to kill your brother. That's what I thought. Because how could he, how could he let you -- I just -- it wasn't his fault, of course, but it's -- "

"It's the risk we take," Fabian hisses. "It's the risk we want to take. We can't live with ourselves, without it. Caradoc."

Caradoc kisses him, leaning into him, almost poured into him and Fabian whimpers and Remus can see him shudder forward. The shelf trembles. The books might fall. Remus can hear his heartbeat like historical gunfire. His knuckles are white.

"We're stupid," Caradoc breathes, "this is, we are so, so stupid." His hand and Fabian's are caught up in each other. Something in Remus's heart cries out. He's always thought that was just an expression, just a metaphor, not your actual heart, but something about it must be true, because his chest actually aches.

"Well, that's why it's fun," says Fabian, so softly Remus almost doesn't hear, and he leans up again. Remus cranes to see -- and feels, too late, the sick lurch of the chair tipping just a little too far back.

"Hell," whispers Remus, and then crashes to earth.

"Bugger!" Caradoc shouts, and then Remus is grabbed by the collar and a wand is pressed against his cheek and he realizes, *My God, they're going to kill me, they must think I'm --*

"No no no!" Remus yelps. This is, without a question, the single most embarrassing thing that has ever happened to him. And it is pitted against some truly intense contenders. "Studying -- student -- Remus Lupin -- how do you -- please please, don't kill me, I'm not -- "

"I know you," Fabian says coldly. "God, put that away, Caradoc, you can't kill a boy for -- oh, Hell." If it's possible for a voice to lose all its color, Fabian's voice does. Remus can't see his face -- he's being held at an extremely unhelpful angle by one of Caradoc's steely arms -- but he can imagine Fabian's face has lost all its color, too. "How's it going, Chocolate Face?"

"I am so, so sorry," whispers Remus, "just, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean -- I mean, I wasn't, oh, God."

"It's all right," Fabian says wearily. He puts a hand on Caradoc's shoulder. "Put him down."

"Put him down?" Caradoc echoes, his eyes burning into Remus's. Remus wants to shrivel up and die a thousand times. He thinks about shriveling up and dying because then he doesn't have to think about their faces and his own. "You mean, like a sick dog, or -- "

"Put him," Fabian murmurs, "on the floor, please."

Remus is lowered slowly which, he must admit, takes more strength than to be lowered quickly. There is no way to save face in this situation. Nothing to say. He wants to open his mouth and explain that watching them was the one time he has ever felt completely like a person, like his body is his true home and he is not a poorly stuffed envelope. He opens his mouth. He makes a pathetic squawking bird-like sound and shuffles quickly clear of Caradoc's wrath. "I didn't -- mean to be -- I was studying and then -- well, if I left you might -- you'd

see and I -- I didn't want to -- but oh, this is much more embarrassing. I am sorry. So, so sorry. Please," he finishes lamely, and looks away. "I didn't mean it. I was just trying to learn potions. I am terrible at potions. You can ask anyone."

"Yes," Fabian says. "NEWTs are soon, aren't they." His cheeks are suddenly bright, very bright. Caradoc still looks murderous. "Put the wand away, Caradoc. It's -- he's just an idiot, I think. I'm not sure."

"I am," Remus agrees frantically. "I am a complete idiot. You can ask anyone about that too. This is so awful. I am awful. I just -- I mean really I just now put down my books. And I heard voices so I -- I leaned back to see who it was. That's all. I didn't mean to -- to get in the way."

"For heaven's sake," Fabian says wearily. "All right. I don't care."

"You can Obliviate me," offers Remus. "I mean. If you want."

Caradoc regards him scornfully. He does sinewy scorn particularly well, like an allegorical statue. "A little blemish like you isn't worth the effort."

"Besides," Fabian adds, watching him with hard eyes, "it's not as if you saw anything I don't want people knowing."

"I wouldn't," Remus says, "if you didn't want me to, I would never -- "

"Save it," Fabian says. "You saw it, you didn't see it, you're telling all your friends, you'll take it to your grave -- I don't care. I am in love with this man for very good reasons and we were having a bit of a feel in the restricted section. Next time we'll, I don't know, check around first, but only because it was lovely and then you quite literally *fell in on it*. All right? Have a nice night. Good luck with potions. Carry on." He breezes out.

"He is," Caradoc says, "the man is -- he is bloody *amazing*." He runs out after him.

Remus is inclined to agree with this assessment.

He slides bonelessly down the bookshelf and sits there for a second, feeling lost. The way Fabian said it was lovely, like, it was lovely but it is always lovely, and Remus thinks, Why don't I know that?

He says out loud, "Remus Lupin, you need to grow a pair."

It is the sort of thing Sirius would say (and if Sirius were here he would probably say something like "Of breasts to go with your lovely womanly flower,") but just because it's the sort of thing Sirius would say doesn't necessarily mean it's wrong. Sirius can actually be unexpectedly right sometimes.

Remus climbs to his feet. His heart thumps wildly against his chest. *There is a little thing called initiative*, he thinks, *and I am taking it. I am taking it right now. I am picking it up and walking out of the shop, because I have just grown a pair and I am not talking about boobs either.*

For a moment, he thinks longingly of the books.

They are dusty and some of the pages of the older books are brittle -- delicate -- something like old thin bone. They suggest at the touch they might crumble. Sometimes he studies just for the sake of being with the books: as if pressing his fingers to the page, some persuasive evasive power of edited words might osmose through the whorls of his fingerprints. But these particular books have no bollocks and perhaps that is why Remus spends so much time with them, too. Misery and the bollocks-less like company. Remus draws in a deep agonized breath. There is a deep agonized hum in his belly to meet it. He is too much in between, like a slim volume no one ever notices, unmarked on the binding and letting himself be embraced by all that bloody dust.

"Right," he says.

He turns to leave.

"No, wait," he adds. He runs back and closes all his books and returns to their alphabetical places the ones for which someone else might come looking.

"*Now* right," he says.

The hallway outside the double doors to the library is empty. There's no sign of Fabian, Caradoc or the initiative which has suddenly possessed him. "Hell," says Remus, and then, struck, "Yes!"

He hurries back toward Gryffindor tower. Desperately he hopes that somehow he can avoid seeing any of his friends -- or, more importantly, avoid being seen by them. It will kill the Initiative, which right now flutters nervously somewhere around his liver.

Getting past them, however, is shockingly un-difficult once he gets into the common room. It is horrifically crowded, sweaty and dark, and by keeping to the walls and taking the stairs two at a time he manages to avoid making eye contact with anyone he knows. Upstairs, he knocks at the door -- lately it is safest to do so -- but there is, mercifully, no answer and he slips inside.

Remus kneels by James' bed, fortunately completely unmade as usual. He pokes gingerly at the sheets, checking for mysterious stains, oh God, but none is visible.

He knows that this does not mean none exist.

Carefully, wincing, Remus peels back the undersheet and gropes around until his fingers find rustling parchment.

The Map.

He fumbles for his wand and nearly drops it but manages to keep his fingers obedient. With the tip of his wand he taps the map and hisses, "I do solemnly swear I am up to no good."

The Map.

James had said early on he wanted it to unfurl and it does, blooming outward like a confused and Escher-esque flower, all angles and corners and complicated stairways of parchment. It isn't quite finished yet -- there are a few considerable problems with how it functions and, if it's feeling snippy, it makes the most horrendously loud farting sounds, no doubt something Sirius did when no one was looking -- but it works all right. That is, if you can parse its confusion with names. The Map has the four of them down all right; it's just everyone else it has a problem spelling.

"Fabian," he hisses at it, scanning the inky hallways and the blotchy doors. "Fabian, Fabian, Fabian."

Fabaloc Dearfellow? the Map says suddenly. Little inksplatter footprints appear and disappear and then appear again, walking away from Dumbledore's office and down a narrow hallway. *Fabblian Prewiweather? Fabiola Doomilett?*

"What the," Remus says, "for God's," but shoves the map up one sleeve, followed by the wand, and leaps to his feet while his adrenaline is still allowing him to act like a total idiot.

Down the stairs again, through the dim-lit common room with his head down like an incompetent spy, and back out the portrait hole, surreptitiously scanning the Map for any signs of the people who might try to intercept him. James and Lily, unsurprisingly, are both missing from the immediate area: Peter is on a sofa apparently alone in the opposite corner of the room and Sirius is at the makeshift card table with two people called "Frankly Klingebolt" and "Shackalack Largebottom."

Back in the hallway he breaks into a run again. Fabaloo Prioress's footsteps head briskly toward the Potions dungeon but Remus, thanks to Sirius and to the rather confused but ultimately well-meaning piece of paper in his hands, knows a shortcut. He ducks down a side corridor, slips into a classroom and through the sliding panel in the janitor's closet, down a rank and dripping tunnel that smells unpleasantly of organs, and pops out directly in front of Slughorn's classroom just as Fabian steps into a pool of candlelight in front of him.

"Good lord," says Fabian. "We haven't seen enough of each other?"

"I need to talk to you," Remus says, breathless and heaving. "I've decided to grow a pair. Not breasts. Not *of* breasts. I need to talk to you," he repeats. Already he understands that this is not going as well as it ought or might or really should. He presses a hand to his chest -- he isn't used to doing this sort of thing on his own, and while it is a wonderful euphoric sort of insanity a small voice in the back of his head shouts *FILCH WILL FIND YOU. DANGER, DANGER, REMUS ROBINSON!* He doesn't have time to wonder why that little voice has confused his real name. He leans against a statue and looks up at Fableboot Wettlebrow and says, "please, I really need -- to talk."

"Well, then perhaps you should breathe first. Do you lie in wait for everyone this way, or is it just your curious way of expressing preference and affection?" Fabyron Prewtanks folds his arms over his chest. In this light, Remus can see he's lost weight. Understandable, when recovering from a giant hole in one's belly.

Remus pauses to catch his breath. "I'm not normally like this," he tries to explain. "I'm usually the, you know,

the one everyone likes because I don't -- pop out -- of places. Ambush. Waylay. That's not -- I have terrible, terrible friends."

"Are you in the market for new ones?" asks Fabian. "Is that what this is about? I warn you, my fee is high."

"No," says Remus, running a hand frantically through his hair, "no, sorry. I'm actually -- usually actually sort of the articulate one, as well, so this is very strange for me."

"We have something in common," Fabian agrees gravely.

"It's just," he makes a helpless gesture, uncertain of what it is supposed to communicate, "I wanted -- I needed to ask you -- how did you know? I mean. About the -- when you found out that," he swallows, "you were, you know, in love, I mean, how did you know? How did he know? How did that happen?"

"Let me clarify the question," Fabian says dryly, but he registers a momentarily curious expression. "Are you asking me 'How did I know I was in love' or 'How did I know I was an enormous kind of poofter'? The two are not exactly mutually exclusive, but of course I wouldn't want to answer the wrong question and prolong this agony."

"No, no, no -- I mean -- both. I think. I think that's what I mean." Remus has been like an over-stuffed pocket, he realizes, for almost a year now. He has just wanted to tell someone and he has told no one at all. "I think I may be an enormous kind of poofter," he says suddenly and without any warning. It all comes out of him. Like vomit. Like one of those exploding goodies at Yule where you pull on the ends and -- well, it doesn't matter. "I mean -- what I mean is -- last summer a good and very male friend of mine kissed me on the lips in a way that could hardly be misconstrued as, as friendly, and then right after he went and found himself a very beautiful French girl and I, we, he, well -- never spoke of it again." *And then we got into an enormous fight and I could have turned him into a werewolf and we were naked together but still it wasn't solved.* "So I just -- I'm not quite sure -- what to do."

"Well," Fabian says, after a long silence. "I think, I think this friend of yours -- I think *he* may be an enormous kind of poofter. Have you considered that?"

"Well, no, actually," says Remus in some surprise. "Not really. I mean, I've thought about -- but he's just -- who he is."

"Sometimes," says Fabian, "who someone is is an enormous poofter. Look, it's not something you -- hell. It's not like having a pimple, you know, where you look in the mirror and you go, 'Ah, right, there that is.'" He gives Remus a narrow look. "I expect I don't have to tell you that somewhere in your teens you start having Urges."

"Yes, no, I know," says Remus, waving his hands. "Urges! I know. That's not what I meant. I mean, yes, it is a...but I already knew about that. I meant more, I mean, so you didn't *know* know, it wasn't a...flash of...revelation or anything? It was just -- you just sort of found out by accident?"

"I don't want to be one of those people who tells you 'I just knew' because those people are idiots," Fabian says. "But I'm afraid it's all a balance of what you find yourself questioning and what you find yourself unable to

question."

"That made no discernable sense," Remus says.

"Life and being kissed by enormous poofters rarely does," Fabian replies. "I can't make this easy for you or say something eloquent and on the mark and illuminating. I'm just, you know. Here, apparently, and -- I'm sorry." He smiles wryly. "Or maybe part of me's just bitter I'd no one to talk to and I'm torturing you by being completely unhelpful. You can believe that, if you'd like, but as I don't know you and I don't know your enormous poofter, there's nothing much I can do."

Remus feels more desperate than ever. "I didn't have time to know if it felt right or if it felt wrong," he pleads. "He just -- all of a sudden -- he just stopped. I hated him so, *so* much, only I didn't, only I -- a French girl! A *French* girl! Do you have any idea -- ?"

"I have some idea," Fabian assures him. "This may sound a novel concept, but have you tried, you know, speaking with him about it?"

"Speaking with -- what?" Remus draws back, horrified. "Oh God. Oh no. I couldn't. I mean, he's already -- there's this joke, d'you see, about how I keep a diary and I've girl bits and -- breasts and -- things, but -- if I tried to talk to him about *feelings* he'd, he'd stick apples down my shirt and call me Mary-Ann."

Fabian blinks. "And you'd let him?" he asks.

"Probably," Remus admits.

"You're probably incredibly bent then," Fabian says decisively. "At the very least you are incredibly bent for this extremely male person of yours. Does that help?"

Remus lets out a huff of air and blinks several times. "Yes, I -- actually, yes."

"Well, that's good," says Fabian, patting him on the shoulder. "I never really thought of myself as a mentor to troubled youth. To tell you the truth, I much prefer corruption and leading down dark paths."

"I will never ask it of you again," Remus promises. "Although, you know, this is sort of a dark path, in a way."

Fabian lifts his eyebrows thoughtfully. "You may have a point."

"Also I think you should know," Remus adds, "that your, uhm -- well, Mr. -- er -- Caradoc Dearborn, that is, he -- well you'd stormed out already, so sorry about that again, but he did add to your most illuminating -- he thinks you're amazing," Remus manages to spit out. He has decided it ought to be known, since it does seem rather true. "Right," he concludes. "Thank you. Very much."

"You're probably insane, you know," Fabian tells him. Then, he adds, "Good luck, my loony fellow! Drop me an owl or something. Not that I'm invested, I'm just sort of boggled."

"This will probably end in tragedy," Remus admits.

"Or apples," Fabian says. "Down the shirt and all. Mary-Ann. Really? Hm. Well, you're no Ginger, that's for certain."

"This has been very," Remus says, "well, thank you for it. Cleared up a -- a few things."

"My advice," Fabian leans close to whisper, "my real advice, is don't let it fester. If you never know, it's worse. Perhaps only marginally, but the lesser of two evils is making a fool out of yourself and the comfort is knowing you'd the bollocks to do it."

"I want to hug you," Remus says. "But I think that would be awkward, so I'd best be on my way."

"Good lad," says Fabian, ruffling Remus's hair absently. "Good instincts. Well, cheerio," and, shaking his head, he is gone.

Remus straightens his shirtfront. He loosens his tie. He tries to swallow, but his throat is extremely dry and this supposedly simple maneuver becomes rather difficult.

He checks the map again. There's the name, on its floating banner, headed as if guided by an angel of convenience out on its own down the long staircase. Remus knows that there's a patch of tramped down earth out behind the broom shed where you can drop a cigarette without lighting the grounds on fire.

"Oh hell, oh hell, I am a woman," Remus says, and hurries toward it.

It is somewhat like running through a dream. If he stops the illusion will be shattered and the whole great unhindered heedless strength of his conviction will fall out from underneath him like that one time in the shack when the floor broke beneath one mighty Prongsian hoof and sent them all crashing into pain and rubble and the bottom floor. Remus is breathless again, and sweating a bit, but speed is the important thing. Reaching Sirius Black, *Padfoot* and his dissolving pacing steps, before the internal clock of Remus's bollocks runs out of time and he turns back into a pumpkin.

He bursts out into the cool night air and nearly trips over his shoelaces. Across a short stretch of grass, behind a few trees, zig-zagging as if through an obstacle course -- which he was never very good at; which is why he hasn't pursued any fantastic career atop a broom -- and then: the broom shed, hit by a shaft of moonlight.

An owl hoots.

Remus draws up to the broomshed like a conquering army and rounds one of its corners to *behind the broomshed*, which is where Sirius is, live and flesh and whole and a matter of what Remus has only ever questioned because he was too frightened until now to discover he never had to question it at all.

"Moony," Sirius says, surprised.

"Shut up, Sirius," Remus says, and grabs him by the collar, and kisses him violently on the mouth.

It feels like a very long time. The only movement Remus feels is the sudden thrill of tension in Sirius' long

wiry body and the lingering ragged swell of his own lungs.

Then against his mouth Sirius hisses, "Fuck! Ow," and his arm jumps. Remus jumps back with it. The dropped cigarette rolls against his feet. Sirius flexes the burnt fingers painfully but his eyes are on Remus.

He opens his mouth to say something. Remus says, "Don't, just, listen, all right?" He winds both hands desperately into his own hair. *Maybe, he thinks, maybe if I just yank my entire scalp off, we can all be distracted by the pain and the oozing and I won't have to say anything else,* but he does, he has to, because this is the lesser of two evils. He says, "All right, okay? That is it. I have just done all I can, Sirius Black, are we clear?"

"But I," Sirius says.

"That's all I have to say on the matter," Remus interrupts him, even though it isn't. "I just -- there is nothing more I can -- well, *I'm* not going to go off after and find myself a French girl. All right? That's, that's, that's all there is." He waves one hand frantically back and forth between them. "That. But now it's all up to you. You! I can't, I can't do anymore. That was a kiss. There. That's -- all there is to it. From me."

"That *was* a kiss," Sirius agrees. His lips work wordlessly. "You, uh. That was."

"A kiss," Remus supplies.

"No, I," Sirius says.

"I don't care. I'm not a girl. I may have a diary. I may keep all the notes we passed. I may *want* to talk about how I feel when you kiss me on the platform and then head off and find yourself the most beautiful incoherent female you can find. Sometimes I want to knock your head against walls and sometimes, sometimes, fine, I want to kiss you. And now I have. You're lucky I didn't--didn't pick the first one."

"The head knocking?"

"Yes," Remus says. "That."

"You have strong arms," Sirius whispers. "That would hurt." He touches his mouth. He looks at Remus with eyes Remus hasn't ever seen before, eyes pale and stunned and long-lashed and looking, suddenly, so much younger than Remus can ever remember him looking. "You," Sirius says, "that."

"Yes," Remus says again. "That. What's that, you know, quaffle's in your court, do what you will with it, I'm going to -- *God* that feels -- I've got to -- oh, bloody -- You see? We're taking too long with this part, I'm starting to." His knees buckle dangerously.

He looks up at Sirius, summons all the dignity he can possibly muster, says, "I have to go throw up now, excuse me," and leaves.

He doesn't quite make it to the Prefects' bath. In fact, he only makes it to the Charms corridor washroom on the second floor before his intestines twist very unpleasantly to the left and the back of his throat fills with sick-

tasting air and then, yes, he actually does retch twice into the toilet, leaving him breathing hard and sweating unreasonably. It feels nice to rest his forehead against the cool clean porcelain and so this is what he does.

A toilet flushes. A seventh-year Hufflepuff whose name Remus really ought to know stumbles out of the stall next to his, regards him blearily, and says, "You too, man, huh?" and then sways away without waiting for an answer.

"Worse," Remus mumbles, "so very much worse," and rests his cheek on the toilet again.

After a minute he hears the door swing open. Quick footsteps echo against the tiles -- a pause -- and then the old stall door rattles open too. Cloth rustles close to Remus as someone kneels by him, rough breath, the smell of earth and smoke and dirt and dog: long, cool fingers on his forehead smoothing back his hair.

"This is disgusting," whispers Sirius, voice hovering on the edge of hysterical laughter. "Seriously, I cannot believe that I am so rotten a kisser that my touch makes you vomit."

"This is not the time or the place," Remus says, "for me to tell you exactly what it means that I have just thrown up -- Sirius, I *hate* throwing up, I *never* throw up -- "

"And you never *shut* up, either," Sirius says. "Except for that time, when you kissed me just now, do you remember that? That was nice," he adds, and then his voice cracks as he says, "I'm going to kiss you, vomit-mouth."

He does.

"I have vomit in my mouth," Remus tries to say into the kiss, the hot sort of wet and slippery junction of their mouths. "I am, I am a vomit mouth, this isn't representative, or fair, or right." It comes out as a series of staccato *mmpfs* and Sirius accidentally bites his tongue and they slip and Sirius bangs his elbow on the toilet seat.

"Jesus bloody fuck, Moony," Sirius says. "I thought you were. I thought you were rocks."

"Sometimes," Remus gasps, "sometimes rocks have urges, too."

"With whom have you been kissing?" Sirius demands. "I want to know. You're really -- very -- more than decent, but I would have thought you'd be all wiggling lips and -- maybe it's just because you're -- well, you -- "

"You just said 'with whom,'" Remus babbles inanely. "That's really, that's very -- especially because actually 'to kiss' is a transitive verb so you don't even need the preposition, you might have just said, whom, either way, I haven't, so it's -- "

"Remus," Sirius says, breathlessly. "Remus, you taste like puke, but the thing is, I want to kiss you anyway. I have to actively, you know, stop myself, because it is nice but you do taste like stomach acid and I can't, I can't, you know, really, no matter how nice it is, that is completely vile, you know." His hands are in Remus's hair and then on his shoulders and grazing his throat, as if reassuring themselves of the fact of Remus's tangibility. Then his fingers curl around Remus's wrist, just under the starched cloth of his shirt. "Why did you -- for fuck's

sake, Moony, I haven't even, in a year, I've tried to be, you know -- Will you fucking brush your fucking teeth, please, this is unbearable." He takes a deep breath. "I just, I really want to kiss you again, properly, when everyone involved is paying attention and I can't taste the mutton pie you ate two hours ago, so, please, I -- I have to go get a drink of water, I have to go upstairs and let you, you know, seriously, Moony, brush your fucking, *fucking* teeth!" and he kisses Remus once, fiercely, at the corner of his mouth, fingertips hard against his cheekbone. Then he lets go of Remus with an odd, forceful motion, like ripping off a bandage, and pelts away.

"But where are we," Remus begins. Sirius is already gone. And anyway, Remus realizes, the question is unnecessary. Already he knows Sirius, really knows him, and sometimes he can just find him by sniffing him out, and sometimes he doesn't even need to sniff. Remus struggles to sit up.

A Ravenclaw -- Seventh Year, Remus thinks, very tall -- stumbles in. "You too?" he asks, which makes Remus want to heave again.

"I am," Remus says, "no, not really, but good luck with the regurgitation." He leaps to his feet. His mouth tastes very horrendous. The fact that Sirius was willing and even wished to kiss it makes something explode -- fireworks, a chorus line, spells gone haywire, every single one of his own potions -- inside his chest. Sirius wanted to kiss him *even though his mouth tastes like seven day old dead person feet*. That has to mean something. "Right, well," he says, and runs out of the room.

Sirius says, "Shit shit shit shit shit."

He has actually managed to tie his hair into a knot. His left hand is stuck in it. His tie is askew, he is walking in frantic, convulsive circles, and, in general, he looks like an insane person. But then, he reasons, he always looks like an insane person and Remus for some reason apparently has decided to kiss him anyway.

And yet, he realizes, with a panicked heave of his innards. And yet! It's all been so sudden and dark and strange that it is really subject to change at any time. He has to do something, anything, to ensure that the idea of kissing him will not stop being appealing.

Then he has a brilliant idea.

Remus has brushed his teeth so hard that his gums are bleeding. That won't do. He has mouthwash and he uses that but his throat still tastes like vomit. He wonders if swallowing mouthwash is detrimental to his health and then he decides that not kissing Sirius is more detrimental to his health -- considering it will probably make him throw up again -- and he screws his eyes up tight and knocks back a mouthful.

There is a burning in his esophagus as of a thousand fiery suns. Remus yelps wetly and clutches his throat, coughing blue into the sink.

"Oh Jesus," he chokes. "I am never, I am *never*, doing that again. Oh, *disgusting maggoty hell!*" It does make his throat taste better, though.

He pulls back his upper lip and checks his gums, which still sting a little but have, fortunately, stopped bleeding. He breathes a hot warm breath onto his palm. He sniffs. It's going to have to do. Then he takes a look at himself in the mirror.

His face is the color of a well boiled beet.

"For Merlin's sake and a bucket of billywigs," he snaps, turns on the sink faucet, and sticks his head under it.

"I've got a lovely bunch of coconuts," hums Sirius tunelessly, through the bar of chocolate in his mouth. "Here they are a-standing in a row, bum, bum, bum." He digs maniacally through his trunk, pausing momentarily to sniff a shirt and then drop it on the floor, cursing himself for his inability to do laundry and his inability to maintain a wardrobe that doesn't smell like puppy dander. He curses aloud, swallows about half the chocolate, takes a shaky drag of his cigarette. "Singing, roll a bowl a ball a penny a pitch," he adds, and hurries to James' wardrobe in search of cleaner pastures.

Now Remus's head is wet, but it's cooled down significantly. "Lesser of two evils," he mutters to himself. "Lesser of two -- heavens, I smell." He wonders if he should shower. It's a possibility. Now that his mouth no longer smells like exploded wildebeest -- which apparently bears striking resemblance to rejected mutton pie -- he ought to smell less like exploded wildebeest, himself.

But that, of course, will take too much time.

Remus turns to the door. He pauses. He makes a grab for the soap. He pauses. Door or soap? His mind aches.

"I need someone to tell me what to do," he whispers. "Hell!"

"Big ones, small ones, some as big as your head," Sirius mumbles, taking another unrealistically enormous bite of chocolate and spraying little bits all over. He examines himself in the mirror of the wardrobe door. He arranges his hair artistically in his eyes and turns to one side and then the other.

He says, aloud, "Fuck this, I am not on a date," and scrubs his hands enthusiastically against his scalp.

He checks the mirror again. "There," he says, more pleased with this rakish dishevelment, and as he is giving

himself the Sexy Look in the mirror the door opens and James and Lily tumble through.

"Christ!" says Sirius, spraying more chocolate.

In fleeing from the toilet to the common room with his toothbrush in one hand and soap in the other, Remus has made a grievous miscalculation. His trajectory has left no room for a terrible factor of normal sensible human life: other people. It would be all right, except he has come up against it and it has been most unforgiving.

"Ow," Remus says from the floor. He stares up blearily. "Oh. It's Shackalack -- Franksley -- er. Kingsley. Hullo. So sorry. Your chest is really, it is like a wall."

"Remus Lupin," Kingsley Shackbolt says. "You look distressed."

"Sorry, no time, kill me later," Remus says, leaping to his feet and speeding off.

"Christ!" echoes James, and then, "I thought you were smoking in the back! Go away."

"Oh God," says Lily, going pink.

"Great googly, I just saw your bra, Evans," says Sirius, a little hysterically. "And, you know, usually that would be really a wonderful moment for me, but just now, it's actually, really, sort of, can't you two go somewhere else? It's very," he adds, feeling that more is needed, "nice color, blue, really suits you -- "

"No," growls James. "Are you eating alone in the dark? Is that normal?"

"Fine!" Sirius yelps, throwing his hands in the air and snatching his chocolate from the dresser. "Fine! I don't care!"

He gives his hair a last helpless swipe and thumps out of the room and down the back staircase.

Remus runs up the front staircase into the dorm. All the lights are out.

Someone is making indecent sounds from James' bed and Remus can guess who and Remus doesn't give a flying croquet-playing piglet.

"Jumper, jumper, jump-buggering-er. Cardigan? Jumper!" Remus fumbles amongst his things for a new shirt, tossing aside what he doesn't need. Jumper. Jumper. Cardigan. Jumper. The entirety of his life up until now can

be summed up by the contents of his trunk which is truly depressing, isn't it, since it all smells of mothballs and is itchy in the warmer weather.

"A bloody white shirt," he mourns, to no one in particular. "My kingdom for a *bloody* white shirt."

"What's that?" comes a voice, and then Peter sticks his head out from the drawn canopy over his bed. "Remus. You all right? Your hair is, it's sort of -- " He makes a vague and somewhat curly gesture with one hand. " -- all over."

"Er," Remus says. He thinks, *This is actually not who I need to be telling me what to do.* "I -- I slipped. In the -- bath."

"Ah," Peter says sagely. "Know how that is."

"Do you, actually, do you have," Remus asks, "just a, you know, a shirt?"

"Christ!" James shouts from his bed. "Is *everyone* in this bloody room now? Is that what's happening?"

"Not anymore!" says Remus with great relief, snatching Peter's offered clothing, and flees.

Sirius charges into the common room feeling more insane than ever.

Someone is at the table, silhouetted by the reading lamp, surrounded by empty bottles and crumpled paper but apparently absorbed in a book.

"Moony?" Sirius hisses, displeased at this show of tranquility, but his stomach does a pleasant little flip at the name.

The someone unfolds itself. It is not Remus. It is Kingsley Shacklebolt. Or else, Sirius reconsiders, it might be an enormous oak tree with moving arms and legs and a big shiny head full of brains.

"No," says Kingsley. "I'm not. I don't suppose you went upstairs to get those five Sickles you owe me."

"Kingsley, mate, old buddy, old pal," Sirius stammers, "look, this is really not the, you know, I only lost because James distracted me, I'll get you your money."

"That's good, because I will hunt you down if you don't," Kingsley informs him. "I will make it my life's work to find out where you are and I will get my money from you."

"Why don't you trust me, my brother?" asks Sirius, hurt. "Why do you just assume I'm not going to give it to you?"

"Because, my brother, you forget things," says Kingsley, and Sirius has to admit he has a point.

"Look," he says desperately, "have you, I mean, have you seen Remus?"

"I ran into him," Kingsley says. "He went upstairs."

"He can't go upstairs!" hisses Sirius, yanking at his hair. "I'm -- oh, bugger, this is -- Shackbolt, friend, if you see him, if you see him tell him I went, er, tell him, tell him I'm right outside. Okay? Okay." For about the sixth time that night, he flees.

The Portrait hole is closing as Remus hurries down the steps and slams into something again.

"Ow," says the something. "Again. Good Lord, Lupin."

Remus is going to die. He is cast in the enormous unwavering monolithic shadow of death. He can feel it breathing on him. Its name is Kingsley Shackbolt and suddenly Remus thinks of the map, *Kibibble Shackingup*, and he starts laughing hysterically in between his pleas for his life. It doesn't sound very sincere. "Please, please, please," he gasps. He screws his eyes up tight. If he is going to die then he isn't going to be brave about it. "Please don't kill me, Kingsley. I'll -- I'll pay you. I'll kidnap babies, I'll polish your broomstick, I'll buy you a new broomstick, I will *carve* you a new broomstick, I will -- anything, sell you my soul, sell you the souls of -- just I really, I really have -- somewhere I need to be." He cringes and braces himself.

"You and Sirius are acting very odd," Kingsley says slowly. "I am not going to kill you. Not right now, anyway. Mistake. You were in a hurry. Clearly something is happening and who am I to interfere, eh?" His voice is like a rumbly mountain of rumbling, Remus thinks.

"You don't," Remus says. "Er, yes! Thank you."

"Sirius said to tell you, if I saw you, that he's outside. If you're killing Snape tonight, tell him Kingsley said hello."

"I don't know why you'd say hello," Remus babbles. "I'd say, I'd say goodbye."

"Please go," Kingsley suggests.

"Oh, yes," Remus agrees. "Going. Fantastic! Right."

He plunges out of the portrait hole at the exact same time that Sirius, who has been pacing wildly and muttering to himself, starts to charge back in.

They stop.

They stare at each other for a moment.

Remus says, "You have, you know, chocolate on your -- "

Sirius says, "I'm going to kiss you now."

Remus says, a little too high, "Fair enough."

And Sirius kisses him.

It's impossible to describe why this is so good, why this is so addictive, the slide of their mouths and the hardness and softness and the feel of Sirius's breath. For Remus, who always maintains a chronicler's several-foot distance from his own life, this sudden incoherency is extremely disconcerting.

Then he thinks, very serenely, *Shut up right now.*

His arms fall over Sirius's shoulders. Sirius runs his palm wildly over the back of Remus's hand and arm to grip his wrist. They stumble back against the wall and the fat lady says "Oh my!" which reminds them, suddenly, that there are other people in the universe. Remus tries very hard to make that important, and fails. Sirius has him at the hips; Sirius has him by the mouth. Sirius touches him very gently at the belly because his shirt, which is Peter's shirt, is mostly unbuttoned and a little too small. It stretches hard at the elbows.

"Is this," Sirius says, "is this Pete's shirt?"

"Did you," Remus says, "you have chocolate in your, did you eat chocolate?"

"Took yours," Sirius replies. "Figured it wouldn't matter, though, since."

"Right," Remus agrees. "Yes, this is Peter's shirt."

They kiss again. The fat lady has vanished into some other portrait. Remus is grateful, but even if she hadn't, he wouldn't mind. He's lost his mind. Something has misfired or exploded or simply shut down. Something has been connected that wasn't connected before, the rough and raw and raging part of him and the cartographer's concise conceptualization, the two halves of himself he has kept separate all this time like the dark side of the moon from the white, a normal kind of gravity, he'd always thought. He'd always thought wrong. He grabs Sirius at the hair and kisses him and kisses him and has no idea what he's doing and kisses him anyway.


Suddenly Sirius pulls back. He stares at Remus with strange, serious eyes, the dark, dilated pupil rimmed in pale light. His thumb runs over Remus's knuckles, which are all scabby, and Remus shivers.

"I'm," says Sirius raggedly, "this is, is this okay?"



"Well," Remus says, as honestly as possible, "no, it's pretty brilliant, don't you think?"

Sirius grins like the sunrise and whispers, "yeah." When he uncurls his fingers against the juncture of Remus's neck and jaw and kisses Remus again, laughing into his mouth, curving against his body, Remus is finally, finally ready to stop thinking about it.




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Cowritten by  [dorkorific](#) and  [ladyjaida](#).



 [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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