

**Part Twenty Two**  
*April, 1977*



James can't find his trousers.

It is, it seems to him, pretty absurd to be looking for your trousers in the middle of a funeral, but Great-Aunt Aramina is drunk (when *isn't* she drunk?) and, in a wine-soaked tender moment, has poured half a tray of canapés on the ones he was wearing. He knows he brought another pair, because he tried them on before the service, and they were too short. His mother, he thinks in a flash of irritation, has probably picked them up, the way she is *always doing*, and put them somewhere no human would think of looking, like the closet.

He almost yells, "Mu-um!" and then he doesn't. He says, "oh," to his socks, and sits down on the bed. It is lower than he remembers for some reason, or else he feels bigger.

That's it exactly, the subtle wrongness, the strange sensation of not quite fitting his own space in the world anymore. What he feels is not grief (he thinks, distantly, analytically) but confusion, as if walking down a familiar staircase to find that it has suddenly lost its bottom step. He's grown suddenly, and what used to fit into the air around him isn't there at all anymore. Now it's up to him, just him, to fill that emptiness. It would be much worse if it felt real, but he still harbors a human disbelief that traps him in moments such as these: where he opens his mouth to say something familiar, and finds that the natural words are no longer relevant.

James Potter doesn't want to rebuild what is natural around what is relevant. He doesn't want to fill in the strange cold space of air that presses around him. He wants his mum to get him trousers that fit and don't have canapés smudged down the left leg.

James stands up and pulls the covers off the bed. Maybe he threw them under--but he didn't. He rips off the sheets, and then the undersheets, and then he hurls the mattress off the bedframe. It knocks over a lamp, which splinters. James wonders at the fact that he has been sleeping on a flowered mattress, all this time, and no one has told him. No wonder he has such trouble with girls. It seems like the sort of thing a bloke ought to be told.

Someone knocks on his door, and a tentative voice says, "James?"

"Um, yes," says James, and Lily opens the door. Her hair is pulled sharply back and she looks whiter than usual. She looks at the mattress and then at James, and then says "You realize you're not wearing any trousers, don't you?"

"I was looking for them," James says.

"Some people," says Lily, tapping the side of her nose, "would call that inappropriate." She walks past him, tangles her fingers briefly in his hair, and then leans down to drag the mattress up off the floor.

"Aunt Aramina spilled," James attempts, "she spilled on them. I thought walking about with, you know, all over my knee would be more inappropriate. But I can't find my other pants, and I know I brought them with me, because I tried them on earlier and they were too short and I was glad I'd two pairs, else I couldn't sit down without showing too much ankle and that, that," he fumbles for the words, "that is also inappropriate, that."

"Sit down," Lily says. She takes him by the shoulders and presses him into a chair and he allows her to do it. Perhaps, he thinks, all he wants is someone to tell him what to do. He can't stand to have to think it up on his own. Soon there won't be any professors to do it either, and it will all be on his own after that. The loneliness of it gapes wide before him. He stares after Lily, who is setting about making his bed again, and longs for her to tell him what to do next. "Just sit still," she continues, speaking over her shoulder. "We'll find them, and if not, there are spells for it. I'll help."

There is something funny about her voice, James realizes, but he doesn't know what. At least she hasn't asked him how he's doing, or what he's feeling. At least she hasn't told him she is sorry. Nor has a single one of his friends, when he thinks about it; they walk around him, looking the other way, hesitantly almost-touching him, but acknowledging that space all around him and keeping clear of it, presumably until he figures out how to occupy it.

"I'm sorry," James says. There is something funny about his voice, too. "This isn't about the trousers. I should help you with that. I've made something of a mess, haven't I?"

"Well, yes," says Lily. "That lamp probably cost a good fifteen Galleons. Not to mention your mattress was on the floor. Did you pick it out because of the flowers?"

"I love you," James says.

Lily straightens, holding something in one hand. "Trousers. They were tangled in your comforter."

"I am a prat," says James. "Sorry." He takes them and sits down again. He has never really considered the

matter, but it occurs to him that trousers are actually made up of thousands of tiny threads, and he can actually *see* them, crosshatched and obvious.

"Put them on," Lily says gently, kneeling beside him, one hand soft at the back of his neck.

Almost overwhelmed with gratitude, James does. He gives Lily a smile that is meant to be charming and capable and serious and reassuring all at once, but his mouth doesn't appear to be precisely under his control, and it emerges a kind of distressing wiggle.

"There." Lily touches his knee. "They're a little short, but I don't think anyone's going to notice, not if you're standing."

"Thank you," James says. He wants to add that she has an uncanny ability to do the right thing, just what he needs, and that he is pretty certain he can never let himself be without her, but he can't put the right words to it. He doesn't want it to sound sappy or anything. His lips press together. "Thank you," he says again.

"Do you think you can go down now?" Lily asks.

"I don't know," James says, all at once. "I was so grateful to Aunt Aramina I almost kissed her."

"Don't make me jealous," Lily says, and winces. "It's just, people are going to worry about you. Down there."

"I think," James says, "that they're probably, aren't they, worried about me anyway. What with the, you know, whole thing," and laughs, horribly.

"James," Lily says. "Come downstairs. This isn't for you. I wish it were, but it isn't. People need to see you being all right to be all right themselves."

"I am so very not all right," James says, with a fragmented sound that doesn't quite make it all the way to a laugh, "that it's kind of amusing."

"Not all that amusing," says Lily. She touches the side of his wrist, traces his jaw with the palm of one hand and turns his face so he has to look at her. It's not an unpleasant obligation. "James, listen to me: I promise you I'm not going anywhere. All right? This isn't going to be for long, and then we're going somewhere else and you can set things on fire, or go to sleep."

"I don't know what to do," James tells her helplessly.

"I'm telling you," says Lily. "Be as strong as you can be."

"That's, really, I'm sorry, this sounds pretty girly, but--but what if that's not enough?"

"The rest," Lily says, "you leave to me." She stands. James is amazed momentarily by the slender strength of her, the way she is unbowed by the desperate muddle that threatens to engulf him. It is fantastically, agonizingly comforting to know that there is a part of him it cannot touch.

They are at the door when he stops her. He just wants a moment. He takes her around the waist and presses his wet nose into her shoulder, and feels, even then, her body soften to make room for him. "Look," he says, "just, because I need to say it." His words come back hot to his own lips from where they ricochet off her skin. It is uncomfortable to breathe this way, but at least there is no dividing unfilled space between him and someone else. It is a closeness that has to be physical in order to be understood; it is perhaps the only thing in his brain that he can bring whole into the world of tangible things. "Look," he says again. "I know that I sleep on, on a mattress that has flowers on it, and I'm pissing myself, just *pissing* myself, over--over everything, but Lily-- Lily--I am so, so--grateful to be in love with you, I--"

"I know," Lily says. She grabs the back of his shirt.

"I'm not done," he pleads, "please, I'm not done, just let me--I want you to know that I--I don't ever want to--"

"No one else, James Potter," Lily says, eyes bright, "is ever, ever going to leave you. All right? No one." He feels her nails against his back. "We'll talk about it when we can talk about it, but right now you have aunts and uncles and cousins and professors and friends and they all know where you aren't, but they don't know where you are, and I think that will help, I think it can, if you just think about them instead. Can you? It might. It might."

James wipes his nose with the back of his hand. His mother, he thinks blindly, always told him never to do that; it is uncouth and uncivil and immature and that's what tissues and handkerchiefs are for and, barring that, the corners of tablecloths. James, at the moment, has none of these. He stares down at his snotty thumb.

"Right," he says. "Let's go downstairs."

"Should we go after him?" says Peter, a little nervously. He pushes his hair, combed limply at the side, off of his damp forehead. "Should we have gone, you know, before?"

It occurs to Remus that they should probably not huddle in a shell-shocked little circle at the side of the room, but he cannot readily come up with any alternatives. There is little he hates more than funeral receptions. Funerals are bad enough, but then forcing the bereaved to stand around and not cry for an hour while eating tiny quiches seems to him downright sadistic. "He probably wants to be left alone."

"No," says Sirius, speaking for the first time. His hands are in his pockets, and he isn't looking at any of them. "Prongs hates being alone. He only says he wants to be so people can prove how much they care by going after him." There is a funny edge to his voice. "It's all right, though. Lily's gone already."

Remus stares very hard at the carpet. It is nice, probably expensive, worn in this corner by perhaps lifetimes of shufflers shuffling over it during receptions, because they are awkward or because they are avoiding someone or because they don't know the proper thing to do or say at a funeral reception. *If only it weren't so obviously a funeral. If only it hadn't been parents. If only it hadn't been James's parents.* It is a selfish series of thoughts. But funerals, Remus knows, are the one place where everyone can be selfish all at once. The relatives who weren't close are selfishly glad they were never closer or, conversely, selfishly wish they had been. The relatives who were close are selfish in their grief. Friends are selfish, either by hiding, as Remus has done, or offering themselves forward too much, as Remus is trying not to do by hiding. Loved ones, that small exclusive

circle only defined at such times of crisis, all wander around with boiled expressions trying to sort their own heads and hearts out. No one is really thinking about the person who died, partly out of fear and partly out of a sick terrible shame that they are left around to think at all. It seems vulgar, somehow, to be alive during a funeral. It seems insulting.

Remus stares very, very hard at the carpet. He wishes the same thing they're all wishing; to be nine again and have done with it. He feels unfairly thrust into the precarious place between being adult and being a child, where at one side is offered the presumed competence of the former, and at the other -- and this is their true desire, and possibly the true desire of adults everywhere -- the particular blindness of childhood, the ability to trust in sleep and the mornings that follow.

"I wish," Peter says, surprising everyone, "I wish there was something we could do. But there bloody well isn't, is there, and that's bollocks."

Sirius barks a laugh. "Well said." It is hard to tell if he is being sarcastic. Remus thinks he probably isn't.

"It's all right," Remus reasons. "We're helping by--by being here for him," he finishes lamely, and Sirius gives him a look which says everything he's already thought. It boils down to, *Don't make excuses*.

"Hey," Peter says suddenly, "he's come down," for there James is again, face white and thin below his subdued hair. His arm is tight and strained around Lily's waist, as if she is the only force making him move at all.

Sirius breaks off from them, a determined set to his face and shoulders. Remus and Peter follow at a more cautious distance.

"Hey," says Sirius, shoving his hands deep into his pockets and regarding James as if he's a challenge. A muscle in his jaw works slightly.

"Hey," says James. He appears to have grown several inches very fast; at first Remus thinks it is the abrupt age bestowed by grief, and then he realizes, with a hysterical, silent bubble of grotesque laughter, that it is because his trousers are too short.

"This is complete crap," says Sirius forcefully.

"More or less," James agrees.

"I'm leaving," says Sirius, "in exactly fifteen minutes. You can come if you like." His anger is a blaze of sudden fire in the room, not comforting but illuminating. It is, Remus thinks, in a long career of strange and perfect gifts, the strangest and most perfect gift he has ever seen Sirius give anyone.

James begins to untangle himself from Lily. For a moment it seems impossible, as if they really are inextricable, but then he shifts and his arm bends the right way, and he makes it after all. "Thanks, mate," he says. "But I've -- I've got to stay here. I think it's -- best."

"Right," Sirius says. He fixes his eyes on the far wall and keeps his hands in his pockets. "All right, then."

"If you want to go," James adds, drawing suddenly close to him, "then you should. I don't want you to--"

"Well, I'm staying if you are, you stupid girl," Sirius says fiercely. "Don't be daft, I'm --you have to know where to find me, in case you need--"

"Right," James says. "No."

Remus thinks sometimes that James and Sirius speak in a special code, and what is actually communicated can only be understood in the words they omit, the syllables they lose before they're said. There's always been something incomprehensible about Sirius and James. They've known each other too long, long enough that they've started to forget who draws what breath or bleeds what blood. And still, in the sharp line of Sirius's jaw above his neck, and the way he works the tense muscles around his mouth, and the way he keeps moving his chin forward just to keep moving, they are keeping a curious distance now. Remus wonders if James sees it the same way Sirius does. James might think it is just the mundane, stupid way they are all cautious with him now, as if they might say something careless and break him. With Sirius it is more than that. It has something to do with death and with Lily and the course friendship charts unpredictably. Mostly, it has to do with Sirius and James.

*They aren't certain how to grow up with one another,* Remus realizes. He knows how that is. He isn't certain how to grow up with simply himself.

James looks at Sirius for a long, silent moment.

Finally he says, "Thanks. I mean. Thanks for coming, Pads."

"Only for you," Sirius says bitterly, "would I ever, *ever*--" He looks as if he is about to say something else, but swallows it, crosses his arms, and stares darkly at the ceiling.

James's throat moves. He looks at Peter and Remus then, and says, with a rueful, twisted smile, "You too, lads. Thanks--it's good to see you here, with all these...it honestly is. Sorry about this."

It is so like James, and yet so unlike the James Remus knew--to stand in the middle of his parents' funeral and say *Sorry about this*--that Remus, for one of the only times in his entire life, has no idea what to say. Usually, when he thinks he has no idea what to say, it is because there is such a wealth of inappropriate possibilities clamoring to be chosen. This time there is nothing but a hideous, yawning blankness. He nods, forcing himself to meet James's eyes.

"What do you want?" asks Peter, with all the horrible, naked desperation that Remus feels but knows better than to express. "I mean. Do you want anything? Can we do anything?"

"Er," James says. He strokes back his hair uncertainly. "It's all right, Pete. I mean, not all right, obviously, but you know. You're all right."

*What would I want?* Remus thinks hopelessly. *If it were me--if it were my--and my friends were all around me, what would I want them to say?*

But of course the answer is simple and impossible: *It was a mistake, you idiot, they're not dead, they're right upstairs. Go put on proper clothes and stop whinging into the canapés.*

He says, "I've--I've just seen Professor Slughorn. Just in case you want a heads-up. That you might have to talk to him."

James groans, and Lily makes a strangled noise. "Oh Remus, not him."

"You oughtn't be so nice and go to all his dinners all the time, if that's how you feel," says James, in a voice that tries too hard to be like his own. "You are a perfectly dreadful tease." He looks at her, and there is a soft question in his eyes which Remus cannot exactly identify.

"It's not--well, he's a harmless old man, and he's terribly friendly, and I don't like to hurt his feelings," Lily says, sighing. Her knuckles caress James's shoulder almost imperceptibly. "Anyway, sometimes we have really interesting conversations. He knows loads about potions. Sirius, I don't know how you get out of it. He's positively frantic to collect you, too."

"Quidditch practice," Sirius says, and flashes her a brief, strained smile. "Terribly busy all the time. You know how it is." They all laugh too loudly, the relief of being able to pretend to converse overwhelming them, and then collapse limply back into silence.

None of them knows what to do. Not James, certainly; but no one expects him to. Lily is pretending -- Remus is amazed at her, the competent line of her neck, the firm way she touches things -- but he saw her, when they realized James was missing, and the flash of panic she stored as a secret in her own eyes. It's like acting. Sirius, too, the way he shuffles in his stiff black suit and doesn't look at anyone, as if by exaggerating the normal language of his body he can somehow consume them all with normalness. Peter looks as lost as Remus feels. Remus wants to touch someone, any one of them, to offer companionship in being adrift.

He wants to say something to James, the right something. He wants to offer him a gift or whisper him a sentence or take him aside and even, maybe, embrace him. When he opens his mouth his tongue sticks like a great gluey glob to the roof of his mouth. Awkward people shouldn't be allowed into funerals. They should be told to write letters and not bother to attend.

"I guess it's," James says. "Slughorn, unavoidable, I suppose."

"We can go with you," Sirius offers gruffly. "If you'd like. Scope things out beforehand. I might be able to distract him with my aristocratic charm, and, you know, things." His anger seems to have melted in the odd way of Sirius's angers, but Remus can still sense it, transmuted and troubling.

James takes Lily by the hand. "Right," he says. "Thanks. I've got it. You know. It's the sort of thing -- I mean I'm going to have to, to figure out how to do these things. Alone. Thanks mate," he repeats. There's a dark fervor to his tone. "You're, you know."

Sirius nods. He does. Everything about him is magnified. It's as if he thinks no one will notice the details of him that way, the pinch beneath his lower lip and the tight dark quickness in his eyes. Remus wants to say, *Let's none of us do anything alone and But that isn't the way we're meant to be*, only now it is, and they all

know.

"Hey, Potter," says a deep, rock-ribbed voice behind him. Remus turns.

He shouldn't be surprised, he supposes. After all, it was the Head Boy's family. It was even in the papers. *Everyone* is here.

"Gideon," James says. He smiles uncertainly, and it looks strange on his face. "You're -- you came. I mean. I didn't...I didn't know you knew them. Fabian -- are you all right?"

"Don't be ridiculous, little Potter," says Fabian, with the ghost of a smile. He is incredibly pale and painfully thin; there are wide bandages around his head and his fabulous Fabian hair has been cut short and ragged. Remus remembers, like a punch in the stomach, Fabian shaking and bloody in the sea-cave at Brighton, the crimson slash on Gideon's arm, the blue light. He doesn't dare look at Sirius. "*You* don't get to ask that question."

"It's Gid and Fay to you, anyway," Gideon rumbles, and puts a massive hand on James's shoulder. "You needn't stand on ceremony."

"My parents never told me," James starts, and then stops again. "How did you -- I mean -- did you study with my Dad, or something?"

Gid and Fay don't exchange glances, but the way they don't do it is almost more obvious than if they had. "Hogwarts Alumni Association," says Fabian, "style of thing." Talking appears to require great effort from him. He pauses for a moment to rest, and in that pause seems to take in Remus, Sirius and Peter for the first time. "Well, if it isn't, you know, the rest of you. Keeping well? All things considered?"

Remus doesn't trust himself to respond. He's certain Fabian is looking at him, and what's more that he must sense, somehow, in his eyes, what he knows. Fortunately, Sirius says roughly, "Good to see you lot -- don't suppose Marlene's around," and Gideon says, "Oh, she's somewhere, probably smoking a fag round the back," and Sirius says, "Well, don't let her leave, I want a chat with her," and Fabian says with gray lasciviousness, "Oo-er," and Remus is free to think about other things, like why Marlene McKinnon doesn't like him and whether he will have to talk to her. He is just wrapping these warm, familiar worries around him like a comforter when Fabian, mythic, untouchable Fabian Prewett, shaking his head too enthusiastically at something James or Sirius said, makes a sharp noise and stumbles: and Remus can't deny anymore that the old worries are irrelevant.

Gideon catches him.

It's a relief to see. A faltering like that can be caught so easily by an arm and a firm grip and instinct. It has nothing to do with thinking or over-thinking, with feeling or not feeling, with the funereal, numb pall they all harbor now in their blood. It has nothing to do with mourning. It has everything to do with bodies and with families, and Remus wishes it were that simple for all of them. He's always had particularly strong arms. It would be something he could do, if things were like that. Although, admittedly, he'd probably grab the wrong part of someone and it'd all go to hell from there.



Remus feels, for a moment, Sirius' hand on his. Sirius' fingers and palm are sweaty. In fact it's an uncomfortable grip, crushing and slippery at once. It makes all the difference. Remus clings to his hand until Sirius lets go, and sticks both hands back into his trousers. Everything's gone to hell at once, but Fabian isn't alone, Remus thinks; and neither are they. There's a certain closeness in sweating on someone else in fear and comfort and unhappiness.

"A bit of a," Fabian is trying to explain. "It's nothing, really, you wouldn't believe it but -- a bookshelf, you know, can you imagine, mucking about like that--"

Gideon's face is drawn, but he laughs, too loudly, and fumbles for a joke. "Pity your, you know, Mr. Muscles isn't around to, haha, give you a strong arm 'round your slim and girlish waist, eh?"

"*Gideon*," Fabian hisses. His ears go pink. "Shut up."

At the word *muscles* Remus's mind immediately flashes to Caradoc the Towel Boy -- as would anyone's -- and goes from there with frightening linearity back to the sea-cave and the dark and *If you live through this, I'm going to kill you*, and he knows somewhere in his stomach that Gideon's joke isn't completely a joke. He glances up at Fabian, unable to stop himself, and Fabian looks back at him, his eyes narrowing.

"Albus's looking for you," says Gideon to James, over their heads. "I mean, most people are. But you'll want to find him. Besides," and he smiles a little, "it'll give you an excuse not to talk to anyone you don't want to. I remember when our Da died -- can't tell you how many people were there that I just hated the hell out of."

Remus is distantly surprised, not by the idea that the Prewetts' parents are dead, but that they had parents at all. He has always sort of imagined that they sprang full-formed out of the imaginations of Boys' Clubs everywhere.

Except for the whole--Caradoc Dearborn--thing. Or perhaps that's a part of Boys' Clubs everywhere. Remus touches the corner of his mouth, where something not entirely forgotten still lurks.

"I had to shut him in a closet," says Fabian, still watching Remus sharply. "He almost bit an old woman."

"She spilled something on me," Gideon snaps. "And I didn't have another shirt that would be proper. She deserved it. I wanted to give her rabies."

"You would have," Fabian says. "If I hadn't locked you up first. In fact I think I ought to do that more often. Lock you up." He is still watching Remus, a strange furrow in his brow. Remus wants to explain to him it's not what he thinks. The expression makes him want to crawl into a closet, himself. He tries to meet Fabian's eyes and excuse himself but a hard shutter draws quick over Fabian's face the instant Remus tries. "Right," he says, clipped and unforgiving. "Let's have something to drink. Old bookshelf wounds, and all."

He leans on Gideon heavily as they leave.

"That was funny," James says. "It was nice of them."

"You'd best," Sirius says, "see Dumbledore. Innit? What they said?"

"Right," James agrees. "Right."

"Alone," Lily murmurs. She gives him a quick kiss on the cheek and pulls him close and he goes a little pink and a little too satisfied, and a little straighter, as well. "Go on. He'll probably -- he probably wants to tell you the secret to life and initiate you into all the hidden wisdoms of the world."

"At least, he'll know the right thing to say," Peter says firmly.

"For he is Dumbledore, master of all hidden knowledge," says James, a little mocking but kindly too. "Sirius--"

Sirius says, looking past him, "I probably won't leave."

"Thanks," James says quietly.

"I might set something on fire though," Sirius goes on. They smile the same rough way at each other, crooked, raw and hurting: and then James says, "right then," and goes.

"I'm going," says Sirius as soon as he's gone, "to, you know," and makes vague motions, sticks his hands back into his pockets as deep as they can go, and turns on his heel, leaving Remus, Lily and Peter alone in their little cluster. Peter gnaws at the ball of his thumb.

"Lily," Remus says. "He's -- I mean, is he--"

"He's James," says Lily, and there's something soft and wonderful in the curve of her lips when she says his name. "He surprises people."

Remus trusts her. For a moment he harbors the irrational impulse to grasp her by the hands and ask her how she does it. If it's a secret, he wants to learn. Perhaps it has something to do with being a girl, perhaps it has something to do with not being a werewolf. Perhaps it's just luck. Perhaps it's because of James. "You don't," he says instead. "We all -- you know. Every one of us, we trust you. Don't we. Peter."

Peter nods emphatically. "We never really thought you'd -- James was kind of awful," he explains. He looks guilty, and adds quickly, "But we always trust *him* -- we just didn't know if *you'd* -- I mean--"

"I know what you mean," Lily assures him. "You're going to hurt something. Trying like that."

"I'll go get something to drink," Peter says. His earlobes are the same peculiar lobster shade as his nose, the former embarrassment and the latter sunburn. "Do either of you, uhm, want anything?"

"I'm all right," Remus says, "thanks."

"I'm fine as well," Lily says.

Peter trundles off. *And then there were two*, Remus thinks.

"This is horrible," Lily says. She draws close to Remus and suddenly her cool is going, in its place something burning and frantic. "Remus, I *love* him -- I haven't told anyone, you know, not even, not even my mum, and -- it's -- do you know what it's like? Loving someone? It's, it's," she trips over the wrong words, "it's worrying, it's worrying *all the time* and never feeling safe. That's what it is. Well," she adds, coloring, two bright spots of heat on her cheeks, "it's other things too, but it's worrying *all the time* underneath that."

"He gives everyone a lot to worry about," Remus says measuredly. "James."

"And there's absolutely *nothing* I can do," Lily adds. She frowns. "Except, you know, not let on."

"About the worrying?"

"I can barely sleep," Lily admits.

"You're not letting on," Remus says. "I think -- you know, that's what's important. For him. Right now."

Lily watches James's dark head vanish into the sea of people, her eyes on him and yet far away. "He was," she starts, and stops, and rubs her cheekbone absently. "How long do you think until it's one of us?"

"What?" says Remus, startling.

"Until it's a student, I mean," Lily says quietly. "This--I mean--it's not going to stop. It's just going to get worse."

Remus has never seen Lily like this before, and he's pretty sure he prefers it that way. "We don't -- I mean, we can't think that way."

"I know," she says. "But I can't help it. I can't stop thinking like that. I can't -- it hurts enough as it is, and I just -- I'm sorry, this is stupid. It doesn't help anything. Do you think Sirius is all right, speaking of people who need more help than any human being can possibly provide?"

"Sometimes," Remus starts, "when I go after him, and ask if he's all right, he punches me and tells me I worry too much." He rubs at his eye, tired and feeling a headache somewhere deep in the socket. "I'm going to go see if he's all right anyway. If he punches me, then at least I don't--" He cuts off before he says 'worry.' "At least I know he's all right," he amends.

"I'm going to go, I don't know, skulk around in corners and spy on James," Lily says. "Remus?"

"Yes?"

"Don't," Lily says. "Worry, I mean. I shouldn't, either. We can all -- we'll look after each other. We can take care of ourselves."

"While we're not punching each other, you mean," Remus says. "I think so. I think we ought."

"Is it a promise, then?" Lily asks.

"Yes," Remus agrees. "Do you think we should shake on it?"

Lily gives Remus a look that says if they shake then there's no turning back, no being afraid, no talking about worrying with one another. It's just full speed ahead. It feels silly, Remus admits, like they're signing away their childhood in the most childish way possible. He offers his hand.

"It's a deal," Lily says. She has the firmest handshake Remus has ever encountered.

"Deal," he echoes.

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At first, Dumbledore doesn't say anything. His eyes are keen and bright behind the scythe-moon curves of his spectacles. He looks at James as James has been terrified this whole time of being looked at, and is grateful, now, to be getting it over with. Dumbledore, like Hogwarts, is the last bastion of their safety -- the parent no one can kill, perhaps; the one man for whom disappearance or abandonment seems a faded unreality, like a bedtime story or a half-forgotten myth. In the middle of James's empty dining room he looks a little ridiculous and a little frightening.

"I am pleased to see that you appear to be standing upright," Dumbledore says at last. "Is that becoming easier?"

"Yes," James says. He's surprised how strong it sounds, and how he suddenly means it.

"I suppose you have spoken to everyone you need to speak to," says Dumbledore. "You will find -- though I have no doubt that you have absolutely no desire to speak to anyone at the moment -- you will find that having done so will, in the long run, quiet you. Don't be afraid to mourn for yourself, James; don't shut out your betrayal and your anger. You need that comfort far more than the dead do. Your parents, I daresay, are very used to your being cross with them."

"Thank you, Sir," James says quietly.

"Very well." Dumbledore sighs. It occurs to James, sudden and strange, that Dumbledore has seen more of these than he can count. He has an odd urge to say *It's all right*, Professor, but he doesn't, because of course it isn't, and saying it won't make it so. "I suppose you have been told the relevant details about your parents' deaths."

He's been told that they were killed by an Unforgivable, that they were killed by an organization that calls itself by a variety of names: the Death Eaters, the Brotherhood of Salazar, the Partnership for Pureblood Pride. This, James thinks, is the biggest load of crap of all. They weren't killed by an *organization*, they were killed by people. There is a stain on the carpet in the dining room where his mother knocked over her teacup in her fall. It will not come out. "No, sir," he says. "Not really."

Dumbledore's lips press together. James knows something's up; he isn't stupid. Just because his parents are dead

doesn't mean he doesn't know how to put two and two together, read the signs, understand that something bigger than even his parents is happening and his parents just happened to be a part of it -- that's all. It has something to do with the world James knows, not just on the microcosmic level of the people who raised him and embarrassed him beyond belief and loved him tremendously, and whom he loved in return. The mum and dad he thought he'd be returning to this summer, and now never will. It has something to do with everyone. Everyone who's come to the funeral is a part of it, and Fabian who looks like he swallowed a bomb is a part of it, and Gideon who is Fabian's brother is a part of it. Dumbledore is a part of it. Dumbledore is at the great swirling incomprehensible core of it, perhaps trying to hold the pieces together even as they fly apart, and parents and brothers and friends and people who oughtn't die *ever* are *murdered*, killed.

"There is much to tell you, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore says, "and none of it is pleasant. I wish there was no need to say it at all -- but if you wish me to be honest with you, and I dare say by the look of things you wish it indeed, then I *will* be. But there is no going back once I have said the things I have to say, told you what you wish to know. There is only going forward. No, no -- don't tell me. You think you want to, and I understand. We have lost many. We will lose many more. There may be time for you to take a bigger part in it. A year. Something so little as a few months, even, if you wish it." James sees something in his eyes that is terrifying.

It is terrifying to know the person you have always trusted to protect you is afraid, himself.

"Tell me," James says. "I want to know. I want to make sure it doesn't happen to -- to anyone else. What happened to my -- what happened to us. I'm Head Boy." It sounds stupid, until he thinks of the night he got the letter, how when everyone else was asleep his mother came to where he was in bed not sleeping, and touched his hair and said with shining eyes, *Jamie, we're just, we're just so proud*. How his father said nothing, but looked at him over his paper and nodded a little, and spent a sentimental day looking at James's baby pictures and showing them off to anyone who would pay attention, mainly Sirius. "I'm head boy," he goes on, "and it's -- this is something that's affecting the school, and my job is to do something. That's my job." He wants to go on, to say something about how it isn't about revenge and it isn't about anger -- or it is, of course, enormously so, but that's not nearly all of it -- but it seems to him that Dumbledore gets it already.

"That is, of course, why you got the job in the first place," says Dumbledore quietly.

James forces himself to hold Dumbledore's eyes. His hand hurts where he bloodied a finger hoisting his father's coffin and probably, he has to admit to himself, overturning his mattress didn't help either.

"Know this, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore says, before he begins. "There are things, great things, terrible things, happening even now. I worry about a time when there will be no rest to honor the fallen, no safety to bury our comrades, but it is when I speak to my students that I am reminded--" He pauses. "That I am reminded of hope," he concludes. "The most important thing in grave times is to believe that we may all live to see the end of them, together. And towards that end we must always work our hardest." Dumbledore motions for James to sit. James does. "And on those principles," Dumbledore says at last, moving to stand at the far end of the dining room table, "I have begun *The Order of the Phoenix*."

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Sirius is sitting outside beneath the shade of an oak tree. The first thing Remus thinks when he sees him is how at home he looks, and then how lost. That's the thing about Sirius: the curious ability to combine as many

contradictions possible into one form of angular boy-flesh at once, and then some. After all, Remus reasons, this was Sirius' home as well for a time, and now it isn't.

"Mind if I join you?" Remus asks.

Sirius shrugs, but waves him over. "Just -- take a look at this," he says. "Stand back, anyway, I'm not sure how it interacts with -- people." His wand sticks out of his back pocket; he grabs it, and waves it once, and whispers something, and then they're surrounded, encircled, by a flock of dancing white lilies. "I was going to do it for James," Sirius says. "But then I thought, you know, he already has lilies. Lily. Not to mention it seemed incredibly bent."

"It's not the manliest possible gesture," agrees Remus, only because he thinks if he says something kind Sirius might hit him.

Sirius looks up at him. "Sit down. You're giving me a crick."

Remus does. It is an absurdly beautiful day, the sky pale blue with lazy clouds drifting through it, and a soft spring breeze that whispers through the new-blown flowers. If he closes his eyes, he could be nine, and it could be almost tomorrow.

"So there's that," Sirius says with a harsh little cough of laughter, "that happened."

Of course there isn't anything to be said. Remus sighs internally, because in a way this is just what he came out here to avoid: but in another way he knew what he was getting himself in for, knew that this would be another awkward episode in the awkward life of Remus "Awkward" Lupin. "I think he would like it," he attempts. "The thought, I mean. With the flowers. They are lovely and you wrote the spell yourself and you know how James gets about spells when people invent them, all -- like me with very old books, spittle, you know, and twitching. But you probably shouldn't do it. I mean, you should do it, but not in front of him, or, you know, while he's around, because it's pretty girly and if you are girly then there's already one girl in the group and you can all get rid of me, which I wouldn't want." Remus has gone, in the space of thirty seconds, from painful verbal constipations to explosions of hideous, nonsensical linguistic diarrhea. He pinches his mouth shut and waits to be punched.

It is worse when Sirius says softly, "I hate this."

"Of course you do," Remus says lamely. "Look, I mean, we all--"

"No," says Sirius quietly. The sharp lines of his profile seem to quiver. "You don't. It's not just all the reasons I ought to hate it. It's not just because of James and the war coming and not knowing what to say and those stupid flowers, you know, and all that. I mean, it's horrible stuff, and we don't *all*. It's just me."

"James's parents--"

"They were *my* parents," Sirius says. He rubs his hand tiredly over the side of his face. "I can't, I can't say that, I can't even think it, because it isn't my grief to have. It's not. I know. But--but it isn't fair, Moony!" A fierce, wild sorrow flames in Sirius's face. "They were my parents, and I'm not even allowed to be sad about it because

James needs me not to be, and I understand that, I do, I'm doing my best, but it isn't *fair*."

Remus has the same question Remus always has around Sirius. *Who's been looking after you, then?* He just has the sense not to ask it most of the time.

The terrible thing about loss and grief, the really terrible thing, is that there is no unlimited store of it in the universe. No one person can exhaust it for any one reason on any one day. But the occasion for grief only ever calls for a few bereaved, while the rest of the world -- lost, miserable, hurting themselves -- have to pretend they're all right for the sake of those who really aren't.

"It was parents," Remus says blankly. He is careful. He wants, more than anything, to help someone. He wants, more than anything, to help *Sirius*, as James has Lily but Sirius is alone putting spells on funeral flowers. "It doesn't seem -- well. Like that's ever supposed to happen, really. We don't think of it, don't think it's possible."

"They were amazing," Sirius says. "You know that. *Fucking* -- top notch. Best there are. Model yourselves after the Potters, and if you come half as close, you're, you're all right."

"I know," Remus says.

"And they were always -- they just *took me in*, Remus!" Sirius slams his fist sideways into his palm, and his head goes hopelessly back, his shoulders falling. "When I had nowhere else to go, they were just there, and didn't say anything about it, and didn't even make me pay for dinner, and always knew what I liked to eat best. It was -- they made me -- feel at home, and that's, that's--" Sirius works it out in his lower jaw. Remus feels the sharp hollowness of his tone and begins to lift his hand. There is an eternity of slow motion still between his fingers and Sirius' shoulder. "The hardest thing anyone can do," Sirius finishes. He drops his chin to his chest. "If even your own, your *own* parents, can't make you -- it was a home, their home, James's home and my home too and I--I *loved them!*"

Remus' hand finds Sirius' shirt at last and grasps its sleeve. Sirius looks up, but still away. He laughs, rough and moist.

"I loved them and they're dead," Sirius says. "I want to kill -- I want to *kill* the people who did it. I don't just want to kill them. I want to hurt them. I want to hurt them so fucking badly for a long time and *then* I want to kill them after that."

"Oh," Remus says inadequately. It isn't really a word, just a noise, somewhere in the back of his throat. "Oh, Sirius. Look. Don't." He isn't sure what he's asking Sirius not to do. Hurt people, possibly. Hurt, himself. It isn't helpful.

And he thinks, *what the hell*, and because he couldn't do it with James and because his hand is already fisted in Sirius's sleeve, he draws his arms around Sirius's back and just holds on to him. Sirius says, muffled by sleeve and shirt, "Fuck, Moony, stop it, get off me, fuck, fuck," and his hands flex and twist and won't touch Remus. There is a growing wet patch on Remus's shoulder and under his hands Sirius's back shakes like the end of the world.

Remus has thought about it often enough before. Not holding Sirius, not that, but rather the awkwardness of

holding anyone, the way he doesn't know when to tighten his grip or let go. The possibility of bumping heads. The odds of catching someone else's hair on his buttons. The chances someone will smell something on him, last night's dinner or toothpaste or old sweater, that's somehow disagreeable or even loathsome. How easy it is to miscalculate someone's height. How easy it is to knock chins, elbows, noses. Remus has thought about it a lot of the time. He cringes at the idea of physical proximity and the heightened awareness it brings of his own physical ineptitude. He even thinks about it now in a vague and almost funny way as he realizes that when someone needs that closeness as much as you do it doesn't matter for shite if he can do it or if he can't. It's just the holding that counts. It's just the holding they'll remember.

"Sirius," he says.

Suddenly his own hands are everywhere, and because he's stopped thinking, and can't stop feeling, he knows exactly what to do. Like instinct. Like lifting up his head and howling at the full moon. Like tearing his tendons into taffy. It's all pain and nature: like *that*.

He gets his fingers in Sirius' hair, and holds him at the base of his skull with the curve of his palm. He's known but not known exactly for some time now that he's *bigger* than Sirius is, though Sirius isn't small. It's funny to him to hold that difference in his arms. Really, truly ridiculous.

Sirius is crying, which is also ridiculous, because he's not crying like a boy-almost-man, he's crying like a six year old, all snot and gasping; he's laughing, too, sort of, and trying to say something, like "I am an idiot" or "Your arms are too long," but Remus summons all his courage and all his instinct and says "Shut up. Shut up. It's all right."

Sirius's fingers dig hard into his shoulderblades. His mouth against Remus's collarbone is slightly open and his ragged breath is hot. Remus tightens his arms and winds his hand deeper into Sirius's hair and whispers helplessly, "Shut up, please, you're all right, it's all right," until he feels Sirius quieting against him, his chest hitching in hiccupping sobs. Remus has a memory of crying, the way a kid cries: the way the end of it leaves you lightheaded and empty-feeling and better but worse too.

"If anyone sees us right now," Sirius says, "I'm going to say you were choking and I was trying to, to save your life." His voice is the odd uneven staccato of someone who can't quite breathe over the force of his own crying, gulping sounds in between words and all. Remus touches him where he can reach, his hair and shoulders mostly.

"What was I choking on?" he asks.

"A canapé," Sirius says, "what else?"

Remus bows his head over Sirius' head and whispers, like a vow, like an oath of fealty, "Best to have our stories straight." Sirius barks a laugh. Remus can feel his tears and probably his snot against his own neck. He doesn't care. He buries his face in Sirius' hair and holds him with arms unflinching as iron. Sirius smells like soap. Most people smell like soap. He smells a little like sweat beneath the soap, and the faintest hint of dog. Remus is overwhelmed by the smell of it, all so close. "Should I stop?" Remus asks. It comes out a jumble, with Sirius' hair in his mouth.



"Don't even," Sirius says, "don't *bloody* even. All I said was that I want an alibi." He sounds a little more like himself, but only a little, still gulping in air. Somehow his elbow is in Remus's ribcage.

It seems like this would be the kind of thing to bother Remus and it troubles Sirius a little that it doesn't bother him, not at all. He's all right with it. He's good with it. He's good *at* it.

For what feels like a long time, Remus holds Sirius up. The only sound is the wind in the trees and the flowers, and the occasional catch of Sirius's breath.

Finally Sirius says thickly, "All right. Enough. All right," in that tone that means he is speaking more to himself than to Remus, and drags a hand up Remus's arm to press it hard against his own nose and mouth. For a moment he shudders again, and then he slowly disentangles himself from Remus's body. Without the weight of him Remus feels strange and suddenly pointless.

"All right," Remus echoes. He passes his free hand between them, touches his own neck, and lets it drop a dead weight in his lap.

Sirius stares at him, a keen, sharp gaze.

It's the kind of expression that suggests something heavy and important could happen, or might instead be lost in the distances that exist, naturally, between even the closest of people.

Remus licks his lips.

"Have you been *practicing* this sort of thing?" Sirius asks. "Oi, I've got -- I've drooled on your shirt and things."

Remus looks down. There is, indeed, a growing translucent patch on his shoulder, and it's damp and stiff around the edges. "I've got a jacket," he says. "It's all right."

"You have been practicing," Sirius says. His voice is sort of wobbly. "I don't know whose funerals you've been going to, but it's paid off for you."

"I've been talking to Lily," says Remus, "and we were thinking. She was thinking. That -- you know, things are...well, you know. All this," he gestures vaguely, "it isn't...out of the question. You know? Beyond the realm of possibility. Anyway," feeling stupid, "she says, we have to take care of each other. We can't pretend we can do it for ourselves, like normal teenagers get to do, and then sit around and mope about how we can't. There's no point lying to ourselves like that--not when--not when we could just -- well, like I said. Take care of each other." He regards his hands intently. He's pulled out a few of Sirius's long, dark hairs and they are tangled around his fingers, which is pretty disgusting.

Sirius is silent. Then he says, "Well. You're doing all right at that."

"So are you," Remus says, very seriously. "James -- he needs you to get angry. I think."

"I know." Sirius chews his lower lip. "I just have to figure out the right way." He rubs his cheek with his

sleeve, then rubs Remus' throat. "Jacket or not," he mutters. "It's still not on to leave your snot on a mate."

"No," Remus says faintly.

"Anyway," Sirius says. "We'll look after each other. That's what we *do*, innit? Look after each other? I don't know how *not* to. I think you have one of, of my hairs in your mouth." He reaches over without thinking and takes it out, fingertips on Remus' lips tickling soft to pull it away. "There," he says. He flicks it into the grass.

Remus' lower lip itches. He moves to rub it, and then doesn't, leaving it like a scab or an eyelash, a curious splatter of ink.

"We just," Sirius continues, "we just have to find out who to get angry *at*." His hands clench into fists in his lap. "And then I can get angry. All of us. We won't get hurt," he says firmly. "We'll get *angry*, properly. We'll look after each other. And you," he points at Remus, gray gaze fond and serious, "you can learn how to be angry, you know, as a skill."

"I get angry!" Remus protests. "We had a fight, and everything--"

"You didn't get angry," Sirius corrects him, "you got very cold and distant, and then you turned into a werewolf, which I think even you would agree is cheating."

"You're only saying that because you're bitter that I beat the tar out of you," says Remus, giving him an awkward, sideways smile.

"That's as may be," says Sirius. His eyes are pink and his nose and mouth are swollen. He always looks kind of like a girl, only his too-sharp edges and broad shoulders saving him from embarrassing femininity, and he ought to look even more like one now, but he doesn't. If anything he looks more boy than usual, and it probably has something to do with being angry and something to do with being unexpectedly grown-up and something to do with Remus Lupin never ever understanding anything no matter how hard he tries.

Remus rubs his mouth at last. The itch has already faded.

"All right," Sirius says. "Come on. Let's go back. One for all and all for finishing this properly, right?"


It's a little quiet thing, Remus thinks, growing up. It can happen in a garden or while someone blows his nose in your neck, and you might prefer that it would happen some other way, but then it's come and it's never going to go and there's nothing anyone can do about it. He stands and offers Sirius his hand which, to his surprise, Sirius actually takes.

"Once more into the breach, dear friend, once more," says Sirius, smiling lopsidedly at him and thrusting his hands back into his pockets. "Or close the wall up with my English snot."

"Right," Remus says, "show-off."

And they go.



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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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