

## Part Twenty-Four

*June, 1977*



### **Thursday Afternoon.**

It is like slugs. It is like slugs in his nose. Or perhaps only one slug, and it alternates nostrils. That is the worst part, the alternation of the slug-nostril. Remus has taken to writing his paper with his head leaning all the way to one side. It has, not surprisingly, given him a truly awful crick, but the slug-nostril is on the verge of shifting to the other side. He can feel it. At present it is about to slosh into a position that will allow him at last to gingerly lean his head to the other side, and begin the entire process once more. The whole procedure tempts him sorely to switch paper topics and write instead a convincing and impassioned screed as to why in hell wizards can turn people into ferrets or make them dance like spiders with a single swish and flick but cannot, it seems, actually develop something to cure the bloody common cold. Someone had his priorities on backwards

and the tag was showing.

Of course, none of this would be troublesome had Remus written his seven inches of parchment (his final seven inches! The last inches of his academic career!) as he was wont to write it: seven days early. That left him time to get sick and still edit the ridiculous thing, make sure all the sentences followed one another sensibly and didn't trail off into a morass of odd punctuation or, horror of all the horrors, become a fragment or a run-on. Normally Remus would have gotten this over with, not to mention with days and days to spare. But he hasn't. There is a reason why, a solid reason. It smells like dog and it has a name. That name is, also not surprisingly, Sirius Black.

It isn't that they spend any more time together than usual; it is just that somehow the time they spend together is less conducive to writing essays than it was before. There are fewer exchanges of the "Sirius, *please* stop putting jam in my hair and let me write this," variety, and more of the "Sirius, *please* stop..." and then a sort of vague trailing-off and loss of all motivation.

The whole thing is stupid. It is so very, very stupid that Remus has to consciously force himself not to think about it, which is hard, since apparently some part of him -- a part of which he firmly does not approve -- wants to think about it *all the time*. He can be sitting in class, genuinely fascinated by a lecture on techniques for the production of sentient publications, and then all of a sudden the professor will use some randomly unfortunate word, something like "hedgerow" and for no reason Remus goes all lightheaded and is completely unable to focus until he has somehow got Sirius into a stairwell and kissed him for a while, at which point he is able to get on with his day. It is utterly illogical. Kissing! Alien tongues! Spit and undignified noises and dog-smell! Diseases! What about these things can possibly be appealing? Spending so much time so close to Sirius's face makes him uncomfortably aware of Sirius's pores and smacky saliva noises and the spots on his chin, not to mention terrifyingly conscious of his own spots and noises and unwanted hairs. And yet they *continue to have at it*. They should both be arrested for gross corporeality.

If Sirius were here right now, Remus would have to kiss him just to stop thinking about how disgusting he is.

The mucus gathered in his nostril shows, in fact, no signs of making the crucial switch. Remus makes a defeated noise -- it sounds like "snork" -- and rests his forehead tenderly on the table.

Someone says, "Working hard?"

Remus's stomach flies into the region of his eyeballs. When he has recovered, he says, as calmly as possible, "You have made me completely brain-dead."

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"It's not meant to be. Go away. I am a vile, mucous-leaking corpse."

Sirius doesn't seem to grasp the implications of 'vile, mucous-leaking corpse' and swings into the seat at Remus' side. Remus' nose goes *wheet, wheet* with every breath. Sirius' every breath goes *hoomf, hoomf* against Remus' neck. Remus is torn between vomiting everywhere and being quite pleased. If this is what being romantically involved with someone is about, then Remus is terrified. Somehow, despite all the wheet-wheeting and the hoomf-hoomfing and the nose slugs and the transfer of germs, people continue to love one another and

reproduce and populate the earth and so on. The thought is staggering. Impossible. A little horrific.

Warm and tingly.

Romantically involved. *Romantically involved*. Romantically involved for lack of a better phrase, as the Wizarding World, so busy with swish and flick and dancing spiders, hasn't managed to cure colds or find a decent phrase for 'romantically involved.' These are vital issues left unaddressed. Unbeknownst to Sirius, Remus has taken to calling it A Mutual Slurping. After all, he can't call it any of the things James and Lily call it when they're at home. Most of this is simply because the things James and Lily call it when they're at home are things that make Sirius' stomach turn and his eyes roll. Remus, not just because he's involved with Sirius in A Mutual Slurping and therefore owes him some unspoken loyalty, is inclined to agree.

At the very beginning, after the first blind haze of groping and indecent noises and new pleasant feelings had left them and they were capable of human vocal patterns once more, Sirius said "Promise me we won't get like James and Evans," and Remus said "I promise you we won't get like James and Evans," and Sirius laughed and answered of course not there were no bosoms involved or har har *hoomf*.

"You don't seem to be paying attention," says Sirius rather breathlessly, surfacing. "I would say your full focus is not with me at this moment. You're having *thoughts*, aren't you? You're thinking about what am I feeling and do I only like you because apparently you're an enormous tart, who knew, and whether or not you can really call me your *boyfriend* when you and the girls meet up for drinks. Aren't you?"

"No," says Remus. It comes out doh. "I was thinking why is it that I let you kiss me when you are so unbelievably irritating?"

"Because you can't get enough of my love, baby," says Sirius, lidding his eyes revoltingly.

Remus would like to think of a witty, intelligent and interesting response that would put Sirius properly in his place, but the combination of hormonal brain-death and illness makes him say, instead, "Well, you...you're a...shut up."

"Whatever you say," says Sirius. "There's snot on your lip, by the by, so don't expect my tongue anywhere near there. Believe it or not, there are some lines I will not cross."

Remus is about to protest, to say something about vomit, maybe, or Mildred Wilkins in third year, but then Sirius moves his mouth against the place where Remus's jaw meets his ear and Remus goes sort of wobbly and winded. "I have snot *everywhere*," he says, trying to control the pitch of his voice. "I told you that."

"I know you do," Sirius says. "I am well acquainted with that fact."

"Snot is not particularly," Remus manages, "ah, uhm, good to eat."

"I know that, too," Sirius says.

Remus is somewhat baffled. If he were Sirius, and Sirius were he, and Sirius was the one with Remus' cold, and his hand was the one probably losing feeling right this very moment on Sirius' thigh, instead of all the other

ways around, then he would be outraged. Disgusted. Not here. Wouldn't he?

"At one point in my life," Remus points out, "I had standards, you know."

"Come on," Sirius says. "I'm special. Admit it. You wouldn't just drip mucus on anyone, now would you?"

"I think I'm going to be ill."

"No," Sirius says. "That's the flu talking."

This really isn't the way it was supposed to be, Remus thinks hazily. It was supposed to be pleasant all the time, to begin with. It was supposed to be beautiful, intelligent day and night, clever and witty and possibly something like Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy with all the sharp dialogue and unending passion beneath their words. They were supposed to meet in closets, in unlit corridors, in the shack all alone, and touch each other again and again -- but always like the first time. There weren't supposed to be colds, spots, bad breath in the mornings, awkward hands, pins and needles in uncomfortable places, and Sirius' apparent willingness to eat *anything* so long as kissing was involved.

"Haven't *you* ever had standards?" Remus asks. "No. No -- that's a -- silly question."

"Don't ask me questions to which you don't want to know the answer," says Sirius, wiping his mouth indelicately. Remus thinks, dimly, *That is my snot or my saliva, and why is it that one of these things is acceptable and the other is not when they are both so vile?* "If I say yes, then you know I'm lying. And if I say no, that's a bit of a blow to your fragile ego, isn't it?"

"My ego is very sturdy," protests Remus. "You're thinking of my immune system."

"Cupcake," says Sirius, throatily, "that's not the only bit of you I'm thinking about."

"Oh, *God*," yelps Remus in disgust, recoiling, but then Sirius burrows his cold doggy nose into the place between his neck and shoulder and Remus doesn't push him off, even when he starts making weird snuffling noises, and then his mouth sort of trails back over Remus' jaw and to his mouth and there is a long, breathing silence.

After a while Remus thinks Sirius is probably getting bored. Remus can only move his head in so many directions; there is only such a narrow spectrum of things he can do with his mouth. Sirius has probably been expecting him to say something for a while now.

"Your day," he says, but it comes out a bit garbled. He steadies himself on Sirius's lapels. "How. Your day's been. It's been good?"

"Er," says Sirius, still idly thumbing Remus' ribcage. "It's been fine."

"What did you do?" says Remus, insanely. "Who did you talk to? Did you turn in any interesting work or how were your classes, I suppose most of them we were in together, but, you know, you could tell me about what you thought and then I could compare it to what I thought and we could see, you know, where we differ."

Sirius looks at him. Remus looks back. At least, Remus thinks, there is no commingling snot involved in this look, though there is a curious puzzlement wrinkling up Sirius' brow. It was probably the wrong thing to say, Remus thinks, but prolonged kissing is at worst confusing and at best very nice and confusing. Most of the time it's the latter. When it's done, though -- that's the problem. When it's done and Remus can hear Sirius snoring in his bed late at night, Remus wonders when Sirius is going to realize -- high tolerance for incredibly foul things entering and leaving his mouth notwithstanding -- that he has been sucking werewolf snot as often as possible all day long.

If it doesn't start to bother Sirius, Remus wonders idly if it will start to bother *him*.

"Moony," Sirius says finally, "we were there. Together. The whole day. I spilled ink on your trousers before class. Then you went and cleaned it up and I came with you. Then, you know, bathroom, very nice. And after that we had Potions and something exploded in your cauldron and you went and cleaned *it* up and I came with you again. Different bathroom, still very nice. And then after *that* there was lunch when I ate part of your chicken and you said 'Sirius, I have a cold, that's disgusting,' and I said 'I think I'll get it anyway, har har,' and Pete said 'What, why?' and I said 'What with all the time we spend together, germs, germs, can't be helped really, Remus has such a large nose to breathe them out of,' and you choked on your water and went to clean that up and I went with you again. Third bathroom, same story, you're *insatiable*."

"And yet," Remus says, "you cannot remember the apparent motion of the stars. Did you call me 'cupcake' before?"

"I was trying it out," Sirius explains. "Just, you know. There should be nicknames."

"Remus' is fine," Remus suggests.

"*Remus* isn't very three bathrooms in one day." Sirius grins fondly.

"Apparently he is now," says Remus, a little ruefully.

"So much for your vaunted Prefectly virtue," says Sirius, palming his jaw. "You weren't really using it for anything, were you?"

"I -- no." High marks, Remus thinks, and getting Sirius out of trouble. Clearly the one is going to be thwarted by this cold, and the other Remus seems to be thwarting all by himself.

"All right then," says Sirius, "shut up."

"I didn't -- you're babbling too," Remus starts to argue, and then Sirius slides two cold fingers under his shirt. Remus makes a small noise. His head goes slightly wobbly. Sirius trails a sticky kiss across his mouth. It is nothing like Remus ever imagined it would be, partly because he never imagined any of it would be with Sirius at all. The rest is because Remus never knew kissing could be so pleasant while still being no less unpleasant. Even as a concept it is lacking in any basic practicality. Sirius' fingers, on the other hand, are far more sensible.

"I think you have a fever," Sirius says. "How interesting."

*Disgusting*, Remus thinks, but rather blissfully.

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### **Friday Morning.**

"I think I found your hairbrush," James says, swinging the door to the bathroom open and stepping cheerfully inside. "You'll never guess where it was. My underwear drawer. Why was *your* brush in *my* underwear? Anyway, here it is. Aren't I wonderful? I go digging through my old underwear just for you."

"I was using your mirror," says Lily. "I don't think you get to act like you *don't* use your underwear drawer as an all-purpose storage facility. I think I saw a potato in there." She flexes her toes absently. "And your underwear's not such a Herculean task to go through. I did wash it and fold it and it was sorted by color, though probably not anymore."

"That's not just any potato," says James, regarding himself at several angles in the mirror. "It's a potato which looks exactly like Peter, I don't know if you noticed. I was saving it for his birthday. Should I grow a beard, d'you think?"

"By all means, if you never want me to speak to you ever again," says Lily, reaching for the toilet paper. "It would certainly make my life easier, inasmuch as I could finally go off and snog Remus, as I have so long dreamed of."

"Well," James says, a little snippily, "I don't much fancy shaving, you know, ever since I found your leg detritus in my kit." But he leans in to the sink, fills it, splashes his face.

"Oh yes, because I certainly enjoyed finding your old food on my toothbrush," says Lily. She stands, flushes the toilet, and elbows him. "Shove over."

"Wash your hands," James says. "There's a vile cold about. Pass me my razor?"

"Who do you think I am?" Lily demands, mildly disgusted. "As if I wouldn't wash my hands. You must be confusing me with everyone else at this school." She passes the razor.

"Unlikely," says James, and kisses her wetly, where her hair parts.

They move comfortably, in silence. Lily wipes her hands dry and fetches her toothbrush. James lathers and squints at himself. Lily regards him.

After a moment she says, through a mouthful of toothpaste, "You know, you're quite handsome when you shave."

"I am quite handsome all the time," says James, and then winces. "Ow. Why? It's just making stupid faces and injuring myself."

Lily shrugs. "It's -- there's something sort of manly and grown up about it. And your shoulders go all lovely."

"I am always manly. Don't spit in my basin," James warns, restraining her. "The last time you did that I got paste in my eye. You could have blinded me."

"I need to spit. I'm foaming."

"So spit in the toilet."

"Selfish," Lily says, pulling a face, but she leans over the toilet and spits.

James watches her in the mirror as she smooths her hair back and straightens. She's wearing one of his ancient Chudley tee-shirts; under it her legs are slim and freckled and very pale.

"I'm in love with you," James says, a little sadly. "I realize I say that rather a lot."

"One day you're going to say it so much it won't mean anything anymore, like *how do you do and pass the mustard, please*." Lily leans in close to the mirror and inspects her chin from two angles and with three completely different mouths. Miraculous, James thinks. He finds her lovely all the time, even when she has just woken up and her breath smells like Sirius' sock drawer. Not that he usually notices. One of the strangest things about love, James has discovered, is that when two people with breath like a sock drawer breathe on each other, you can't tell how bad the situation is. Everything seems fine until one of you brushes your teeth.

"A man can dream," he agrees.

"Not today, though," Lily adds. "Today I still like it. Can I borrow your razor?"

"It's got my skin in it, at the moment," James points out. "I'm using it to be manly. Are my shoulders really lovely? That's not a very manly word, you know."

"Can I use your extra one then?" Lily asks.

James shrugs and grunts. "I *am* exponentially more manly than when first we met," he says. "Aren't I?"

"Exponentially," Lily agrees. "You no longer resemble cooked noodle."

"I suppose now it's more like uncooked noodle?" James snags the difficult place right under his lip on his razor and winces. Lily pats him on the shoulder.

"You are even more manly than an uncooked noodle," she says, kindly. "Though not by much."

It smells of soap and Lily's washed hair and the general scent of bathroom in the bathroom. James washes his

face and pinches the bleeding skin ineffectually until he gives up and lets it crust over. Lily uses his extra razor to shave a hairy patch on her ankle and James supposes they're going to have to get married one day, otherwise they'll kill each other to keep the world from knowing what it is they do in the privacy of their own bathroom.

Except that it isn't actually their own bathroom and it isn't actually private, which James realizes when someone knocks and they both yell, "What?"

There's a little pause, and then Kingsley says, "Morning, Evans."

Lily catches James's eye briefly in the mirror. "Sorry, Kingsley," she calls back. "Out in two shakes, I promise."

"Sorry, mate," adds James.

"This is a little disturbing," says Kingsley.

"I know," says Lily.

"Right," rumbles Kingsley, after a long moment. "I'll come back." His feet make dull booming noises as he goes.

"Arms like the mighty oaks," mumbles James, when he's gone. He regards his own and flaps them vaguely in the mirror. The whole thing resembles raw chicken and he stops.

Lily kisses his ear, and sighs.

"Are you awkward with him?" James asks rather shocked. "Were those Awkward Eyes you were giving me? Are there feelings? I didn't know Shacklebolt had feelings. I didn't know he had room for them, with all those muscles."

"Don't say that," says Lily, shoving her hair behind her ears. "They were awkward eyes, but it's not because of Kingsley. Well, sort of. I don't know. This is sort of -- odd and scary, isn't it?"

"What," says James, unnerved, "my arms?"

"No," says Lily. "Us. Sharing a bathroom. Sharing a bathroom while one of us is actually on the toilet. Old people do that, you know, and inmates in prison."

"My mum and dad do that," James admits. "Did that. I saw them once when I was five and I locked myself in a closet and refused to come out again until they promised they wouldn't do it anymore."

"This explains a good deal about you," Lily says. "Perhaps we should -- not. Do this, I mean. I mean -- it's -- I think I want to lock myself in a closet and refuse to come out until you've put something in Kingsley's tea and he forgets this ever happened."

"You *are* awkward!" James says. "You *are* awkward with him!"



"Well, we did -- we were -- you know." Lily doesn't meet James' eyes, even in the mirror, and busies herself suddenly with washing her hands. James stares at her fingers and wonders how she hasn't taken half the skin off them yet, at the rate she's going. "I'm sure you have -- *someone*, you know, where you see them and maybe food is hanging out of your mouth or you're rearranging your, I don't know, your trousers which are about to fall down, or you're in the bathroom with your -- anyway, and it's awkward."

"No," James says honestly. "The only person it's ever been awkward with is Sirius." Lily gives James a narrow sort of pointed look. "No, no no no, that's not what I'm -- we're talking about you! About you being awkward. This is a new development." James swallows. "He's not -- *Kingsley's* not -- he doesn't get awkward, does he? I think he'd punch awkward in the face and take his name and never let him come around anymore. Right? Right, Lily?"

Lily sighs. "You can be remarkably obtuse," she says. "Kingsley may be a certain amount of, of, well, of imperturbable--"

"--and with a certain amount of shiny head," James adds.

"--and, shut up James, what I'm saying is, it doesn't mean he's made of rock or anything."

"Isn't he?" James stares. "He's not -- he's not *sensitive*, is he? Tender? What did he do to you? I'll kill him!"

"He'll crush you," Lily says. "Like a very small and very pale bug."

"When I said 'kill him,'" says James, deflating, "I obviously meant 'stare coldly at him from across the room.'" He watches her in the mirror for a moment. "So there were feelings. I don't like to think of you having feelings."

"I'm not going to tell you I like you better, because that's ridiculous and plays right into your stupid insecurities," says Lily sharply.

"You do though," says James, leering at her. "Like me better. Don't you?"

"I can't talk to you now, I'm flossing," says Lily with some dignity.

"I love you," James tells her, again. He can't help it. Sometimes it just comes out, like a sneeze. He's not sure if it's just his need for reassurance, to hear her say *Me, too*, or if it's nothing if the kind, something less selfish or more.

"Shut up," says Lily, and James is so grateful that he has to touch her, softly, at the waist. She leans into him, her wild morning hair foaming in his eyes, her body very warm.

"Spitting," she says after a moment, "move over," and throws her used floss in the bin.

The back of her neck is pale and has two freckles, near the boniest spot where the hair is soft and so light-orange it's more yellow than anything else. There are times when James can't really bring himself to touch it because it makes him feel incredibly unworthy of any of the good things his life has given him, and of all those

good things James would be hard pressed to say Lily isn't the best. She isn't the most beautiful female ever created and her nose is kind of silly at the tip, and she has freckles in odd places. James is simply pleased she doesn't punch him anymore. She has particularly strong fists.

"Did you floss with Kingsley?" James asks finally, tensing to hear the answer.

"Don't be a complete idiot," Lily says. "Of course not."

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### **Friday Afternoon.**

Remus is packing. He is rolling socks. Now and then he cannot find the matching sock for a sock he already has and it clearly annoys him, as he normally keeps his socks in good order. Now and then he pauses to blow his nose; he never wipes it on the scratchy sleeve of his scratchy shirt that Sirius wishes he wouldn't wear so often.

He has other shirts. He has other shirts that are less scratchy. Sirius would give him all the not-scratchy shirts in the world if Sirius had money anymore, but in any case Remus wouldn't wear them. As terrible as Remus is at giving gifts he is perhaps even more terrible at receiving them.

Remus can't find another sock.

"Remus," Sirius says.

Remus blows his nose. It is red and angry looking. "Yes?"

"I don't know," Sirius admits. "I don't really have anything to say."

"You could roll your own socks," Remus suggests. "Or I suppose you could just do what you're going to do anyway and put them in that bottomless trunk of yours in no order at all."

He isn't all that bad looking, Remus. He's not, Sirius admits, good looking like, say, he is or James is, but not everyone can be blessed with such classic features, such handsome jaws, and all the other things that make Sirius and James a natural and dashing duo. Remus has an unremarkable jaw and his nose is, all jokes aside, sort of a remarkable phenomenon, but his hair falls over his forehead in a pleasant way and his smile is often crooked and beautiful. Also, Remus folds socks. But that's all right. Sirius does still want to kiss him, or come up behind him and take him by surprise and get all his sorted socks mixed up in his hair until he's forced to laugh and, possibly, get snot all over.

"It's June," Remus is saying. "Imagine having a cold in June. It's ridiculous. How did I get a cold in June? Sirius, have you seen my green sock?"

"Remus," Sirius says. "You're not, I don't know, avoiding me, are you? By rolling your socks up in little sock balls like your mother? I've heard you say that colored socks are for hapless old men and that once you reach that point there is no hope for you."

"Don't be silly," Remus says faintly. "Why would I be avoiding you? I haven't been avoiding you. I've been around. I've been around rather a lot."

"I think you're thinking," says Sirius, wisely. You can tell when Remus is thinking -- well, he's always thinking, of course. But when he has really serious thinking to do he balls socks, or alphabetizes things, and he chews on his lip until it gets chapped and painful-looking. Sirius kind of wants to bite Remus's lip, just to see what the attraction is. "You should stop. You're getting all distracted, and you're wearing the scratchy shirt."

"I'm not," Remus protests. "Well, maybe the shirt. I don't know. It's just -- well, how could I not think at all? I have to think. I don't understand how you don't think."

"Urgh," says Sirius. "Let's not discuss this. It's vulgar." Almost without thinking about it, he reaches for the back of Remus's shirt and tugs him down onto the bed.

"Don't," says Remus, and sneezes violently into his hair. "God! I'm sorry."

"Stop," says Sirius. He splays his fingers across Remus's mouth. "Stop saying that."

Kissing a boy is not like kissing a girl. It's not like he's never done it before -- a dim memory of tequila and James's nipples comes to mind -- but he's never done it sober, and he's never remembered it significantly enough for the sake of comparison, and he's certainly never done it and meant it. There's something combative about it, like neither one is sure which of them should be pushing and which of them should be yielding, so nobody yields. The sounds Remus makes aren't soft, melting girl sounds. Their elbows are always knocking together. And Sirius's mouth and chin itch afterwards. It's not exactly what Sirius imagined when he imagined certain things necessary for the imagining, during those inevitable times when all he really needed was a good wank. It's not exactly what Sirius ever imagined should feel good. Still, when something feels good Sirius doesn't really see the need -- like Remus *always* sees the need -- to question it until it gives up on making him feel good because he's just not paying attention and slips out the back way, never to be seen again.

Kissing a boy involves a lot of accidental teeth scraping and sometimes, with Remus, it's like fighting. Make all the jokes you like about Remus Lupin and the questionable veracity of his man parts, but he's strong and he bites. Sometimes Sirius catches himself in the mirror and wonders how no one notices what he's noticing, swollen lips and dark little bruises around his neck, just low enough to hide with a messy collar. Surely James should notice, though James is busy making his own bruises and probably wouldn't notice if Sirius were carrying on a conversation over breakfast dressed in a cow suit and ermine cloak. James is lost to them all forever, Sirius thinks wistfully.

Remus pulls away to sneeze again.

"Bless you," Sirius says.

Remus kisses him hard and scratchy on the mouth. The full line of Remus' chest is hard and scratchy because of his boy-body and scratchy shirt. Sirius feels strange, though it's his own fault, to be pressed beneath Remus' weight. It's not like kissing a girl at all. It is, Sirius admits, a lot better. Not that he has anything against girls. Not that he's going to make a habit of kissing boys all over the school. Not that this means anything; it just feels good.

When something feels good Sirius thinks *oh, that feels good* and doesn't get distracted from it for too much thinking.

Remus pushes him down. "Oof," says Sirius. He likes that Remus pushes him, Remus who so infrequently pushes anybody. He thinks probably very few people have seen this look of odd, aggressive concentration on Remus' face, the sudden tight wires of the muscles around his wrists. Maybe his test papers have seen it, if test papers could see anything, which they can't, so obviously he's thinking nonsense.

Then Remus' fingers slide into his hair and Sirius's brain fractures a little. Remus' thumb smoothes against the pads of his palm in a way that sends full, dizzy warmth floating wildly about in his stomach. He thinks suddenly that his body is brimming at Remus' touch like hot water, an embarrassing, maudlin image which for some reason is pretty accurate.

He thinks, *This feels good*.

"I should finish packing," says Remus raggedly. His mouth moves against Sirius' mouth when he talks and his breath is too hot and too close. He smells like cold. There is a particular cold smell which, strangely enough, only Remus would understand, the brotherhood of canine senses having something to do with it.

"Why are you so eager to leave?" Sirius asks.

"I'm not," Remus says. "I like to think if I concentrate on packing I won't be thinking about why."

"You're completely insane," Sirius tells him. "Nothing you say ever makes sense. You're packing so you won't have to think about packing? If you go back to socks now I'll -- do -- something. To your socks. It will be terrible. Oh, the weeping you will -- weep." Mostly, Sirius threatens because he knows Remus *can* go back to socks now, whereas Sirius probably cannot even sit up. There's one thing he's been doing a lot more of since Remus went even more completely insane than always and kissed him completely out of nowhere and threw up and then kissed him again, and that's having a private wank and necessary imagination. Remus is all hands but he's not all hands down there; he's never all hands down there. Sirius honestly thought it would be the other way around. Remus *is* of the male persuasion, after all. Of all the boys in the world to kiss, Sirius chose Remus, the one boy who has probably never had a wank at all. If it were James, well, that would be a different story. James would understand a man has needs.

Remus shifts. "My socks," he says.

"This does not bode well," Sirius warns.

Remus sneezes on him and pushes himself upright again. "I don't think it bodes anything. I wouldn't know how to bode if I wanted to."

"You don't bode," Sirius clarifies. "Your behavior -- your behavior bodes. Stop." He wrenches a pair of socks from Remus's hand, unballs them and drapes them over Remus's head, like huge droopy dog ears.

Remus gives him the bleary, helpless look of the very ill. "I know perfectly well how boding works," he says.

"Ridiculous," says Sirius, glaring at him. "You're ridiculous. Have you ever even had a wank?"

"What?" Remus goes pinkish in the ear area. "For heaven's sake, Sirius."

"Is that a For heaven's sake of course I have or a For heaven's sake how dreadful, fetch me some smelling salts or I shall swoon?" He hooks two fingers into one of Remus's belt loops and pulls him forward by the hip.

"For heaven's sake," Remus repeats. "I'm sorry, that didn't exactly -- it didn't clarify."

"You let me lick snot out of your nose," Sirius says. "But you won't tell me what you do when the curtains are drawn."

"Boding badly," Remus says. "Yes, I can see your point." His nose wrinkles, which Sirius watches from up close with some strange combination of delight and amusement. It's a big nose. Sirius wonders what Remus would do if he bit it. "I suppose," Remus says finally, "once or twice -- I mean, I'm not James -- James does it

*all the time*, I'm sure you know that as well as I do, or he used in any case to before Lily -- what I'm trying to say, though, we could hear him clear as anything and I always thought if everyone else could hear *me* go at myself like that I'd have to move to Argentina and live in a hole with a bag over my head and then I'd probably die from lack of oxygen, but that would be all right since my life would be over by that point anyway. Honor of my family," he adds. "That sort of thing."

"James once tried to do that," Sirius admits. "I convinced him not to. Now he's all right. He's even snagged himself a feisty redhead. Just think of all you could be if you only tried."

Remus eyes him narrowly. "Were those sentences even -- you know, I don't think you make any sense either."

"I'm not even paying any attention to what I'm saying," Sirius admits, worrying vaguely at Remus' lower lip. "I'm just trying to make you drop the socks. Is it working?"

Remus smiles.

"This is nice, now," says Sirius. This is important. He's not sure how to communicate that it's important; he rests his forehead against Remus'. "It feels good. Doesn't it? So forget the socks. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we have to buy our own food."

"Doesn't that," Remus begins.

"I don't care yet," Sirius says, grinning like a dog. "It's just tomorrow."



\*

### **Saturday Afternoon.**

The common room is quiet. Sirius and Remus have been missing in action for days and days. Perhaps, James thinks idly, they've run away to join the circus. He's seen Peter around, here and there and about and very Peterish, so that's all right; no one's flushed him down anything or turned him into a cauldron or anything. James finds now that he doesn't want to pack. Lily's already more than half done with her things, lacey undergarments James hates and loves at once and gets tangled in sometimes. Even the one he got caught on his fingernail and had to explain to Madam Pomfrey it was all a prank gone dreadfully wrong when he realized he couldn't get it uncaught from his fingernail.

Now and then Lily appears in the common room, looks around for something, and disappears. The fourth time James says, "Well, have you found it yet? This is getting very exciting. I'm on the edge of my seat. I just *have* to know how this one works out."

"You could be packing," Lily points out. She's holding her potions book. She's carried it back and forth from the common room every single time. James smiles involuntarily seeing it again. Lily Evans: odd duck.

He flutters his hands cheerfully. "A trifle," he says. "C'mon, tell me."

"It's Snape," Lily says guiltily, weighing the heavy book in one hand. "I should -- get him his book back. I haven't had the nerve."

"You have Snape's *book*?" says James, horrified. He has, it must be admitted, noticed her and Snape partner off in Potions before, because he notices everything Lily does, ever; but he's always just assumed it was Lily's natural, irrational kindness. "Why? Did you steal it?"

Lily hits him, with less affection than usual. "We were friends." She flips through the pages of the book, and then laughs, startled and a little sad. "Look -- see, we couldn't figure out how to counteract a potion--"

James checks it. *Just shove a bezoar down their throats*, it says. And then below, in Lily's neat script, the pencil so smeared and faint it is almost illegible: *Agreed. Bugger this.*

"He used to make me laugh," Lily says. "And he wasn't, you know, awful. Unlike some people I could mention, Quidditch-playing people with stupid hair."

"What happened?" asks James, curiosity momentarily overcoming revulsion.

"I left his book in the common room by accident," says Lily, and sighs. "Frank Longbottom found it. You know *Levicorpus*?"

"Ah, an old and loyal friend," James says nostalgically. "Frank taught me that, actually. Snape knows it particularly well."

"Well, so he ought," snaps Lily, whipping around and turning her back on him. "He wrote it." She begins forcefully throwing the piles of clothes into her trunk.

James opens and shuts his mouth several times, and then says, "He who now?"

"He made it up," Lily flares. The back of her neck is extremely pink. "Maybe if you'd spent less time being rotten to everyone who wasn't as popular as you, and more time paying attention to people, you would have noticed that he's one of the cleverest students at this school."

"He *made it up*?" repeats James. This strikes him as showing a distinct lack of foresight. Surely, if you are Severus Snape -- a man whose very appearance engenders a great longing to do bad things to you -- you do not invent a spell which gives people the ability to do those bad things with grace and ease, while simultaneously showing everyone your underwear.

"Yes, he did," Lily says. "It's in the book. Go on."

James turns the pages, uncomprehending. He can't find *Levicorpus*, but there are a great many other scrawled notes and spells and what appears to be one side of a conversation. It occurs to him that Lily probably has the other side in her book. The thought is distasteful and yet, oddly, makes him feel terribly ashamed. He flips to



the front cover.

"The Half-Blood Prince?" he scoffs, almost without thinking. "Who does he think--"

"It was to make me feel better," says Lily quietly and dangerously, turning to face him. "Because Lucius Malfoy and those awful Black sisters used to get on me, and call me Mudblood, and say the most horrible things about my parents. Second year I thought if I wasn't a pureblood, I didn't even deserve to be at the school. And that was sort of your fault, you know," she adds sharply, "you and Sirius -- always being tops over me even though you never ever studied and I was studying *all the time*." Lily takes a deep, determined breath. "And then once Severus and I were working on something, and I couldn't get a problem and it was so frustrating that I started crying. I told him I was practically a Muggle and I ought to just give up and go home."

"You never told me you felt that," James breathes, feeling unbelievably rotten. "I mean, we were tops over Remus, as well, weren't we? And he studied every waking minute -- he studied more than he ever *breathed*. I didn't -- I never would have thought in a million years."

"He said it was rubbish. It was the nicest he's ever been. I mean, you know, he's Snape, and everything, so it wasn't what you would call nice by normal human standards. But he said I was an idiot, and he was a half-blood and if anyone thought that made a difference then they were as stupid as I was. After that he used to joke that he was first among the half-bloods and I was first among Muggleborns. Prince was his mother's name. We thought it was awfully clever."

"But Snape--" James stumbles. "He calls you -- I mean, he's called you -- Mudblood. I've seen him do it. "

"Well, yes," Lily says. "He hates me, doesn't he? You used his own spell on him. For all he knows, I gave it to you. I mean, I practically did."

James looks at the book. Then he looks at Lily. Finally he says, "I've been a real kid about Snape, haven't I."

"It is true that you've demonstrated more maturity in other arenas," Lily says quietly.

"I should -- before we go, I should apologize to him." James realizes, sort of, that he doesn't really owe Snape anything; that in the great karmic balance of the universe, saving him from a giant werewolf pretty much cancels out hanging him upside-down and putting mashed potatoes down his neck. But in the smaller karmic balance, the balance between people, the big things matter less than you might think. "If you like, I'll take it back to him. The book, I mean."

"I hardly think he's going to be any more eager to talk to you than he is to me," says Lily, quirking up her mouth, but her eyes are soft.

James shrugs, one-shouldered. "Doesn't matter."

"I should do it," Lily says.

"We could leave it around," James suggests.

"That was rather the problem in the first place."

"I'll take it to him, then," James offers a second time. It feels strange to want to apologize, to Snape of all people, *Snivellus*, but what happens in school, James supposes, should stay there. It should be ended. They're all going home and they're not coming back. Snape won't accept it. He hasn't any reason to. James realizes he's probably even more of an idiot for thinking this will help instead of make things worse. It strikes him suddenly as dreadful that the things they've done, all the stupid little things that meant nothing, have bled over into their real lives and are a part of whatever they do next. They can't escape any of that, not with all the magic in the world. "I won't read it," James offers. "You should let me do this."

*Let me, with You should.* Lily knows what that is: kind selfishness, selfish kindness, James all grown up but not quite at all. She touches the side of his jaw with her free hand and he turns his face into her palm, breathes in.

"You'll be all right," she says. "Maybe not with Snape, but, you know. Overall."

"I'm taking care of it," says James, and smiles lopsided. She hands him the book. He kisses her wrist.

"When I get back, you owe me a shag," he adds, turning to give her a significant look.

Lily lifts an eyebrow, and also the hem of her skirt.

"Nnaugh," says James, and leaves.

The anticipation is worse than the action, James tells himself. The agonizing period in which he has to imagine himself apologizing to Severus Snape -- this is where the pain is. The actual apology can't possibly be as bad as the idiot yammering he pictures himself engaged in, he thinks hopefully, and he holds this view until he sees Snape coming down the hallway he's headed determinedly through, and all of a sudden he is not sure.

About twenty feet away, Snape sees him too and stops. His eyes lid expressively; one side of his nose lifts. James seriously hates him.

"Look, Potter, as dreadful as it will obviously be never to set eyes on each other again, I was hoping we could skip the tender goodbyes. I have things to do."

"God, you're irritating," James says, in some wonder. "No wonder I always want to punch you."

"This is touching," Snape says. "You always soar high above my expectations. I did imagine there'd be flowers, but I suppose your heartbreaking words of affection shall *have* to suffice."

"Look," James says, "I'm actually not here to punch you."

"Miraculous," Snape replies.

James fingers twitch. He's tempted to add *But the best laid plans* and punch Snape anyway, until he thinks of Lily and manages to stop himself just in time. "I am here," he manages, "to say perhaps it is best if we let -- we let all that, you know, *all that*, just -- just let it go, considering now we're, you know, we're leaving the school

and that means we're more mature now. And adults. Hence the maturity. That we now have more of. And all those good things that involve me not punching you even though I want to, and you not being all snide and poisonous even though you obviously want to."

Snape's nostrils flare. For a moment, he even appears speechless. James supposes it's not in the spirit of reconciliation. "You are impressive even to me," Snape finally says, flinging each word forth like venom. "You expect I should be grateful for--" He waves a twitchy-fingered, oddly delicate hand. "For *this*? The great James Potter deigns to let bygones be bygones. How very *big* of him."

"I'm a big man," says James. "So come on. Let's all be adults, difficult though it is for everybody. What d'you say?"

"What do I say?" Snape repeats, voice hard and incredulous. "What do I -- you made my life a living hell for seven years, Potter, and I long for the opportunity to visit the same courtesy on you. Good day."

He slams past James's shoulder. James says, "Oh for fuck's sake, at least take your bloody Potions book, anyway," and grabs his wrist.

Snape makes a noise like he's been burned and wrenches his arm away. James, surprised, steps back, and Snape suddenly looks up from under his hair, his face pale and agonized. He grips his forearm, bunching up the sleeve like James hit a bruise.

"If you ever touch me again," he says, very quietly, "I will kill you."

James doesn't falter or step backwards, though he wants to. "Here," he says, shoving the book in Snape's direction. "You're mad, d'you know that? D'you hear yourself? *Kill me*? Over a few stupid pranks when we were thirteen?"

Snape's mouth twists, thin and unsmiling and sharp-lined, and makes James feel a little sick. When Snape reaches out to take the book he knocks it hard and quick from James' hands instead; it thuds dully to the ground to lie shut between them. "It's a promise, Potter," Snape says. "A rather different world has begun for us. I only hope you learn what sort of a world it is in the way you deserve to learn it. I only hope I am there to see it."

"Right, well," James snaps back. *My only regret is there were too few dungbombs* would be a nice finishing touch, a voice worryingly like Sirius' whispers in the back of his brain. He kicks it. It whimpers. "Can't say as you'll have too many friends out there but can't say as you had too many in here, either, so carry on blaming other people, eh? It suits you. You must bloody *love* it."

Snape's threat still lingers, and even though it's Snape James feels curiously disheartened. For a moment longer, neither of them says anything at all, until James turns heel and saunters off. It's a jaunty stride, he thinks; a stride that says *I win!* but he can hear Snape stalk off after a few long moments, like he's been waiting for the last word.

So that's that, then, James thinks. Apologizing to Snivellus -- he should have known.

The potions notebook in question is gone the next day, though neither James nor Snape returns to find it. James

wonders only once what happened to it. No doubt, he supposes, it suffered the fate of all lost books: found by idle hands, or passed unnoticed to the back of a professor's bookshelf.

\*

### **Sunday Night.**

"I must say I won't be sorry to say goodbye to this place," Remus says thoughtfully, kicking one desiccated piano leg.

"I am certain we shall meet here again one day," says Sirius. "It has a siren call which is irresistible. These squeaky floorboards. These tattered curtains. These clawmarks in the floor, filled with shiny memories."

"And dust," adds Peter.

"Also dust," agrees Sirius.

"We could have had a picnic farewell ceremony," Remus said, with a sigh. "I thought we should have done that instead."

"Which just goes to show what you know about farewell ceremonies, mate," says James, patting his head. "Leave this to Pads and me."

"I would have brought pie," Remus says. "You like pie. Don't make it out as if I'm the mad one. We *all* like pie."

"Everyone likes pie," Peter agrees.

"All right, look, no pie, no picnic baskets -- this is a manly and important ceremony," James says. "Like the Prewett brothers before us, we shall leave behind our glorious names -- our glorious legacy -- forever. We have to do it right or not at all. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs -- the greatest gang in all of Hogwarts history. I present to you: The Marauder's Map." Sirius trumpets through his hands and James unfurls the map with an enormous flourish. Remus wonders how they are allowed to make fun of his practical pie when they are trumpeting and flourishing. But it is true that the map is a glorious thing, dark ink and thick pages and footprints.

"I hate to do it," says Sirius, with a sigh. "I feel we've had so little time together."

"Well, the beautiful thing about love is its transience, really," says Remus, surreptitiously pressing his fingers against the back of Sirius's neck.

"Think of what joy it has brought us," says James. "Think of the generations to come who will build on the grand tradition of wreaking havoc that we have established here."

"It does seem likely to be the only worthwhile legacy any of us is likely to leave," says Sirius gloomily.

"Serving ice cream is a very sacred duty, pal of my heart," says James. "There are squalling children who will remember you forever. At least you're not alphabetizing inventory forms in the Department of Mind-Numbingly Boring."

"I thought it was Agricultural and Husbandry Supervision?" says Peter.

"That is its slave name," James says. "By night it tears off its dress robes and spectacles and saves lives. Babies, puppies, that sort of thing."

"At least you're not having more school. Like our dear friend Mr. Schooly-Face over here," Sirius says, surreptitiously pressing his fingers against the small of Remus's back in return.

"It's not school," Remus protests, swallowing. "I've told you all a thousand times, it's a *research institute*."

"It was all right when I thought you were making waffles," Sirius says. "But then when you told me absolutely no waffles were involved in this so-called Waffling Cultural Institute I was shocked. Horrified. Deeply disappointed. One might even say my heart was broken."

"It's for *research*," Remus repeats darkly.

"At least it's not taking inseams," Peter points out. "I'm going to be taking inseams."

"Ouch," Sirius says. "I sympathize, my poor comrade. At least you've the opportunity to make those inseams too tight. Chaos may yet reign."

"My dad will skin me and make ties out of me," Peter says, resigned. "No tight inseams, he told me, and no loose ones either. An inseam is the most delicate balance of a tailor's talent and precision, and anyway my dad says--"

"This is already the Department of Mind-Numbingly Boring," James groans. "Come on, lads, let's have a wonderful last go of it, eh? We can do it. I've faith in us. Let the ritual begin."

Peter blinks. "Er," he says. "What ritual is that, then?"

"We're burning it," James says, eyes aglow. "We're going to sing a song and burn it."

"I thought we'd sing 'Auld Lang Syne,'" adds Sirius.

Remus suddenly finds there is dust in his throat and chokes. "We're doing -- I'm sorry, I fail to see how that is in the grand tradition of the Prewett brothers and have you forgotten how much work we spent on that? How much the paper cost? Just -- just feel the paper again and tell me you're burning it. Months of -- *months* -- this is ridiculous."

"It is in the grand tradition of Viking warriors, in whose horned footsteps walked the Prewetts," James explains.

"It doesn't leave our names behind at all!" protests Remus. "Not that I am particularly concerned about our names being left behind, it seems to me that anyone who has to read the property damage reports of this place will be made aware of our glorious names, but you have to realize this is a truly pointless thing to do. What in God's name is a horned footstep?"

"Metaphor," James says.

"That's not metaphor," Remus replies.

"You're just prickled up because we're burning your beautiful paper." James strokes it fondly. "It's what the ancients would want us to do, you know. It's a celebration of honor, of valor, of glory, et cetera."

"There's no glory in burning your work," Remus says, then quiets. It's a true shame. The footprints are perfectly shaped and the map no longer makes farting noises when you try to open it -- every possible name spoken against its hallowed pages corresponds to an appropriate, biting insult of which even Wilde would be proud -- even the staircases shift and reconnect with fluid accuracy. It's like their baby, Remus thinks. You can't just go around lighting babies on fire.

"Padfoot," James says solemnly. "Have you the matches?"

"I have the matches," Sirius says. He fishes them out of his trousers and lights one with steady hands.

"We have made history, mates," James says. "We are handsome. We are brilliant. We have marauded with the best of them."

There is silence.

Remus squeezes his eyes shut. He can't watch.

Nothing happens.

Remus opens his eyes again.

"Ouch," Sirius says suddenly, and shakes the match out. "Burnt my fingers!"

"That's because you were supposed to light the bloody thing," James points out. "Are you with me, horned footsteps and dungbombs, to the last?"

"Well," Sirius begins, looking torn. "I mean, I just -- we can't -- my *best* insults are in there, James."

"Et tu, Sirius?" James moans. "Such betrayal -- from my best friend! Oh, I am wounded. Wounded to the very core."

"Did you really want to burn it?" says Remus, incredulously.

"Of course he did!" says Peter.

"Well, I just--" James looks at them helplessly, and then sighs. "I don't think it's something that we ought to leave lying about. Times being what they are."

"You're telling me this whole thing stems from a sense of maturation and responsibility?" yelps Sirius, the shocked betrayal on his face mirroring James's own. "I thought it was Vikings and Prewetts!" He flings the matches to the earth. "Crafty, lying Potter that you are. I should have known better."

"Lily--" James starts, and everyone groans.

"No mention of such things tonight," Sirius says, waving a hand. "Come on. Moony's right. This is silly, and it doesn't do us any good to take it with us, so why don't we hide it? Then, one day, brave young entrepreneurs such as ourselves find it, they will carry on in *our* blazing, horned path of glory without actually setting incredibly brilliant pieces of enchantment on fire. Unless Filch finds it," he adds, thoughtfully, "in which case it may be lost to the ages."

"Let's hope some kind of heir finds it," Peter says. "With all those games of Catch It In Your Lap, and that one year we were all, d'you remember, test subjects for all Sirius's summer spells -- I don't think any of us is having any children of our own, really."

"Bah, we are virile," James says. He eyes the map, then grabs it quickly and folds it, holding it tight to his chest. "To think," he murmurs absently, "I was going to burn you, my darling."

"The level of schizophrenia in this room," Remus begins.

"No Lily," Sirius repeats, "and no schizophrenia. Just us." He grins, eyes wild and flashing. Remus feels something terrible and weak happen to his stomach, like it's made a desperate, denied bid for freedom through his throat. "Let's hide it. C'mon. Like buried treasure. Maybe one of *our* good-looking and incredibly intelligent progeny will find it in the distant future, and then we'll know they're worthy of our loins. We'll tell them all our secrets, all our tricks, all our trades."

"Most people are not worthy of your personal loins, Sirius," says James lovingly. "I wouldn't hold out."

Sirius makes an odd "huh" sound and glances involuntarily at Remus, who finds himself coughing wildly again.

"Where are we going to hide it?" asks Peter. "I mean, if we're not to leave it lying around."

"We will leave it in the one place only the worthy will look," says Sirius, and James says knowingly, "Kitchen cupboards."

"I am not sure I will ever be able to visit your flat," says Remus. "Who knows what odd things you will keep in what odd places."

"What if we have pie?" Sirius offers. "And picnic baskets? Though I cannot assure you they'll be together. There might be underthings in the picnic baskets."

"So long as they aren't in the pie," Remus replies.

"Cupboards it is, then," James says. "It seems sort of -- sort of unworthy, doesn't it?"

"James," Sirius says. "James, James, you were about to have me *set it on fire*. And I was going to do it!"

"Like a warrior of old," James protests. "Burnt to dwell with his ancestors the gods. In Valhalla."

"Lily's having him read all sorts of Viking mythology," Peter explains. "He's showing off."

"Right, well," Sirius says. "I suppose we should get on with it. 'It' being our last hurrah, our final frolic, and so on."

"Don't say that," protests Peter. "We'll still see each other. Won't we? Grown ups still see each other. I mean, I won't be half a mile from any of you."

"But it's different," says James. "Never mind. Last hurrah. Come on."

Huddled under the cloak, it smells of boy and armpit and incipient adulthood, which also smells of boy and armpit, and Sirius' socks and Peter's dinner and the weird goo James puts in his hair. Remus doesn't mind if their song is sung to the rafters or if only they know it in the end. They shuffle out into the warm night together, and Remus thinks if they could just keep it all as some secret amongst four good friends they'll be just fine until they're impossibly old and the seven years they spent at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry has shrunk into a short sweet memory, distant as a good dream.



Sirius,


I have confused your socks  
tremendously, I'm sure, by rolling them  
for the first time in their sock-y lives.  
They are very confused, but they are  
also very rolled. Who knows what mad  
adventures they will accompany you  
on, smelling disturbingly of dead rodent  
and expensive cheese.

Remus



*Tucked into Sirius' suitcase. With the socks.*





*Kept pristine, later burned, later salvaged.*


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

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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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