

Part Nine
March, 1976

On most days, Sirius Black consults James Potter before effecting an idea. On most days, great tragedies do not occur from simple lack of coordination, planning, or revision, or some arbitrary combination of both. On some days, however, Sirius Black skips the consultation step and moves directly into action. He often regrets it later. Most of Hogwarts often regrets it later. This is one such day.

"Where is he, Black?" Snape asks. The light in the hallway is most unflattering to his complexion, waxy, yellow, unclean. He runs his spindly yellow fingers through his hair, which separates greasily into individual, thick strands over his forehead. Sirius shudders. "Another night of debauchery for the two of you? Really, *really*. You *are* a bad influence."

"He's off shagging your mum, Snivellus, since I got sick of her fat saggy arse," Sirius says casually, rolling up his sleeves with great deliberation and care. "Why do you care? Just hoping he was in the showers so you could catch a quick peek?"

"You're one to talk," Snape drawls. "Trailing around after him like a little puppy, trying to control who he talks to, what he does, with whom he *makes nice*. It's pathetic."

"A state of being you know *all* about, after all." Sirius hopes, very much, that Snape will take just two steps closer and give him a good excuse to punch him right in the nose. It really does present an awfully tempting target, all shiny and out there. He does not, however, throw punches that require any kind of awkward setup, so he's willing to bide his time until Snape makes it easy for him which, as Snape learns quickly and well, might not happen without further provocation. "Do I detect a note of jealousy in your dulcet, *harmonious* whining?"

Snape snorts. "Don't worry, Black. Your *toys* are safe." He gathers his things up into his arms, eyes shifting to uncover the safest, most feasible escape route. Sirius is proud to note there isn't one, unless Snape is willing to venture just close enough to be in range.

"Don't know about you, Snivellus, but some of us have friends. We call them friends; they call us friends; it's a mutual relationship in which we are friendly. Very complicated. Tough for you, isn't it? Well, keep trying. You'll figure it out someday."

"Oh, I *will* figure it out," Snape says, very softly, while his black eyes flick up to Sirius's, cold and hateful. "I don't know yet, but I will figure it out. And when I do, this whole school will. I *promise* you that."

"Well, the student body will be itching to know when you unlock the mysteries of 'friendship,'" Sirius says easily, but a chill crawls down his spine.

"I think you know what I'm talking about," Snape says.

"I think you're a loony," Sirius says, "and you need to find a hobby." He saunters a little closer, cracking his knuckles. "A hobby other than getting the shit kicked out of you by me because you can't shut up about things that are not your business."

"Not my business, hmm." Snape grins mirthlessly at him, spidery fingers closing around his books, and eyes the space between Sirius and the wall like he might try to break through it. Sirius is still trying to decide whether, when the inevitable happens, he will a) stick out a foot and let Snape go flying, or b) try the riskier but probably more rewarding method of lunging sideways and trapping Snape between himself and a wall, when Snape adds, "I'm going to follow him. I know where he goes, and I'm going to find out what he does. And then you'll *all* be sorry."

Sirius snorts and rolls his eyes. "Oh, right. Because you know so much. Why don't you go jab your head into that big knot on the Whomping Willow, if you're so bloody curious?" It would be wonderful, Sirius thinks, to watch an inanimate object like a tree share in the joy that is giving Snivellus a thumping.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sirius can almost see the cogs whirring behind Snape's narrow, dark eyes, the calculations, the speculations, spiraling to an unfortunate conclusion. Snape is already clinging to the tiny crumbs of information with the desperation of the starving. Pathetic. Hopeless. Morbidly fascinating. How strange the unsocialized are, eager and withdrawn at once, always unsure of how to stand or what, exactly, their faces are doing on the outside.

"It's supposed to mean you should save me the trouble," Sirius replies, "of bashing your pointy little head in for you."

"No," Snape says. "The Whomping Willow. That's where he is, isn't he. Right now." His eyes dart to one of the slope-arched windows along the outer hallway, where the sun is dripping low on the horizon.

"And what if it is?" Sirius says slyly. "Think you're man enough to handle him after hours, is that it?"

"You're up to something," Snape hisses, "you've been up to something for years. Just because no one else is smart enough to notice what's happening right under their noses doesn't mean I don't see it. I do."

"Surprising," Sirius grins, "considering how hard it must be to see anything under *that* nose."

"Very funny," Snape snarls. "We'll see who ends up laughing."

"Oh, me," Sirius says matter-of-factly. "I can say with great confidence that it will be me."

"Well, if you like -- *Rictusempra!*" Snape yells, suddenly yanking out his wand out of nowhere. Sirius ducks to the side and the curse fizzles harmlessly against the wall, but Snape takes advantage of the distraction to speed out of the hallway as fast as his little legs can carry him.

Sirius regards him in some surprise, ponders his parting words, and then howls after his retreating footsteps, "Look out for the stairs, they've just been mopped!" and is gratified to hear a series of painful-sounding crashes

followed a torrent of very creative Pureblood curses.

Lovely evening, he thinks, and strolls out of the hallway, whistling.

"You said *what* to *who*?!" James shrieks, yanking himself up by his own hair. "And he did *what*?!"

"Poke the willow, Snape, fell down the stairs," Sirius says, regarding him with innocent surprise. "And this was...bad?"

"Bad?! Fucking -- fuck, Padfoot! Fucking fuck!" James' face has turned a remarkable shade of purple. Sirius squints at it, intrigued.

"Oh, come on, it's not like he'll actually do it, I was just winding him up--"

"How can you be so stupid?! Were you always this stupid? Wormtail, back me up--"

"You're stupid," Peter says to Sirius, saucer-eyed. It was a look that was once oddly appealing, childish and round-cheeked, but now seems somehow disturbing. Naturally, Sirius might also be put off because of the statement coupled with it. No one likes to be called stupid by someone whose eyes look like they belong underneath the cups at high tea. "Wow," Peter adds. Sirius cuffs him on the ear.

"Really," he mutters, "I don't see why you're making such a big deal out of it. Calm down. Sit down. Nice underwear, by the way, is that new?" Sirius flops down into a chair, folding his arms behind his head and closing his eyes with a satisfied sigh. "Relax. Snivellus'll go out there, get his face whacked in by the Willow, have his nose re-done, and everyone goes home happy. I don't know why you're inventing colors on your face."

"Because what if he gets through?" James splutters.

"You think *Snivellus* can get *through*?" Sirius scoffs. "Not bloody likely. The Willow'll knock him from here to Sunday. It's a good tree. It knows what sort of people it wants crawling through it and what sort of people should get their honking great noses knocked off."

"Sirius!" James snaps, flailing his arms in front of Sirius' face. "Sirius, *he could get through*. You told him *how to get through*. You gave him *directions*."

"He might just do what we did, the first time," Peter adds. "Remember? Picked up a big stick and poked at it until we hit it right. Kept out of range of the branches and you even said it yourself, easiest break-in you ever managed."

Sirius cracks one eye open, pondering this. "Well I didn't tell him *which* knot to poke," he rationalizes. "I just said he should hit it with his head. Clearly not a suggestion to take seriously."

"*But what if he does*," James insists. "Think, Sirius, *think*."

"Do you really think that's possible?" Sirius swings his legs onto the floor, scratching his chin. "Do you know, I think I've got hair on my chin. No, seriously. Go on. Feel it." James looks, for a moment, as if he's going to hall off and punch Sirius in the face. Sirius blanches at his expression, pulling back. "The hell's gotten into you?" Sirius demands, an angry flush coming over his cheeks. "It's like everyone's gone mad here but me!"

"You're the one who's mad," James snaps, still flailing. "You told Snape where Moony is, Sirius. It's not a game, it's not a joke, it isn't clever or funny -- you could get Snape killed!"

"Evans is rubbing off on you, mate," Sirius mutters. "In a bad way."

James puts his hands on Sirius's shoulders, looking very serious. He might look more serious if he were wearing more than a pair of underwear and his hair wasn't all sticky-out over one ear. "Padfoot, *think* for a second. What if Snape gets through? Let alone if he gets hurt? What happens to Moony if *Severus Snape* finds out what's going on? Two seconds. Shut up and think about it."

Sirius shuts up and thinks about it.

"I -- he won't get in," he says, but uncertainly, and then, "oh, shit."

"You're bloody right, oh shit," James says furiously. "Pads, there's pranks, and there's pranks."

"It wasn't a prank even!" Sirius protests weakly, feeling slightly lightheaded. "If it had been a prank I'd've put a bucket of water over the door or made the tree fart when he pushed it or something. Anything. This wasn't even -- it was just a *comment*!"

"What if they put Moony down?" Peter wonders aloud. "Like once, my old pet Kneazle bit my Aunt Esther right on the arm, and we had to--"

"Shut *up*, Peter!" Sirius and James yell in unison.

"Well I was just," Peter begins. Sirius takes him by the top of his head and neatly sits him down into a chair, then flicks him right between the eyes. "That hurt!"

"Shut up," Sirius says. "Shut up, sit down, and don't move. We have to think, and the sound of your voice isn't helping."

"Well it's not my fault," Peter mutters. He crosses his arms over his chest, glowering at the far wall.

"So." Sirius turns on James. "Think. *Think*, man, *think*!"

"I can't think if you're shouting at me!" James exclaims. "Just -- all right. What, *exactly*, did you tell Snape?"

"Well," Sirius says. "First we got into it about each other's mothers, and then we got into it about sex with Remus, I think--"

"Not that part," James explains. The tips of his ears have turned the same shade of mauve as his nose and

cheeks.

"You're all splotchy," Peter mumbles. No one pays any attention.

"Oh, right, right." Sirius pulls one sock off and holds it out to Peter. "For your mouth," he instructs. He turns back to James, running his fingers distractedly through his hair. "You meant the relevant parts. I'm just. Uhm. No, I've got it. All right so then I said -- 'Why don't you go jab your head into that big knot on the Whomping Willow, if you're so bloody curious?' And he said 'What's that supposed to mean' and I said something about how it would save me the trouble of smashing his head in for him and then *he* figured that's where Remus was, the Willow, and how he was going to figure out what we were up to once and for all with one of those expressions, like he's so brilliant. Well, if he's so brilliant, why can't he figure out how to use shampoo, that's what I want to know."

"The relevant parts." James holds Sirius tight by the shoulders, shaking him to punctuate each word. "The. Relevant. Parts. Please."

"And then he stormed off and fell down the stairs and for all we know he could be with Madam Pomfrey right now!" Sirius finishes. "Completely incapacitated and posing no threat."

"The stairs wouldn't stop him," James says grimly.

"No," Sirius groans. "Stupid fucking sailboat-nosed Slytherin *bastard*."

"We have to stop him," Peter pipes up from the chair, and then quails and stuffs the sock into his mouth when Sirius whirls on him.

"Stop him? Stop him *how*? What do you want us to do?"

"Go after him," James decides. "That's how."

"Oh, no, thanks very much," Sirius says in shocked disgust. "Risk my neck so Snape may or may not be saved from a hypothetical beating?"

"Have you been paying any attention at *all*?! Risk your neck so Moony won't hurt Snape and you won't have caused the biggest disaster of our relatively short lives! Hand me my trousers, they're over that chair."

Sirius does, automatically, but something is nagging at his mind. "Prongs, how are we going to stop him?"

"I don't know," James admits. There's a sort of still, tidal rage behind his words, that strange anger that he gets where he goes cold and very calm and very quiet. "You should have thought of that before you went running your mouth off about someone else's secrets. I can't believe you."

"I didn't," Sirius protests. "You're not being fair."

"You *did*," barks James, whipping around and shoving his face into Sirius's. "You did, all right? You didn't mean to, and who doesn't like the thought of Snape getting destroyed by a tree, and I understand how it

happened, but the point is you ran your mouth off and now *other people* are going to pay for it. So be quiet and *deal with it*." There is a short, very silent pause, and then he adds, "and the fucking zipper is jammed on these fucking jeans."

"They can't be stuck." Sirius stares down at James' fly, or rather James' fingers struggling with James' fly, and shakes his head. James, indulging in his sometimes-painful penchant for heroics one second, and struggling to zip up his trousers the next. It's almost funny. Sirius attempts a laugh that wilts immediately on his lips, and sticks for the next few minutes deep down in his throat.

"*Hell*." James has developed that struggling, clumsy desperation that only comes about in moments of dire need, restless panic, and certain doom. He has the feeling that his fingers have suddenly turned into sausages, for all they're listening to him. The zipper, stuck on itself, stuck on trouser fabric, stuck on his underwear, refuses to move until, at last, with Herculean effort, he rips the fly free completely. "Sirius," James says, deadly quiet, "my trousers are in two pieces. Give me your trousers."

"I'm not giving you my trousers!" Sirius objects. "*I'll* go!"

"And do what?" Peter asks around his sock.

"I told him not to talk," Sirius snaps, pointing an accusing finger first at Peter, then at James. "I *told* him not to *talk*!"

"And do what?" James repeats. His jaw is tight, hard at the edges, twisting the corners of his mouth.

"*You* don't even know what you're going to do!" Sirius explodes. "You just want to -- you just want my pants so you can run out their first and play hero, clean up all the messes, be James Potter, the only one who can clean up the messes other people leave. Well I *won't have it*! Wear *his* trousers!"

"As what," James snaps, temper and frustration making him tactless, "a very short poncho?" Peter goes white, and then red, and then very small in his chair. "I'm going to the bloody Willow, I'm going to haul Snape back by the neck if I have to, and you can stand there like an idiot or you can help, because I'm going. In broken trousers." James, considering these epic final words, spins around and hurtles out the door. Sirius gestures after him, mouth open, stares at Peter, stares at the door, and then his face goes tight.

"Fuck all!" Without waiting to confuse himself further, he breaks into a run after James, yanking his jacket over his shoulders.

"Bloody--" Peter says to no one, and sends a panicked glance out the window, at his own hands, at the abandoned sock. "What now?"

The moon has risen high in the sky as James makes it outside and finally kicks his useless pants away from down about his ankles. "Bloody hell," he mutters to himself. "Stupid bloody pants, stupid bloody Sirius, stupid bloody Severus Snape." He stops for a minute, running his fingers miserably through his hair, legs cold in the chill night air. "Bloody willow," he adds, "bloody full moons, bloody werewolves, bloody hell."

"You're repeating yourself," Sirius pants, running up behind him. "And wasting valuable time."

"I don't know what to do," James mutters. He cranes his neck forward, peering off into the distance. "Is the Willow moving? Is it still moving? I can't see."

"Neither can I." Sirius makes a low, desperate sound. "Closer," he decides, "we have to get closer."

"We can't get caught," James adds. "Stick to the trees. Stick to the shadows."

"I'm not an idiot," Sirius scoffs. "I can figure that out for myself."

James's only reply is an arched brow directed at Sirius from just over his shoulder.

"Save it," Sirius snaps. "Just--save it. Should we -- you know. Should we?"

"No," James says, a little distantly, already making a plan. Whether it's a good plan or not, Sirius can't imagine. It's terrible, not knowing. "Won't do any good without Wormtail, neither of us can get at the knot--"

"Where is he?" Sirius spins back to the door. "Isn't he coming?"

"You scared him."

"*You* went on about how short and fat he is!"

"We don't -- have -- time for this!" James yells, smacking Sirius on the side of the head. "Get it together! We need to just -- just fucking *run*."

Sirius thinks for a second. As far as plans go, it's hardly a complicated one. It doesn't actually seem like a plan -- not yet, though James is full of surprises. It's something Sirius could have thought of all on his own, but for some reason, he isn't resentful. He's grateful. He doesn't have to do the thinking, he doesn't have to come up with what happens *after* running, and, most importantly, he isn't the one who's going to make things any worse than he's already made them. He looks up to the moon, licking his lips nervously, and nods. "Right," he says. "Running. Running I can do."

James is already off, pale legs flashing through the shadows. Sirius lunges after him, one sock on, one sock off, something cutting the sole of his bare foot almost immediately. He bites back a sound of pain and, not even half a minute later, he's too numb to even feel it, the wind too rush to allow him most major thoughts. James in front of him to follow; Willow to get to; Snivellus to catch. It's a three-link chain of action. He feels more confident, blood pumping faster, heart beating out the quickened rhythm of necessity. This is going to be all right. This is going to be fine. This is going to be nothing at all. This is all going to resolve itself easily and without any lasting problems and with no fingers of blame pointing back to him and no one putting Remus down, as if he's some sort of animal. This is just another day in the wild and crazy lives of Sirius Black and James Potter, who mess things up and save the day anyway.

What a relief.

"Owfuck," Sirius says, and goes down, aided by a large, only somewhat visible, and certainly low branch.

James pauses only for an instant to take his trousers.

When James pounds up to the Willow, his throat aching with effort, the tree is thrashing its branches wildly against the air, signaling some recent disturbance. James unleashes a torrent of curses, distantly wishing Sirius were around to appreciate his fluency, and hurls himself, eyes squeezed shut, at the crucial knot. For his efforts, he gets smacked in the stomach with a particularly aggressive branch and goes flying, hitting the ground with an unforgiving thud.

There are no curses, at this point, to properly express his rage. His trousers are too tight across the thigh -- this has never happened before, when borrowing Sirius's clothes, and he puts it down in the back of his head to increase stair-climbing to visit Lily -- his best friend is a total careless wanker, and his second-best friend is about five minutes from being euthanized for relieving the world of one of its most prominent boils. The world is a cruel and horrible place, and James is, for a moment, paralyzed by the pure unfair *awfulness* of everything.

It won't work. It never works to just sit there and hate it. James knows this. Sometimes he feels like an idiot for knowing this, feels pretentious and wanky and over-mature and wishes he could just kick things and rage and yell and be a proper teenager; but he can't, because it just *doesn't work*. Driving deep breaths into his lungs, steadying himself against future impact, he dives in one more hopeless time, rolls under a side-swiping bough and smacks the knot with the side of his fist. The Willow quivers and goes still. The side of his hand goes numb. He stares at the entrance to the underground tunnel, a dark, wide, helpless mouth.

"Bugger all," James whispers. Winded, sprawled on one side, for a moment to dizzy to lift himself and head into the encircling dark, he realizes suddenly something he wishes adrenaline kept him from realizing. He's frightened. Terrified, in fact. A werewolf isn't Remus, though Remus is a werewolf. It's a great big creature with tight claws and powerful paws and crushing jaws, teeth like knives and a bite that changes everything. He's never been afraid of Remus and he hasn't ever been old enough to be afraid of the wolf before now, afraid of the consequences, afraid of the reality of it. It's not just an animal. It's not just a friend with a different shape and different instincts, like Padfoot, or Wormtail. It's a Dark Creature, capable of wrath, ruin and poison, and little else. James recalls the dead squirrels strewn about the forest floor after a night of gliding through the forest, feeling a little sick to his stomach at the messy blood. He draws in a deep, ragged breath. However bad it is for him, right now, he tells himself, it's worse for Severus Snape. And, that not being nearly enough incentive, it's more terrible still for Remus Lupin, changed and snarling and without his mates to calm the fever in his blood.

James presses one hand to his chest. His heart is moving so fast and so a-rhythmically he wonders that it hasn't leaped already, straight out of his ribcage. "What are you waiting for?" he asks himself out loud. The branches above him shiver against their spell. He dives forward, and into the tunnel, pants tight around his waist, face streaked with dirt and sweat, and precious time running out.

The first thing he does is slam into a wall, and nearly knock himself out.

The second thing he does is curse, again, mostly because it's good to hear some kind of comforting, familiar

sound. He yanks his wand -- Sirius's wand, rather -- out of his back pocket to put a light on, so he can get running again. The light wavers insanely over the root-crawled walls. His heart hammers in his ears. James remembers having a nightmare like this, once, except in the nightmare he wasn't wearing pants and he was being chased by an army of rabbits. He silently thanks God for the existence of Sirius, if only as a pants-lender and a rabbit-chaser, and then remembers that if Sirius did not exist, this nightmarish little excursion would not be occurring at all.

Over the sound of his heaving breathing, he hears footsteps: slower footsteps, not too far off, echoing.

And then he hears the howl.

James runs like he's never run before. His glasses slip off his nose, from sweat or current lack of luck or a good combination of both, and are lost behind him. Everything fuzzes out of focus, but he can see enough to know he's going forward, and knows enough to realize if he turns back now, he's already too late. "Don't go up the stairs!" he screams into the shifting darkness in front of him. "Snape! *Stay where you are!*"

He comes out into the moonlight over the unsteady floorboards to see footprints, small, disturbing a month's dust. Nausea hits him in one powerful wave. He wants to throw up.

"Snape!" he screams. "Snape, where *are* you?" The staircase creaks and sways, and James leaps forward, operating on instinct only, taking the steps three at a time and tripping ungracefully twice. He takes the last five stairs on his hands, scrambling, and swerves onto the landing when his blood goes sluggish in his veins. There's a very small figure in black robes frozen on the floorboards, and a huge silence sawing through his ears. James freezes in the doorway; and then, almost luckily, there's the howl, immediate, enormous, smashing through the rational forebrain into the black, primordial pit of animal fear.

"Bollocks," James says, forcing it down. "Snape!" The dark figure whirls, paper-white, mouth a dark slash in its face. James lunges for him, grabs him by the neck of the robes and drags him away. Snape, he discovers, runs the way he does everything: like a total prat, his big stupid feet every which way. Something growls, ground-shaking, and smashes like a cannonball into the iron-barred door. The whole house shivers under the impact.

"Come on!" James howls, losing all patience, and literally pulls Snape down the stairs. They land in a splintered heap by the lone, awkward banister.

"Get off me, Potter!" the World's Biggest Idiot shrieks. James, finally doing something he wants to do, *has* wanted to do since first year, belts Snape a good one upside the ear and shoves him into the open trapdoor.

Snape hits the root-tangled ground with a loud *ooph*. The wolf howls out behind them, over and over, hitting the doorframe and the floor and shaking the shack deep into the earth beneath. James winces at the sounds, imagining wolf joints melting into boy-joints in the morning, compiling all his mistakes, crippled by the immensity of his fear.

"A werewolf," Snape says, and breaks James' terrified reverie. "You sent me to be *killed* by a..." He trails off, voice shaky and small, as realization hits at last. "*Lupin*," he spits out. "That's *Lupin*."

James puts his head in his hands, which are shaking, and keeps his voice calm. "Shut up," he whispers. "Just

shut up."

"You tried to kill me," Snape insists, voice rising, hysterical, "you tried to kill me with that monster."

"What the *fuck* do you know?" James demands. He moves before he can think, grabbing Snape by the collar and throwing him against the tunnel wall. "What the *fuck* do you know about *anything*? What the *fuck* do you know about tonight? What the *fuck* do you know about *werewolves*?"

"I know you tried to kill me!" Snape whines. "With -- with *that*!"

James holds him by the collar for a moment and then lets go, disgusted and too tired to argue. Snape slides down the wall, boneless. "You ignorant little shit," James hisses. "Don't flatter yourself. You're not that fucking important."

"You're a murderer," Snape breathes. "Black -- Black is worse than the rest of you put together. You'll be expelled, you'll be put in *jail*, they'll have to have that *thing* put down--"

"Snape," James says, very quietly. "Shut up. I just *saved your life*." It has to be absolutely the worst thing he's ever done in his life, and it hurts to admit even to himself, but he makes himself grind it out anyway. "And I want you to know that I didn't do it for you, because your pathetic, snot-nosed little life isn't worth one tiny constipated turd, in my personal opinion. I did it for Remus, because he's worth a thousand of you and there's nothing I wouldn't do for him. Including this." He gives Snape a last, disgusted look. "Now *live with it*," he finishes, as calmly as he can, before he turns on his heel and sets off down the tunnel, his heart still wild in his ears and Snape's breathing loud and ragged in the darkness.

Halfway through the tunnel, he hears Snape following him, keeping quiet and hanging back. A few steps further and he finds his glasses, beneath his left toe. He shoves them onto his nose, one lens cracked, the other smeared with dirt, but it's an improvement. Sirius' wand casts wavering light in front of him, the air close and stale and earth-bound. A few worms wriggle thick and pink above his head, dangling bodies struggling upwards. As much as he hates to acknowledge it, they're both afraid, for different reasons. As much as it sickens him, it helps to know there's someone else with him struggling through the darkness. Even if it is Snape. Even if Snape is still going to ruin everything, after all James did to save his ungrateful rear end.

"I'm going to tell everyone," Snape says, unexpected in the prolonged silence. James feels his gut wrench.

"You're disgusting," he spits out. "You're *repulsive*."

"He's a threat to everyone at this school," Snape snarls. "You must think you're all awfully clever, hiding it all this time, putting everyone's lives at risk. It's too bad your friend Black is such an imbecile -- otherwise you would have *pulled it off*, isn't that right, Potter?"

"I told you before to shut up," James whispers. "I meant it. You don't know anything, Snape. You don't know anything about him."

"I know enough," Snape replies shakily. "I know he's a monster. I'll have you all expelled."

"That won't be necessary," Dumbledore says, from the mouth of the tunnel. James has never been so relieved to see anyone in his entire fifteen years of life. Dumbledore's eyes, James realizes, twinkle like stars. Uncanny, yes, but infinitely welcome. Dumbledore reaches a hand down to help James up and out, and does the same for Snape moments later. Snape turns on him, ready to explode, but Dumbledore holds up a hand to silence him. "Mr. Pettigrew told me what happened," he explains. Peter steps out nervously behind him, not quite meeting James' eyes.

"It's all right," James says. "I'm sorry, Peter. Thank you."

"And Mr. Black, though bleeding and lacking his trousers, filled me in on the rest." Dumbledore smiles benevolently, eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Where is he, sir?" James asks. It would be such a fucking relief to see Sirius right now, wearing that ridiculous hangdog *who, me?* expression that he adopts every time he does something stupid and gets caught, making faces at James behind Dumbledore's back.

"Mr. Black is indisposed at the present time," Dumbledore says serenely.

He's puking, Peter mouths from behind Dumbledore's back, followed by some impressive miming. *Puuuuukiing*.

James feels mad, unhinged, and impossibly lonely, a combination of random emotions all fired at him at once. He wants Sirius to be here, not off being a prick on his own.

Snape has been trembling, fists screwed up, sallow face bulging like an over-pumped balloon, and now it seems he loses all control and bursts out, "Sir, they tried to kill me!"

"I have been assured that it was an accident, Mr. Snape, resulting from the foolish action of one person, rather than a conspiracy." Dumbledore takes off his glasses and polishes them on his sleeve. "Would you like to present an opposing case?"

"They sent me here," Snape hisses. "They knew what would happen!"

"I believe," Dumbledore begins, looking up at the sky as if greatly concerned with the actions of the stars, "I believe Mr. Black was of the impression that he had not given specific enough directions to put you in danger of anything worse than a beating."

"It -- took some effort," Snape mutters. For the first time, James notices the enormous bruise blooming around his eye and the torn sleeve of his expensive robe, and is darkly pleased. "That doesn't excuse," Snape continues, but again Dumbledore stops him.

"I believe this conversation would be better continued inside, don't you? Mr. Potter, you can find Mr. Black and return his trousers to him, and then meet Mr. Pettigrew, Mr. Snape and myself back in my office. And we can all of us discuss things together, shall we?" James nods, worrying at a belt loop. "And none of us will point any fingers," Dumbledore adds, "nor will we raise our voices. Perhaps we can even have something to eat to calm our nerves -- some tea would suit our purposes as well, wouldn't it." He turns on his heels, beckoning once with

a quick old hand, and James trails after him, not looking up. He can still hear the wolf howling behind him. Even as Dumbledore shuts the great Hogwarts doors behind them, guilt is still thick in his throat.

"Now." Dumbledore steeples his fingers just beneath his nose, and leans forward, peering at the four boys seated across his desk. "There will be no interruptions, no profanities, and no insults. This is a grave matter, and we will discuss it with the gravity it deserves." He pauses, passing Peter, on the right end, sinking into a large-backed armchair, the sugar. "One lump or two, Mr. Pettigrew?"

"Er," Peter says. "Three, actually."

Snape gives him a repulsed look. Peter studiously ignores him.

"And Mr. Black, of course, I know all too well --"

"--I don't want any tea," Sirius says, in a rush. He looks very ill. "Sir, I'm sorry, but--"

"I understand," Dumbledore says, gently but firmly. "However, I cannot imagine that we will accomplish anything of use if we rush blindly ahead. What appears to be a useless and, dare I say, agonizingly time-consuming ritual may in fact be just what we need to clear our heads and -- ah -- begin to look at this incident objectively. Now, as I know from frequent experience, you prefer cream to tea, and proportionate amounts of sugar -- there we are."

Sirius runs his hands desperately through his hair and slumps even further down into his seat. His eyes catch James's, and he blinks, twice: *I wish I were dead.*

James pushes his glasses up his nose. *I wish you were too.*

After what seems an eternity Dumbledore finally leans back and regards them impassively. "Now. I would like to hear first, if you please, from Mr. Black, who has decreed himself the instigator of tonight's chaos."

"I am," Sirius says. "I did. It was me. Well," he adds as an afterthought, "and, I mean, him." He jabs a thumb contemptuously at Snape. "But it was my fault. I wasn't thinking, sir."

"I cannot tell you how much that shocks me," Dumbledore says, sounding distinctly amused. "Would you mind recounting for us precisely what happened? With--" he amends hurriedly, as Sirius opens his mouth, "no personal attacks of any kind, if you please."

"I just told him -- we were -- having a bit of a -- I was messing about a bit, sir, and I told him..." Sirius swallows, loudly. "He was being a right t -- being very derogatory, sir, about Remus, and acting like -- and *insinuating* that he knew -- things he didn't. And so I told him to go poke the knot on the Willow. I didn't say which knot, sir. And I didn't think he'd really do it, I thought he'd think I was trying to set him up and he'd stay away--"

"Ridiculous," Snape mutters against his chest. "Absolutely ridiculous; it was murder, pre-meditated and cold-

blooded and--"

"No interruptions, if you please," Dumbledore says. His eyes are stern over his glass, kind but steely, and his palms pressed tightly together. "Now, Mr. Black, as I have pieced together your evidence from prior to this discussion and what little more I have gleaned from your continued admission, it is my understanding -- quiet, Mr. Snape, please, I trust my methods of discerning the truth, as should you -- that you said what you did without the intentions to send anyone to his death or, perhaps, mauling." Sirius sinks down into his chair with a squeal of the cushions and a sigh of half-misery, half relief. "However," Dumbledore continues, "the recklessness, immaturity and thoughtlessness of your actions cannot be overlooked. Yes, Mr. Snape, it is your turn now."

"He sent me there," Snape says immediately, "knowing full well who -- *what* lay in wait for me, giving me clear directions as to how I should find it -- without any warning, *any* warning whatsoever, knowing the harm that would come to me." Snape draws in a deep breath, narrow nostrils flaring. "And I would have died. I would have been killed, by a *monster*, a monster being harbored *in this school*, if it wasn't for--"

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore murmurs. "Yes, that, too, I have come to understand, from Mr. Pettigrew, when he came to enlist my help in the matter." Dumbledore's eyes move from Snape to James, catching his gaze, holding it up. "Look at me, Mr. Potter -- there we are. That's better. I intend to have your side of the story, as well, so speak up, as it is getting rather late, and I should have to reprimand myself for keeping students up at so egregious an hour."

"Well," James begins. "Sirius came to me and -- he hadn't been thinking, Headmaster, that much was clear -- he just sort of told me what happened, off-handed, like it was just some sort of a joke." Out of the corner of his eye, James sees Sirius wince. No time to think about that now. He deserves it, James tells himself, deserves to sit there and think about what he almost did, and what he *did*, and how close the two are. "But it was obvious, Headmaster, that he didn't mean it. It was by accident. I don't know what he *was* thinking, but it just -- it must have just -- Snape must have been acting like a real -- *really* awfully. Sirius only ever loses his temper like that when Snape won't shut -- when Snape says things, about his friends -- it's not an excuse, but -- I don't know what it is. Bu -- Er. So I, uhm, tried to get my trousers on, and they ripped. At the zipper. The zipper got stuck and that's why."

"Ah," Dumbledore says. "Which is, I take it, somehow why Mr. Black ended up half-naked at the edge of the forest?"

"I took his trousers," James explains. "But that was later."

"I tried to go with him," Sirius adds, "that's why, but then I ran into a tree and -- I couldn't," he finishes, rather lamely. Snape snickers aloud. Sirius's eyes roll back halfway, and James can see him cataloguing the items within reach, trying to determine which is discreet and pointy enough to inflict the requisite agony.

"I see," Dumbledore says. Sirius looks down, digging his fingers into his chair. "I think I have some idea of the, er, happenings of this evening. Mr. Snape, would you repeat, not in your own words, if you don't mind, precisely the conversation you had with Mr. Black?"

"I can't remember it," Snape says unpleasantly. "Exactly. Sir."

"I suggest you try." Dumbledore offers a very small smile that makes something shiver down James's spine.

"I -- I said something about where Lupin was. I was -- curious. And Black, he said 'Why don't you go poke the big knot on the Whomping Willow, then you'll find out--'"

"I did *not*!" Sirius roars, leaping to his feet. "Sir, it wasn't anything like that! -- you lying little--"

"Mr. Black, restrain yourself," Dumbledore says sharply. He motions for Sirius to sit, which Sirius somehow manages, though his knees look too brittle to bend. "Mr. Snape. It is imperative that we get to the bottom of this matter. I hate to resort to the use of potions or spells in dragging out a student confession, but I am willing to stoop to the necessary depths. Is it true that you, offering an innocent inquiry after the health of a fellow student, were given explicit guidelines on how to access his -- area of convalescence?" Sirius is breathing so hard it sounds like he's being strangled.

"Well -- not -- exactly," Snape mutters. "Maybe -- explicit would not be -- he told me how to get in, Sir, he's admitted it! I don't see what the point is in interrogating me."

"The devil," Dumbledore says, "is in the details, Mr. Snape." Snape's eyes turn with chilling hatred to Sirius and rest there, gathering a thin-lipped strength from his rage. When he speaks again, his voice has calmed, crackling with nasal intensity.

"I was right," he says. "I knew, all this time, all those disappearances, this lot was up to no good. Every month, Headmaster. I saw them every month, sneaking around as if they're better than the entire rest of the school, *beyond* your jurisdiction, *beyond* the rules and *beyond* reprimand or punishment." Snape's hands, in fists, shake on the arms of his chair. "A werewolf. They hid a werewolf."

"Mr. Snape, *I* hid a werewolf," Dumbledore says smoothly. "That was *my* decision, not theirs, and as you can see the decision for secrecy, even if judging by your reaction alone, was most necessary." His smile is dangerous, patient but with a hint of anger. Snape searches it, shocked to find it isn't only Sirius Black. Dumbledore has angled his pale-blue disappointment at.

"He could kill someone," Snape protests. He leans forward on his chair, a thin line of sweat stamping his brow, his shoulders shaking with the effort to remain as calm as possible. "The *irresponsibility* -- the *danger* -- the *repercussions* -- Headmaster, the thing almost killed me!"

"The werewolf in the Shrieking Shack would not have almost killed you if -- and here is my decision, boys -- one, you were not looking into matters, Mr. Snape, that did not concern you towards a malicious end and *two*," Dumbledore continues, noting Snape's expression of abject horror, "which is perhaps a more important offense, if you, Mr. Black, had thought to avert what could have been a most grievous disaster, by pausing a moment to predict the possible impact of your words. An accident, it would seem, of a callous nature, one which we might have easily avoided if any of us were aware of the severity of punishment that could have been brought down on *all* of our heads. We are most fortunate that the crisis was prevented by your quick thinking, Mr. Potter, and Mr. Pettigrew's sound presence of mind that, in all the panic, he should could looking for my aid in the matter. Thirty points to Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, and ten for you as well, Mr. Pettigrew, and forty points from for your rash actions and your unthinking foolishness, Mr. Black." Dumbledore, keeping a mental tally in his head, turns

back to Snape, smiling almost sadly. "It is a pity, Mr. Snape, though understandable, that your terror should give you such prejudice."

"A monster," Snape insists, "and one that should *not* be allowed freedom in an academic setting--"

"We will look into that, rest assured." Dumbledore's smile turns general, without focus and without any meaning but resolution to impart. "Now that I believe myself to have a comprehensive understanding of tonight's occurrences, we must look to the future by discussing our matters of recompense. Mr. Pettigrew, Mr. Potter, the two of you are dismissed. Mr. Black, Mr. Snape, and I have a little yet to talk about."

James pauses at the doorway to look back, seeing only the top of Sirius' head from where he stands. Even that manages to look miserable. He wants to send some sign of forgiveness, grudging and annoyed as it may be, his anger weakened by the late hour and Dumbledore's long offerings of kindness. He finds Dumbledore's eyes, but before he can ask anything more of him, a little twitch belies that *Dumbledore is winking*. James' relief surges up from his stomach and into his mouth, wresting a smile out of him. "C'mon, Peter," he whispers. He shuts the door behind them. "We'll wait for Remus."

Inside, Dumbledore leans back, folding his hands over his stomach. Sirius and Snape stare at each other in the deafening silence, burning holes into one another's foreheads. "It will do no good," Dumbledore says from his position of repose, "to hate each other so virulently within my offices. No good can come of it, and it shall only give the two of you a headache."

"Am I to be punished, then?" Snape spits out.

"You do not trust, at present, my judgment, do you, Mr. Snape." Snape remains silent. "Well! It is no matter. I am sure that, soon enough, I shall gain it back in spades. Let us first deal with Mr. Black, whose guilt is overwhelming and, I see, and in dire need of immediate punishment." Sirius bows his head. "I would, of course," Dumbledore goes on without pause, "ban you from the Quidditch team indefinitely, but this would, I think, be just as detrimental to your teammates as to yourself, and why, indeed, should I punish them in light of your transgressions?" Dumbledore drums his fingers neatly over the lip of his desk, buried in great thought. "However, I believe I have wracked my brain and devised an appropriate task for three month's worth of detention that should be suitable to your guilt's needs, and my own, while at the same time, we shall hope, teaching foresight, humility, and grace under pressure." Snape leans forward again in his chair, an eager glimmer in his face. Sirius grits his teeth, steels his jaw, and prepares for the blow. "Your Wednesday and Friday evenings," Dumbledore finishes, "shall be devoted to the tutoring of our Slytherin First Years in the art of Transfiguration, since it is one in which you so clearly excel. To miss an appointment, to shirk your duties for a lesson, or to do anything to jeopardize your position as tutor, shall mean your immediate suspension from the Quidditch team, with no second chances whatsoever. Have I made myself clear, Mr. Black?" Sirius nods, swallowing down a groan at the assignment with a fresh reminder of his guilt. "Very well then." Dumbledore beams. "Dismissed. Go straight to Gryffindor House. Do not go after Mr. Potter and Mr. Pettigrew, as undoubtedly they are not within. Tomorrow is, if you recall, a Friday. I will find you with instructions. Good evening."

"Evening," Sirius mumbles. He gives Snape one last, withering look, and slinks out the door, letting it *snick* shut quietly at his back.

"Now," Dumbledore says, turning those bright, unreadable eyes on Snape, "you and I can speak privately."

Remus wakes up through a haze of muzzy pain and thick, cotton-mouthed bad taste. It's been a while since he woke like this, nauseated and disoriented, and he knows what it means. He's dimly shocked at first, and then a little scared with instinctive worry, and then hopes he's been dreaming and doesn't want to open his eyes, and then he rolls over to reach for the bucket that Pomfrey keeps always under his bed, and instead his hand encounters someone else's head.

"Gnagh!" yelps Remus. He sits up very straight, and regrets it immediately, cradling his pounding head with bandaged hands.

Sirius looks up at him, looking very much the way Remus feels. He's kneeling on the floor, arms and chin up on Remus's bed, and from the way his hair sticks up over his left ear, he's been sleeping there, if he's slept at all. He hasn't done this since third year. Remus feels the slow stirrings of panic in his belly kindled into something portentous and dreadful.

"You should move." His voice feels strange in his throat, rusty; the world lurches sickeningly and he clutches the bedsheets, closes his eyes. "I'm going to be sick in your hair if you don't, I think."

"I deserve it," Sirius says in a hollow, dead voice. "Please. I offer my head as a receptacle for your vomit."

"That would make a mess." Remus presses the place where his nose indents into his forehead with a thumb, warding off the headache to cope with the dizziness and nausea. "And then I'd keep throwing up because you'd smell awful."

"Here. Here," Sirius says. He holds out a lightweight porcelain bowl, which Remus takes in tingling arms and shoves his head into, waiting for the heavy sickness in his stomach to pass. It lurches unsteadily, rises, rises, and then fades with the cool shadows in the bowl. Remus gives himself a minute more to collect himself, joints burning, temples throbbing, the side of his jaw bruised all the way to his ear, his skin and ribs stretching painfully with every breath.

"What happened?" he asks, voice echoing inside the bowl. He pulls his head out. "What happened?" he tries again. Better. No reverberations.

"It was all my fault," Sirius says. "And I'm not sorry because it was Snape, I'm sorry because it's you, and I'm going to feed him to a dragon first chance I get and he'll never tell anyone, Moony, because I'll break his mouth out of his head."

"I don't know if that's anatomically possible." A fresh wash of paleness comes over Remus' face, white around the lips, dark circles under his eyes the color of gray ash. "Snape knows?"

Sirius swallows. "Snape knows," he confirms. "I didn't mean to tell him -- he was *saying* things -- and I just thought, what if the Willow whomped him a few, isn't that what the Willow is *there* for, isn't that what the

Willow is *called*, anyway -- but he's stupid in all the right ways and smart in all the wrong ones -- and he got in but James saved you and it's all right, Snape isn't going to tell anyone. I'll kill him if you want. I can do that. Please say you want me to, I want to." Remus presses his hands to his cheeks, trying to hold his head together. At any moment, he's sure it will burst apart, scattering pieces of his pounding brain all over the infirmary. He has to hold himself together. He doesn't want to make a mess. "You're not mad, are you?" Sirius ventures. "James said you'd be mad. Are you mad? You *should* be mad."

"I'm not mad," Remus says.

"You *should* be mad," Sirius repeats, then stops. "Wait. What?"

"I'm not mad," Remus says again. "Why should I be mad? You're my friend. I'm not mad." He takes a long, shuddering breath into his lungs. "Is Snape all right?"

"Unfortunately. I mean fortunately. I mean, you're not mad?"

"No," Remus says. He wishes Sirius would stop moving so much, talking so much, swinging the room wildly from side to side. "You're my friend. You didn't do it on purpose. I'm out of the school, aren't I?"

"Christ, Moony, of course not! Christ. No. *I* should be out. I should be *beheaded*. I just wasn't thinking. But Dumbledore--"

"How many points?" Remus asks, retreating behind the safety of the Prefect.

Sirius shrugs. "Forty. But James got back thirty and Pete got ten for telling."

"What did James--"

"--He went," Sirius starts, and swallows, and goes on. "He went after Snape. I tried to go with him, but I hit my head on a branch and then he took my pants."

Remus lowers his head to his shaking hands and tries to steady himself. "He got thirty points for taking your pants?"

"He went for Snape." Sirius runs his fingers through his hair. "From -- he made sure he didn't get hurt."

"By me," Remus says. Every inch of his body throbs.

"Or by angry bears," Sirius says hopefully. "Or falling into a tar pit. I mean, there are lots of ways to get hurt. I'm just, Moony, I'm so--"

"Sirius." Remus presses the heel of his hand into his eye, so hard he can see dark red spots. "Look, it's done, isn't it? No one's hurt. Are you off the Quidditch team?"

"No, I'm tutoring Slytherins," Sirius says in a voice of utter disgust. Remus looks up, surprised at Dumbledore's creativity. "Without McGoggles at my side, either. I take them while she's doing private sessions with her

NEWT-levels. Wednesdays and Fridays. And if I talk back, then I'm off the Quidditch team. I cannot tell you how full of dread I am."

"I'm sorry." Remus gives Sirius' hand a little pat. "For how long?"

"A few months." Sirius' eyes narrow. "Wait a minute. Why did *you* apologize?"

"You hate children."

"I know. I do. But that's not the point. Remus, you're being -- you're being unreasonably reasonable."

"Snape isn't hurt?" Sirius nods. "James isn't hurt?" Sirius nods again. "And I'm not expelled." Sirius shakes his head. "And you're not expelled." Sirius shakes his head again. "All right. Well." Remus sinks back against his pillows, letting out a low sigh of relief. Sirius stares at him, unsure what god of forgiveness has crept into Remus' body while he was sleeping. "It could have gone worse. It could have been -- there've been other pranks, and this isn't -- is Dumbledore angry?"

"At me," Sirius assures him. "And at Snape a little, too."

"Snape." Remus cracks one eye open. "Who--"

--hates you even more now, because he's a stupid, slimy shit who doesn't know the first thing about *people* or *were*-- sorry -- or *you*. And by the way, James tells me he runs like a girl, which I always said he did, only now I *know*. You know. Are you sure you're not mad?"

"Sirius," Remus says, "shut up."

"Shutting," Sirius says. He puts his head down on the bedspread, gazing mournfully at Remus with eyes that brim with apology.

"You know what this reminds me of," Remus murmurs, a small, tired laugh grazing his throat. "Remember when you first -- the three of you first finished -- you know -- and you hadn't got the bodies just yet but you got your minds all mixed up?"

"I wouldn't remember all too clearly," Sirius says dryly. "I do recall Peter shrieking and hurling himself under the bed a lot."

"You looked just like that right after you wet on the carpet," Remus continues mercilessly.

"Well, did it work? Did I get beat with a newspaper, or did you really forgive me?"

"Sirius?"

"What?"

"Shut up."

"I just thought you would be angry," Sirius explains, "and I would have to ply you with poetry, bon-bons and flowers to achieve your forgiveness."

Remus lets his eyes fall shut, normally busy, fidgety fingers still against his stomach and tangled in the pristine bedsheet. "When I was five," he says softly, "my father's business took us to France. I don't remember much of it, just -- colors, and sound. Old memories, the sort that you can never really place and only *think* happened to you. Mum tells me we had a little house for the summer and she could never learn French so we ate the same meal every night for three weeks until she and dad went over a menu and figured things out. I don't remember that, either. There was a swing, I remember the swing, and birds in the morning, and a lot of trees. That's all. In any case, one night in June I left my room to sit on the front steps because I couldn't sleep, and there was a great big dog across the clearing, watching me. When you're little and your parents tell you never to touch strange animals you ought to listen to them, but I suppose I didn't. I moved, and I must have waved to it, and it ran over to me, and bit me. The funny thing is, I don't remember it. I know how it *must* have happened, I know what I *must* have done, I know what *it* must have done, and how it *must* have felt, being bitten, there, in the night, under the full moon. I know there must have been some reason for me to get up and unlock the door against express instructions, and sit there, and want to pet a wild animal I had never seen before, but I don't remember any of it. It happened. That's all. It happened. I woke up later and my mother says I didn't even cry, just asked where the dog was, which seems silly, as I can't remember the wolf now, or asking for it later." Remus licks his lips. "My father blamed himself for taking us to France during what was, he found out later, roughly translatable to an epidemic of lycanthropy, and my mother blamed herself for putting me in a separate room when I was so young, not keeping a better eye on me, not having taught me to go to her when I couldn't sleep. But it wasn't their fault, was it? It was mine; it had to have been. I know what it *must* have been, though I don't remember what it was. And it all feels so silly and unimportant, because I can't remember it at all." With a little sound of relaxation, Remus opens his eyes, and looks up to the ceiling, tracing the patterns of shadow above him. "I'm not mad. I'm relieved. You should stop apologizing."

Sirius is silent for a long time. Remus stares fixedly at the ceiling. After an age of regret and awkward quiet, the bed creaks and rolls, shifting Remus sideways. Something hairy and enormous and smelling vaguely of kibble whuffles against his cheek and then settles, hot and sprawling, against his side, breathing its noisy, doggy comfort.

"Aghn," Remus says, looking down at it. It unsettles his instincts with its comfort, half-familiar, half-foreign. "You nutter. Pomfrey'll be in any minute." The furry heat shifts. Fur prickles against Remus and morphs to long, warm boy-limbs, and Sirius's face, very close, instead of a dog mouth and a dog tongue breathing hot dog breath, with hands, not paws, jammed uncomfortably against Remus's stomach. Sirius regards him in strange stillness for a minute.

"Don't say I'm sorry," Remus says, suddenly intensely uncomfortable, "unless you mean for drooling in my hair, and shedding on my pyjamas, and taking up most of my bed, in which case I have mustered all the kindness in my heart, and herewith accept your apology."

Sirius nods. He looks pale and set and deeply helpless.

"I don't mind," Remus insists. "Honestly, Sirius. I don't mind."

"I do," Sirius says. He pulls Remus in by the back of the neck to rest his chin atop his head. "It shouldn't. It isn't fair." His throat moves against Remus's forehead.

"You always smell like dog," Remus mumbles. It's not strictly true. At the moment Sirius smells of stale sick and old fear and relief, which Remus smells intimately from every last pore, but for some reason Remus feels it would be unkind to say this. Sirius's laugh vibrates low through his skull. "Madame Pomfrey's going to think we've been having it off," Remus informs him. The bed sags under their combined weight. Sirius's knee is in his stomach and their hands are touching on the pillow. Remus feels sick, and too tall, and too young, and too old also, and wonders why none of it is as easy for him as it seems to be for everyone else.

"She'll just have to contain her jealousy," Sirius says. "She knows I always come back to her, in the end. I know it kills you, but you have to understand that what we have isn't love. It's just physical. What Pomfrey and I have, now, that's something lasting."

"What with the children," Remus says, only half of him playing along and the other half lingering in uncertainty.

"The puppies," Sirius reminds him. "Litters and litters of puppies."

"You're disgusting," Remus says.

"I'm sorry," Sirius says.

"I'm going to pass out now." Remus pats Sirius' chest with a few weak pawing motions. Sirius remembers the first time he saw Remus' hands bandaged like that, palms hidden beneath white gauze, fingers stiff from pain. With the dog nose he smelled him, a sort of defeat in scent, and the copper hint of blood, and the blue undertone of bruises, and tense muscles, and old wood. So much of the wolf remains in him the day after, where the moon, though hidden in orbit, reaches out moon fingers, trying always to claim him. Sirius tightens his hold, unthinking. "Augh," Remus grunts. "Ribs."

"Fuck that," Sirius says. "Sorry. Better now?"

"Uhm," Remus says, and droops.

Sirius is glad for the empty infirmary, for the quiet early hour. Boys don't do this with other boys, don't even when they're young and tired and nervous and desperate for comfort. But Remus isn't another boy, not exactly, with his words like adulthood and his body at odd, limp angles. Nobody understands, Sirius thinks, and puts it aside.











Early in the morning, or late at night, Sirius finds his fingers on the binding of the old journal.



I think my friends are up to something because all the time they're exchanging glances which I am sure they think are very secretive but are so unsubtle I'm sure Professor McGonagall thinks the school likely to explode any second now. They've left me completely out of it which is also, you know, more than just a little worrisome. It's either something so big and so foolish they don't trust me to keep it a secret, or they've found another walking encyclopedia, and one without the occasional opinion, in which case I feel very obsolete. I'd bring it all up with them but I do feel that they believe they're doing a stellar job acting as if nothing is out of the ordinary and I can't bear to break their bubble of delusion.

Worried, though.

Very.

"Well," Sirius says happily, rubbing his hands together, "I think that went very well."

Peter sniffs the air uncertainly. "Are you sure? I didn't feel anything happen."

"You aren't meant to," James explains, "you just sort of -- get it. I guess. That's what it says in here." He taps the grimoire at his side. "That you won't feel it, like, but you'll just know how to call the animal forward."

"I'm not sure--" Peter starts, but Sirius shoves a hand over his mouth.

"Peter," he says. "Concentrate. See what happens."

They concentrate.

For about half a minute.

And then something in the back of Sirius's head goes *putt*.

"What are you guys doing?" he inquires, abruptly extremely curious. "What are you doing, huh? What are you guys doing? Are you having fun? Can I help? Are you asleep? What's happening? Hey, Peter, hey, my favorite guy, Peter!" He throws himself forward at Peter, cool awesome Peter who he just likes so much because he's *Peter* and he's so great! Peter!

"GNAUGH!" Peter screams, and overturns a table scrambling under it.

Sirius watches him for an instant and then whirls around, bored, and sees: oh, his best friend. His best friend in the whole wide world. The best person ever. The *greatest* person ever. James. James James Jamesy James James.

"*James!*" he fairly shrieks, and hurls himself at his best friend in the whole wide world who is just so great and Sirius just wants to lick him all over and knock him flat on his back, which is what he does. "Hey, James, hey, James, hey! Guess what, James? Guess what? Peter's under the table and I can smell him. Guess what? Guess what you had for breakfast? I can tell you cos I can smell it. Eggs! You had eggs! You're my best friend, hey, James, let's go have fun! Are you having fun? I'm having fun but we could be having *more* fun!"

"Predators!" comes Peter's tiny, suspicious hiss from the darkness. "Predators *everywhere*."

James blinks, eyes focusing and unfocusing in brown confusion. Sirius pants into his face, mouth, up his nose, until James snorts and shakes his head and nudges him away with his cheek. "It's working," James says, in a slow, calm, deep voice. "Either that or we've gone insane. What am I doing? It feels nice." He shakes his head again, pawing at the floor with one hand. Sirius stands, stretching, shaking, laughing, with his mouth open unattractively and his tongue hanging out.

"Hey how do we get it to stop? I don't get it what's going on! James? Jamesy James? How's that? How's that,

huh? What's that? I'm me, right, but I'm not me. Do you get that? You too, and Peter, and me, we're all like -- and that's not -- and what's that, huh? What's that?" Peter's eyes, narrowed, watch Sirius as he darts from corner to corner after dust motes, his own hands, tongue bouncing cheerfully with every leap and bound.

James paws at the grimoire, using the side of his hand in long, sweeping motions to get at the appropriate page. The words shimmer and shake before him. He can only barely make them out as language he understands above the musky smell of everything, the strange and distracting lightness of his head.

Effect should take three or four hours to wear off.

A little boy's voice comes at him, making him turn, startled, and stamp the floor, until he realizes it's from within.

Bugger, James thinks.

"James," Remus says, voice muffled, wet, a little shaky. "James, what is Sirius doing to my face?"

"You -- are -- my -- *best friend ever!*" Sirius barks very enthusiastically between slurps, and butts his head into Remus's jaw. Remus pats him distractedly atop the head, for which Sirius makes an ecstatic noise. "Do my ears, huh? Scratch my ears? Could you could you could you? You're the best. Rub my stomach. What's going on? James help James help James I'm going crazy!"

"His mind has a dog in it," James explains. He is still slower in his body than his mind moves, like a sharp wind that only shifts the trees. "We've...made a charm. An experiment."

"His mind has a *dog* in it," Remus repeats, only a little hysterically. "You mean the way you might go 'oh, don't eat that soup, it's got a fly in it?' Is that what you mean?"

"No," James says. His voice is careful and deep, reminding Remus of a slow-moving river. "Not exactly." He pauses for a while to collect himself.

"James," Remus says uncertainly.

"What's he doing what's he doing who wants to feed me? Hey, Remus, you know what we should do? You should throw something, and I should jump up and get it and bring it back! And then you could throw something *else* and I could jump up and get it and bring it back! Or you could throw the same thing and I could go get it *again!* It would *never stop being fun!* What's he doing? I'm *hungry.*"

"Hmm," James says, still thinking. He shakes his head out to remind himself what's important.

"You've been sitting there for five minutes," Remus says. "I'm going to panic very soon. I think you should know that. Where's Peter?"

There is a sepulchral cackle from beneath the bed. "*You'll never find me!*"

"All right," Remus says. He feels he is being supremely reasonable, considering the circumstances. "We'll never find Peter and Sirius has a dog in his mind. This is very good, James. We're definitely getting somewhere. You can't put more than three words together in the space of one minute, but this is good, James. This is a start. How about *I* start the sentences, and you finish them?"

"All right," James says. Sirius bounds over to him, licks his face, then bounds back to Remus, sitting at his feet and bouncing up and down. Remus stares at him.

"Can I lick you again can I can I can I? Just a little lick just a small like just a -- no I'm lying a lick *all over your face*, all over your face, can I lick you can I lick you now can I please?"

"Down," Remus says.

"We haven't...taught him to...heed, yet," James warns.

Sirius leaps for Remus' face. They struggle. "Down!" Remus yelps. "Down! *Down*, Sirius! All right -- just -- ooghk -- James -- finish this one -- you and Sirius and Peter were?"

"Looking...in a grimoire," James says.

"For the purpose of -- Unfh -- doing what?"

"Transfiguration," James breathes out. "Animagi."

"Hungry hungry hungry," Sirius sings. "You know what I want I want meat. I want some meat. I want some raw meat just some pieces of raw meat. Cow meat. Mm cow meat. I like cow meat. All yum and slurpy and I'm hungry." He licks Remus up the side of one cheek and settles, still vibrating, thrown half across Remus' lap. He's a big boy. Remus attempts to think over the sound of his insanity. "What do you say eh Remus what do you say to that let's go we should go we should go *now* and get some *meat*."

"So," Remus says, "Sirius would be -- a dog, is that it?"

"Yes," James replies. "Yes...that's it."

"And Peter is some sort of small rodent," Remus infers, "perhaps a mouse, or a weasel, or a rat?"

"Rat," James sighs.

"And you are, apparently, suffering from old age and about to wheeze out and die?" Remus guesses.

"Stag," James murmurs. The a trails out, dusty and sweet. *Sta-a-ag*.

"Aha," Remus says. "And what, may I ask, inspired you?"

"You did that's who you did because we thought you shouldn't be alone, why should Remus be alone we

thought, and it was James' idea you know, with the book and the animals and the transfiguring so we did it in secret and you had no idea and what do you say Remus aren't we brilliant aren't we aren't we?"

"I have your saliva in my left nostril," Remus murmurs. "Other than that I have no idea *what* to say."

"You could say Good job!" Sirius pants, regarding him pleadingly. "Because we worked so hard and we were so quiet and I didn't chew *anything* important today. Can we throw something? Hey, let's go get something to eat! Cows. Huh?" He abandons his post at Remus's knee and hurls himself onto his bed, where he turns around three times and falls promptly, bone-meltingly asleep, letting out an enormous snore.

"You're all madmen," Remus says. He turns, wide-eyed, to James with whom, Remus has decided, is probably the best person to discuss this, despite the slowness and the look of majestic calm. He jams his head under the bed to test this theory. Peter, as predicted, snarls, bares his teeth, and attempts to burrow into the wall, muttering "big animals big animals never catch me predators! Heh heh heh heh."

"We were trying to help you," James intones with excruciating serenity. "We'd have done better if you'd been helping us. Couldn't ask, of course."

"Because I'd've talked some sense into you?" Remus drags his hand through his hair, trying to ignore Peter's constant muttering and intermittent sniggers from beneath the bed. Sirius sighs, flops hugely onto his back and waves his arms vaguely in the air, kicking convulsively with one foot.

"You needn't worry," James says, after a contemplative few minutes. "It's normal."

"Oh, yes," Remus says. "Completely normal! You're all barking! Especially Sirius, ha ha ha, oh *God*. What if someone finds out? How are you going to keep people from finding out?"

"Everyone knows Sirius is barking," James points out, very reasonably. "No surprise there. It'll wear off. Book says. Four hours. Thereabouts," he amends, after some consideration. "And then we'll have the minds."

The door slams abruptly open. Sirius flips onto his stomach, looking alertly in the wrong direction. "Who? What? Guard dog! *Rrrrr*."

Lily Evans stands in the doorway, glaring furiously, her wet red hair jerked back into a ponytail and her arms folded. "All right. That's it. *Which* one of you lot Transfigured my towel while I was in the bath? You can answer honestly, I'm going to kill you all anyway."

"Oh God," Remus whispers. "Lily, err. You should *really* not -- um -- be here, now."

"Who was it, Remus?" Lily whirls on him, hair flying around her heated face, and slapping wetly against her shoulders. "Well? You know who it was. Tell me, for the sake of justice."

"Er," Remus says. He doesn't, actually. She won't believe that he doesn't, but he doesn't. "I don't know?"

"Of course you know. And you're going to tell me." She descends on him like a goddess of retribution, eyes blazing, cheeks bright red. Sirius is creeping up behind her, sniffing dangerously. James has circled the other

way around, stomping one hand against the ground with rhythmic insistence, making low, snuffing noises deep in his throat. Peter is nowhere to be found. Remus feels insane -- or, rather, like the only sane person amongst the criminally bonkers. "Well? *Well?* Have out with it and you'll die quickly and--" She stops. Goes stiff. Her green eyes widen in sudden shock, panic, disbelief. Her back is rigid, hands frozen in place, mouth half-open in distress. "*Oh my God.*"

"Yes," Remus says. "Yes, that is Sirius' nose between your legs." Lily opens her mouth. Closes it. Takes a deep breath in, turning a fantastic shade of purple.

"I like her!" says Sirius happily. "She can stay. Do you want to play with me? Hey, how about you throw something? Do you want to scratch my ears? Hey, hey, hello!"

"What. The Hell. Is James doing?" Lily manages at last.

Remus barely dares to look back at James over his shoulder, but his curiosity, morbid and fatal, gets the better of him. James, on all fours, is giving Lily a look of such intensity Remus is surprised her clothes haven't burned straight off her body. As the two of them watch, James lifts his head, tosses it, stamps one hand, and lowers his head again, and repeats the pattern with unwavering dedication. "You," James says, in that breathless, deep, wise voice. "Me. Yoooouuuu. Meeeee."

"Run for your life," Remus says. "Please. Save yourself."

Lily, never a girl who needs to be told the obvious twice, is gone.

"*Haroun*," James says, in tones that can only be called amorous, and starts after her. Remus, thinking fast, hurls himself in front of the door and yells "Lumos!" Light explodes, yellow and round, from his wand. James freezes, transfixed

"Hey," Sirius says, "where'd she go? We were going to play. She smelled nice. What's James doing? He's not moving. James? James? James? James? James? James?"

James does not move. His eyes dart, panicked, from side to side.

"Four hours," Remus whimpers.

"Four hours of fun!" Sirius yelps, gamboling around his legs. "Fun fun fun and nothing but fun! James? James? Jamesjamesjamesjamesjames. Make him move! Hey, Remus! Make him move. I want him to come play. Hey, Remus, let's play. I'm going to go run around and smell things! Guess how many things we could smell? We could smell trees and rocks and bits of grass and walls and cats and sticks and bugs and--"

"*No*," Remus says, firmly. James trembles and Remus shoves the light at him, gaining some confidence. "Bad dog."

"Bad--" Sirius goes pale all over, slumping as if all the air has gone out of his body, as if Remus has just stabbed him. "B--bad dog?"

"Yes," Remus says. He feels cruel, but not all that guilty about it. "Bad Dog. Lie down." Sirius does so immediately, staring up at him with eyes full of reproach and deep, deep sorrow. "All right." Remus thinks furiously. "Er. We -- we're going to play a game. Yes. That's what we're going to do. We're going to play a game."

"A game?" Sirius says hopefully, rolling up onto his elbows. "A fun game?"

"A quiet game," Remus says. He rubs his temples, gathering all his self control. "A game called Go To Sleep For Four Hours. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

"No," Sirius says doubtfully. "But if you say so!" He spins around once, twice, testing the floor gingerly for springiness, and passes out.

"All right," Remus says again, returning his attention to James. "Are you done?" The corner of James' left eye twitches. "Right. Well that's settled you." Remus turns, locks the door, shuts all the windows, and secures the rest of the area with gratifying attention to detail. By the time he's finished, he almost forgets he has a headache.

"Can't--move," James says, through gritted teeth.

Well, almost.

At least, Remus thinks, as he tries not to ponder his own role in all this madness, Sirius hasn't put his nose anywhere other than into Remus' mouth, and ignores blatantly the niggling voice telling him the day is yet young. "Oh, shut up," Remus says to no one in particular.


"Can't move," James repeats.


"Excellent," Remus says, and puts pieces of tissue in his ears. "Fantastic."

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project