

Part Twenty-Five B: August 1977

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It's not that Sirius minds the outdoors. Sirius actually quite enjoys the outdoors. He likes the smell of decaying woody things, the bright clarity of the air, the echo of small animal sounds and leaves shifting and it's all very pleasant, under normal circumstances. But the circumstances aren't normal, and today the woods are making him antsy. "I don't like it," he says again. He has said "I don't like it" at least seven thousand times since this morning, but he can't seem to stop himself. The forest here is odd. The echoes are strange, like they're bouncing off a boundary that isn't there. He doesn't like it! James should know!

"I know," says James.

"I'm right about this," Sirius says. "Don't you think I'm right about this?"

"I think you're tired," says James. "In fact I know you're tired, because you were flopping all over the tent like an eel for most of the night. I think you're half-delirious and I think I want to slap you. I think a lot of things."

"You did slap me," Sirius points out.

"Oh yes," James agrees. "That's right. I did. It felt so good I may have to do it again."

Sirius frowns and scratches at his eight hundredth mosquito bite. Apparently he is a very tasty mosquito delicacy. "Do you think I'm a very tasty mosquito delicacy?" he asks.

"Slapped Sirius," James says. "It sounds French. Doesn't it sound French?"

"Fine," says Sirius, not really paying attention. He still doesn't like it, whatever *it* is, floating and mysterious, coming hither and thither unbidden, suspiciously like the common mosquito and making Sirius even more edgy than usual. Of course, it's possible it's only the mosquito bites that are bothering him, the occasional warning drone in his ear. Who wouldn't be hopping up and down when one is half naked in the forest, like a giant buffet table for the bugs?

The mosquitoes have probably set up signs all throughout the forest, neon signs that read *Sirius Black! Extra Raw & Juicy for Your Enjoyment.*

That isn't it.

"I have an excellent sense of dangerous," Sirius hisses. "Fine-tuned antennae for it, if you will. I have Filch to thank for it. Plus, I *smell* something. I *smell* something not right."

"That was our breakfast," James says sadly. "This should be a lesson to us never to eat anything you find under a—"

Sirius tackles him. He's not quite sure, for a moment, why he did it; but no, James is annoying, probably Sirius did this in order to belt him round the head. James isn't fighting back, and that's unusual, and then Sirius feels heat on his back--is it heat? Maybe it's just a strong pressure, like leaning his shoulders against a rope? and then it doesn't matter what it is just that it *hurts*, pain so strong it is twisting, flaring, alive. Bright streaks slam across his vision. He makes a noise.

James, under his body, says "Fucking! Fuck!" His hands are on Sirius's shoulders, trying to push him off. Sirius wills himself heavier, just to be annoying.

God, his back hurts! His back really fucking hurts! Sirius hates himself. He should be working through the pain, like any competent person. Is he delirious or something? When was the last time they ate? He gets low blood sugar, this is Remus's theory on why he spends so much his time not making sense or falling asleep. Remus has a crooked sort of mouth, a mouth that always goes two ways at once, a mouth that seems always surprised by itself, as if it's constantly trying to thwart its own intentions. *For Christ's sake!*

"You stupid ass!" says James. His breathing is harsh, uneven. "What did you do?" Something whistles past them. A tree is on fire.

"I didn't," says Sirius indignantly, and then a powerful shove on James's part sends him sprawling into the leaves and hot white pain splinters into him again. "Fuck! Don't!" he says, or thinks he says.

James is gabbling something, *Sorry sorry Sirius are you hurt you're hurt oh Jesus you're bleeding*, James you idiot will you look out because something is happening and you need to pay attention, are you paying attention? James has his wand in his hand. That's good. That's a step in the right direction. He's muttering something, sketching letters in the air. There's a good sound, a clear, blue sound: a shield. It would have been easier with the two of them working together, Sirius thinks regretfully.

"I told you," Sirius says, through the fog in his head. "I told you I didn't like it! You never listen." He tries to reach for his wand, stuck into his waistband, biting his lip so hard as the raw skin on his shoulderblades scrapes the ground. Manly! he thinks insanely. Tough!

He swats at James's ankle and James, who when it's important doesn't need to be told anything, pulls him to his feet. He doesn't ask if Sirius is all right and Sirius is so grateful for this he could kiss James on the mouth.

"I could kiss you on the mouth," says Sirius. "Ow."

"Okay," says James. His fingers are tight on Sirius's arm: and it's that fierce contained contact that focuses Sirius at last, narrows pain and confusion and hunger and sleeplessness into a tight, fiery point, something to be set aside and dealt with later.

James is looking at him, pale, his astigmatic eyes huge, his hair ridiculous. Sirius nods tightly. James says, "Right then."

There are no more spells coming at them, only the trees burning and the ringing in Sirius's ears. Maybe they just triggered a defense system, something automatic and short-lived. Maybe they could--

But no, there's a smell coming. The dog knows how to read a smell: it's dry, like fingernails or hair, and yet it's somehow also a wet smell, a putrid smell. It makes the hairs on Sirius's neck stand up.

"*Fuck*," says James, with real feeling.

The pain between Sirius's shoulders almost itches; the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. His senses are sharp, fine points, focused in the muggy forest air. What's funny is how often people curse but don't mean it properly. It makes the moments when cursing really means something, when 'fuck' really means 'Sirius is bleeding and James is frightened and there's a smell like acid and matches and sulfur and dying in the air,' seem smaller, like the trivial adventures of an ant circus. That's a strange thought to think, especially strange at a time like this, but no stranger really than the curious nature of Remus Lupin's mouth.

There are shadows moving beyond James's protective seal. They catch moments of light as it filters down from the canopy of leaves above, speckled, dappled, poetical light, but they're no more than cruel shadows, creeping and menacing and closing in. Those shadows are real people, real people who want to kill them. Sirius thinks he can see one of them smile, a lean, hollow smile beneath the hood of its cloak.

Dying happens to other people, or so Sirius always assumed. It's tragic and when it happens to the people you love you feel scooped out like—Sirius's mind stumbles—like a melon. And you hate it, you fight against it, sometimes you cry, but it isn't you. Dying happens to other people and Sirius has no idea what it means if dying happens to *him*.

James's hand clutches hard at Sirius's elbow. Sirius is glad it isn't clutching so hard at his back, though the sting is nearly gone now as a curious numbness seeps in. Sirius can barely feel his own thoughts anymore. He finds James's hand and grasps it briefly, probably a little too hard. Then, he draws his wand.

"I didn't say goodbye to anyone," James says. "I didn't, I mean, I just never—I know people are dying. But I didn't think."

"I know," Sirius says.

"Lily told me to be *careful*," James says. "She's going to kill me."

"I know." Sirius wonders what Remus will do, a silly, fickle wondering. Will Remus sit down or will he stand up or will he even cry? Sirius has never actually seen Remus cry. He probably doesn't have the ability to make tears happen with his eyes. Sirius doesn't want Remus to cry, anyway, except he does. Except he doesn't. There are all sorts of things he should say now, heroic statements with James, last stands, that sort of thing, words men and women will teach to their children and say "That, my sons and daughters, that was the last thing Sirius Black and James Potter ever spoke before they died and became heroes of the people, before we built those seventy seven statues to them and in their honor, the poses they struck, their chiseled chins!" but the thought isn't funny because they haven't even had time to do anything heroic yet. Sirius feels cold.

"Right," James says, stepping forward. James Potter, Sirius Black's best friend in the world, is the bravest person in the universe, and it's horrible. "Are you ready? We'll, we'll throw down the barrier, and then—we'll have to distract them, just to get the warning out to Dumbledore—"

"Right," Sirius echoes. "On, uhm. On three."

"One," James says. "Two—"

"Get down!" The voice tears through to them, booming and surreal, slicing into the dirty, hot stench in the air; the shadows whip around to face it, and so does James, and Sirius grabs him. They hit the ground. Light, light everywhere. Sirius's back hurts again, he can barely see for how much it hurts. Someone grabs his wrist and pulls him up, pulls James up.

"Get out of here," Caradoc Dearborn hisses. They're face to face and Sirius can see the whites of his eyes, his singed eyelashes. There are other people behind him, moving fast; Sirius doesn't recognize them, though maybe he would if they would just stop moving. If everyone could just stand *still* for ten seconds, please.

"Don't Apparate. Run as fast as you can, due west. Go."

"We can do something," James protests breathlessly. "We can, you need us—"

"This *isn't the time*," Caradoc says. Something in his eyes makes Sirius want to throw up.

Sirius grabs James by the arm and runs. James is yelling something, Sirius can't hear it, blood in his ears and hurting and rage deafening him --

"--the other way!" James yells, twisting out of his grasp and seizing his shoulders. "West! *Other* west!"

"Oh," says Sirius, "right," and they wheel around.

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They don't die. It's almost embarrassing, which is probably the wrong reaction to have. Sirius should be relieved, should be grateful; he should be promising all his ancestors that he'll never steal cake again, but all he can manage to think of is how mortifying it is not to die and to have been so certain. To have been so young.

At St. Mungo's, a nurse Sirius fondly calls the H.M.S. Greta puts all sorts of foul-smelling cream on Sirius's back, and then he can go home.

When he leaves the hospital room, still gingerly buttoning his shirt -- it's a long, long process -- James is leaning against the wall, hands in his pockets. He's wearing new glasses. They're rather...square.

"Nice glasses, you wonk," says Sirius. "Did you get a line-of-duty discount?"

"About that kiss," says James, with a twisted sort of smile.

"Sorry, mate, that was a special one-time offer," Sirius says, wincing as the cloth grazes a bad spot. His back feels better -- a little -- but it smells like charcoal and motor oil and, bizarrely, tuna, and the smell makes him remember hurting, which is almost as bad as when it actually did. "Only at the moment of death. Or if you get me a bit liquored up first."

James opens his mouth. His face, Sirius notes in alarm, has come over all sincere and brow-wrinkly. Sirius flinches away from him. "Don't," he says, waving James away. "You're welcome. You know. Just -- it

happens. Well, hopefully it doesn't happen that often. But you know what I mean."

He's relieved, he thinks. Alive and well enough to be embarrassed. He should be grateful, but he doesn't know what to think. James looks away. They're quiet for a moment.

"Give us a lift home, then," Sirius prompts. Why is everything always so strange? You finally get a handle on things, you say to yourself firmly *Let's not do that ever again, thank you, it was not worth our time*, and then all of a sudden there are whole new ways to do *that* that never occurred to you before. It's hopeless.

James says, "I don't have any money. But I'll walk you."

Sirius says, "All right. Fine. I save your life, and you can't spot me a fiver to sit down in a cab for fifteen minutes."

James looks straight through him and pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose, both done the same way he's done since they were eleven. "I don't care if you make this a joke," he says quietly. "I mean, you should, since you can. But it isn't a joke to me, all right?"

"You are much, much less fun since you grew up," says Sirius. His head aches. Everything aches. "Tell you what. Let's go downstairs, I'll throw myself in front of a bus and you can grab my arm. Then hooray, I'm saved, Sirius Black lives to brighten the universe another day, we'll be even, and it'll be funny for everybody."

James considers a moment. Then he says, "Fine."

"Fine," says Sirius.

James shakes himself like a wet dog, like he could shake off everything that's happened to them -- not only now but always. He says, "Good," and slings an arm around Sirius's shoulders. Sirius howls in exaggerated agony, James manages a little coughing laugh, and it's a little better.

Next time, Sirius thinks vaguely, we'll do this whole dying thing properly.

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Remus,

I wanted to tell you that Sirius came through the hospital today. Don't worry, he's all right -- at least, he'll be all right until I get my hands on him. Dumbledore says James is back and isn't hurt but he hasn't come home. They're being debriefed now, apparently. D. informs me that they were involved in "reconnaissance" and that they "stumbled" on an "unexpected number" of Death Eaters, and were then plucked out of danger by Caradoc Dearborn, who's been watching them for all these months -- apparently this was a practice run.

I'm so furious I can barely hold a pen. I'm sure this is mostly their own fault. You know how they are, and they feed off each other. God, I could kill them. Anyway, I wanted you to have the facts, at least those I could gather, so you wouldn't worry, not that you would ever admit that you do. I'm dropping a note to Peter as well. I'll take care of James, but I expect you to put the fear of God into S. as soon as you see him. All right? All right.

Lily

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"I said ham and cheese," says Susan-the-assistant, giving Peter an impatient look. "This doesn't have cheese. I mean, it's only two ingredients, Pete."

"Right," says Peter, casting a longing glance at the clock. "Well. Sorry."

"I don't mean to hurt your feelings," says Susan. "It's only, you know, if I knew you'd get it wrong, I'd've gotten my own sandwich."

Peter's getting the sneaking suspicion that his brain automatically switches around Susan-the-assistant's order out of spite, or perhaps out of stupidity. Maybe it's just that Susan-the-assistant has actually been put on this earth to make him dread lunch hour. "Sorry," Peter says again. That usually helps, saying sorry a lot and acting like an idiot. "I must've given someone else the ham and cheese. I know I ordered it."

"Mm," says Susan. She gives him the look that means, 'You're here because your father is my boss,' and then goes back to picking at her sandwich. "And there's mustard," she says. "I hate mustard."

Peter wishes James were around. Back at school, when the Susans and Jerry-the-tailors and Magda-the-

counter-girls of the world were making Peter feel stupid, there was always James, who would say something like "Mustard never killed a man" or "No one needs cheese that badly," and they would go away. Peter could never duplicate exactly the kind of things he'd say, and even if he could, the effect was all in the tone.

"Sorry," he says.

"It's all right," says Susan. "I said it's all right. It's just, you know, don't offer, if you can't do it properly. All right, I've got to count up for yesterday."

Peter waits. Susan lifts her eyebrows at him.

"That means you can *go*," she says.

"Right," says Peter.

He hates working. He hates being away from school. Lily came to see him the other day, which made him very uncomfortable but also sort of glad, since she wouldn't have come unless James had asked her to; it's obvious she doesn't like him, and they have nothing to talk about, except James, and whatever she knows she won't tell him.

As for Remus, he is a fortress of solitude.

Being on his own feels strange and wrong somehow, more strange and more wrong than taking inseams, which is what his father said he'd be doing but does not, in fact, trust him to do. And why should he, Peter thinks, when he can't actually bring back the right lunch for everyone. Cheese! Mustard! Inseams! It's all so ridiculous, but Peter can't be caught by Magda-the-counter-girl while hiding in the closet again -- or by anyone else, for that matter.

Peter hates being alone. Being alone reminds him of what it's like not being alone, which is worse, sometimes, than loneliness. Being alone reminds him that what he does when he *isn't* alone is in fact just watch all his friends say funny things -- like "Mustard never killed a man," for example -- while he laughs and contributes nothing.

Peter closes the door behind him.

"Mustard never killed *anyone*," he mutters, but of course it's too late, and not as funny as if James had said it. James would have said something else, probably. Sirius would have put a napkin in the sandwich and hid

under the counter to watch the sparks fly. Remus would have brought the right sandwich.

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"You're going to kill me," James says. He leans against the door of their little flat. There is no part of him that wants to talk about anything. All he wants to do is put his head in Lily's lap and feel her fingers, soothing in his hair.

His head is spinning. It's worse than in the woods. There's the terror of what she'll do to him, because she's most dangerous when she's like this, all white and still and completely without expression; and, worse, the terror of what she won't do. What if she doesn't say anything, doesn't punch him, doesn't put her arms around him, doesn't yell or cry or do any of the things he imagined? What if she just gets up and walks into the bedroom and closes the door? And then, under that fear, he feels relief so immense it almost chokes him. Home. He's *home*. It's strange to think of this crowded little place, which smells so strongly of nothing except paint, as anything so important.

"I've been considering it," Lily says evenly. She's sitting in a tiny circle of light in the far corner of the dark room, her feet curled under her. James realizes that she's clasping her hands together because they're shaking, are still shaking even though the knuckles are white from holding on. No, this is worse; this is the worst.

"I'm sorry," James says. "I was stupid, God, I was really stupid and I'm so sorry, Lil." The doorknob is digging into his back. The alternative here would be to move towards her, but he feels strongly that this is an extremely not good idea.

"Tell me what happened," she says, "and—" A weirdly comforting pinkness begins to kindle in her cheeks and the tips of her ears. "And if you leave anything out, one single thing, I will -- I will do something extremely rash. I don't care what Dumbledore said he'd do to you. I don't care. You're going to tell me what you were doing there and what idiotic thing you did wrong, and I know it was something, because they rushed Sirius past my desk on a stretcher. That's how I had to find out. And he had the nerve -- he *waved* at me! Which is also your fault, because you encouraged him when he was young and now he's grown up *completely impossible*. So you're going to stand right there and talk until I know exactly what happened."

James always thought the expression "eyes blazing" was stupid and, if you thought about it too much, grisly, until one day Lily Evans got angry at him and he suddenly understood.

"Can I sit down?" he asks, carefully.

"No," says Lily.

"But I'm tired," says James.

"You're in trouble," says Lily. "You can hold on to the door frame if you like. Now talk."

The fact that Lily is in love with him, the fact that she is so completely magnificent and is sitting in front of him with her legs folded, white and shaking and furious because James might have gotten hurt, is amazing. He is even more glad than usual not to be dead.

"We were meant to be looking for a camp," he says, pushing hair out of his eyes. "We'd traced a lot of the recent attacks back to this one area -- a lot of energy moving around, a lot of -- presences, you know. That's what Sirius does -- he has that affinity, sort of. You've seen it. He can tell what kind of magic something is and where it's been and where it's coming from; it's partly his blood and partly the dog thing, I think."

"Dog thing?" says Lily.

Shit! "You know, he's like a dog," gabbles James, stomach dropping to somewhere around his toes. "Because he's, you know, loyal and -- sniffs things and sometimes he tries to urinate on hydrants or put his face between your -- I mean not like that but, anyway -- he's like a dog. That's not the point. We were trying to track it, and -- "

"Then why did they need you?" Lily's face is hard and set again. "Why not just send Sirius?"

James gapes at her. "Alone?"

Lily doesn't say anything.

"No," says James. "I mean -- no, Lil. Don't be ridiculous. Anyway, he can't work a defensive spell if his life depended on it, which it would. You know how he gets when his blood's up, all laughing and insane and hopping about talking nonsense and all of a sudden someone would hit him in the chest with a hex before the possibility even occurred to him."

"Or the shoulders?" says Lily.

"No," says James. "That was different. I'm getting to that. We were looking, and we'd been looking for weeks. There was a camp, that was clear -- everything was concentrated in one place -- a hotspot, sort of. But it kept

moving about, and there were some extremely complex location and cloaking defenses on it, and -- "

"Two kids," says Lily. "You're eighteen, for God's sake! You're my age! You're barely out of school -- neither of you has ever faced a single Death Eater, let alone a whole camp of them!"

"We weren't exactly supposed to face them, you know. This wasn't some two-man military operation. It was just to find out where they were and get a fix on them, so we could bring in more people later. And," James adds, a little bitterly, "apparently they had Caradoc Dearborn, Baby Monitor, spying on us all along, so it really shouldn't have been an issue."

"I don't care. They should have sent -- "

"We had to go because we're better than other people," says James, simply. "And we have to learn how to be the best. Do you want to hear what happened or not?"

She crosses her arms across her chest and looks away.

"Well, we did," says James. "I mean, we found them. Well, we didn't know we had, we were just walking. Sirius found them, I think, he just didn't know. He kept saying he was hearing things funny, that something was wrong, but I thought -- it's not that I disbelieved him, you understand, only he'd been saying that all along, and we hadn't really been sleeping, and anyway, it doesn't matter."

"I'm angry," Lily says. "I'm so, *so* angry."

"At *me*?" James demands. "Because it's not as if I could have said, Why, yes, sir, please take my best friend in the whole world, who's no good at all with defensive spells by the way, into immediate danger without me, while I just stay at home sipping tea and buffing my nails and staying safe and, and keeping up on the *Quidditch* scores!"

"Yes!" Lily snaps. "At you, of course I'm angry at you! And at Dumbledore, for thinking it's all right to ask either of you -- and at Sirius, *oh*, at Sirius," she continues, jaw tightening, "at Sirius for being no good at defensive spells and not getting *better*--"

"It was just supposed to be a, a reconnaissance kind of thing," James says, angry and weary at once. He doesn't want to fight or yell or do anything that reminds him of where he was, of what almost happened. He wants his parents. He wants someone to tell him it's all right and he can go to sleep without dreaming about it, that it wasn't real, some fiction of the forest. He wants Lily to stop shouting, to stop reminding him of how

real it *was*. "So that people who really – who really know what they're doing wouldn't have to be wasted on the unimportant things. Lily, I *wanted* to go!"

"But you were attacked," Lily says. Her mouth trembles.

"Sirius pushed me out of the way," James says. "That's how he got hurt. I'd go again. If he goes, I'll go again: Dumbledore needs us."

"You *idiot*," says Lily, viciously. "You stupid – stupid—"

"Lily," James attempts, "please, can't we just—"

"No," Lily snaps. "We can't *just*, we can't just *anything*. I know I only have a stupid desk job, James, but I've seen what the Death Eaters can do – what they have done already! – to people. I don't want you brought in there like that. James, I *love* you, do you have any idea what it means?"

"Yes," James tells her. "Actually, yes, I know exactly—"

"You do not!" Lily's voice tears off, sudden and awful to hear. "It means that I'm terrified, I'm terrified all the time, and then when they brought Sirius in and you weren't there, what was I supposed to think?"

"That I was making my report," James says, mouth dry. "That I was telling Dumbledore what happened."

"That you were in seven hundred pieces somewhere. Gone. Forever." Lily stares at the ceiling, clenching her own forearm so tightly that James wants to take her hands before her nails reach bone.

"Sirius should have told you that I was all right," James says.

"Oh, I assumed," says Lily. "What with all the waving and the idiot grinning, unless he'd *lost his mind from the blast*, which is also quite possible, *isn't it*."

"I'm sorry," James says.

"I know you are," says Lily.

"I love you," James says, and:

"We should get married," says Lily.

"I'm sorry," James says. "What?"

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Remus can smell Sirius before he even knocks, though it's hard—there's something distinctly piscine masking the heavy canine scent, the normal combination of Sirius's soap and his hair and his skin—but Remus is waiting to smell him just, fingers digging into the arm of the couch and the back of his neck prickling with anxiety as he waits, and waits.

Sirius has been in the hospital: he also smells of that, complicated salves, sheets kept sterilized with precise magic. He smells a little of petroleum, too, which is an odd detail Remus saves to analyze later.

Remus is at the door immediately, flinging it open, grabbing Sirius by the shirt and dragging him inside.

"Ow. Hi," Sirius says. "Watch the back, it's sort of—ow! Christ, Moony, careful, I'm a veteran of the war, you know—"

"Shut up," Remus says. He should be gentler, kinder, but suddenly he doesn't know how to be. He presses Sirius back against the door, face against his neck, a blind helpless connection of mouths and teeth and their noses banging together. Sirius makes a sound. Remus swallows it.

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"You heard me," Lily says.

James touches her elbow, her shoulder. He leans close and kisses her.

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"Uhm," Sirius says.

There's the asymmetrical waxing-moon shape of a bite-mark on his chest, beneath his collarbone, over his heart. Remus touches it wonderingly, brow furrowed. He put that there.

Before.

"You *bit* me," Sirius rumbles, sounding inordinately pleased. "Not just there, either. *Everywhere*."

"How's your back?" Remus asks. He doesn't want to think about it. "I didn't – did I hurt it?"

"Of course you did, you nonce," says Sirius wonderingly. His eyes are this incredible color Remus has never seen before and he doesn't exactly want to look at them, nor does he exactly want to look away. "You practically threw me across your bed like I was Lady Diana Mayo and you were wossname, the fellow with the camels. Except then it was the other way around. Thanks for that, by the way." He threads his fingers through the hair at the nape of Remus's neck and Remus's skin -- he seems to have more than the usual amount of skin tonight -- prickles at the firm, presumptuous touch. "And, it's a great big burn a foot long. Of course it hurts."

"What," Remus mumbles, against Sirius's throat. He can't seem to stop smiling. His body feels loosened and slow and sweet, like everything's been shaken out and put rather lackadaisically back together. He must look like an idiot. "I never have any idea what you're talking about. Lady Diana Mayo?"

"*The Sheik*," says Sirius. "Of course. It's a great Muggle film, you philistine. Yet another item on the to-do list of your cultural education."

There doesn't seem to be anywhere they aren't touching. There are many places on Remus's body of which he is not fond, places he's careful to avoid looking at or accidentally brushing against, even in the bath or when he gets dressed, but even these places are warm, as if forgiven, where Sirius's body presses against them. The sheets are damp. Remus's legs are sticky. It's all extremely disgusting, so it's fortunate that Remus is the exact opposite of concerned about it.

"James's first time with Lily was, it was *awful*," Sirius blurts out abruptly. His fingers are ranging across the skin over Remus's spine, skin which feels extremely hot and unusually thin. "I'm not supposed to talk about it but he said it was like being attacked by a jellyfish. It was at the beach, probably why he brought up jellyfish at all I'm sure – but can you imagine? Jellyfish. Jellyfish sex, Remus, they had jellyfish sex together and it was so bad I had to talk him down from a ledge."

"I'd guessed as much," Remus admits. "Since there was no confetti or skywriting, I figured it must have been dreadful."

"That's because you're very very clever, Moony," Sirius says. He touches Remus's lower back, which is very naked, and then his thigh, which is also very naked. They are both very naked. Remus has never been so very naked in his life; he wasn't even this very naked on the day he was born.

"That – didn't feel like jellyfish," Remus says carefully. "There were some times in the middle where I wasn't exactly positive that things were -- but not jellyfish, I think."

"Electric jellyfish, maybe," Sirius says. His hand stops moving, his thumb pressed against the inside of Remus's knee. Remus is so tangled up he may never be untangled again. "How about: White Hot Smoking Electric Fireworks jellyfish."

"But not just regular squashy jellyfish," Remus says, a little bit pathetically. He has to be sure. There was a moment, somewhere in the slightly-less-hazy-than-one-might-wish center of things, when they were fumbling about and there was something disgusting and, indeed, squashy on parts of Remus that were not used to that kind of thing, and for a terrifying second Remus had to stop and wonder if he was going to become hysterical in the middle of having sex, or right before having sex, or whatever it was that was feeling so odd and slick and unpleasant. He believes he might have actually said something like "for God's sake Sirius will you just *do* something already," at which point Sirius burst out laughing, and then Remus did too, but only sort of helplessly – and then they were kissing and not talking and things were all right again.

And then, somewhat to his own shock, it had been *much* better than all right -- but still, there had been the laughing, too, and it's hard to tell if this was a good thing or not.

Sirius makes an impatient noise and shoves his face into the pillow for a moment. The bed is all shadows and sweat and hair and strange new smells. Remus lifts himself up onto one elbow, touches Sirius's jaw uncertainly.

"Not any jellyfish," Sirius says, sliding his eyes back to meet Remus's. "Don't be stupid."

Remus has never seen Sirius look shy before. Something curious and unnamed unfurls through his chest, warming his belly. He swallows. "Oh," he says. "All right. Not any fish of the sea."

"Nor fish of any other place. However," says Sirius, "let us not pretend that the mechanics of the whole operation have a lot of dignity. In fact, it is my opinion that this -- the overall goodness of things in the world

of us -- is beginner's luck of the worst kind. And where did you -- where did you get the -- you know?" His ears have gone pink, and his cheeks, too. Remus can see another bite mark, smaller and less red, on Sirius's throat. This is insane, Remus thinks. Sex is insane, it's the craziest, dumbest thing anyone's ever thought of, and God, he is unforgivably, unremittingly naked.

"Oh, God," he says, rolling away and putting his hands over his eyes. He is blushing in places that he never even knew existed. "I -- look, Sirius, I know it might appear to the uninformed that I never think about these things at all, but that's just because -- oh, hell -- I know that I have a certain -- er--"

"Uptight propriety?" suggests Sirius innocently, taking Remus's wrist and nipping at his fingertips. Remus squints at him. "Hello, that's better. A certain tightly-corseted good breeding? Beneath which, I need hardly say, there strains and snarls a fangy and bestial beast of -- mm -- insatiable carnality, desperate to break loose, and apparently only my magic touch can set him free."

"Not -- those, no," says Remus, sliding his fingers almost absently into Sirius's mouth. "I just -- happen to have something resembling a sense of decorum, all right? Which is more than I can say for most of the people I know. And I did the research, because that's what I do when I'm confronted with a problem I don't understand, and I like to be prepared -- not that I thought we were going to, I didn't know, I had absolutely no idea, but what if we did and I had *absolutely no idea* -- so, you know, I -- I prepared. You can buy -- things -- in, in shops, you know. And it paid off pretty well for you, I might add, so--"

"No complaints," Sirius agrees cheerfully.

"I -- oh God, I stole a book. I stole a book from the library! It was -- I needed two dictionaries just to understand it, and I couldn't check it out, I couldn't. Can you imagine? The librarian, she's a million years old, and she has this look about her, this I Will Have Your Skull on a Plate look -- so I put it inside the dictionaries and I walked out! I'm going to hell."

"Probably," Sirius says. The dark wine-sound in his voice is his smile. "Oh, probably, straight to hell." Then there are his hands again, his lazy, elegant fingers trailing over Remus's hip. His mouth curves over Remus's, both of them breathing hot and close.

So this is what bodies are for, Remus thinks, though it's such a ridiculous thing to think, because bodies are for all kinds of things, like eating and, and building pyramids, and keeping your brain out of the mud.

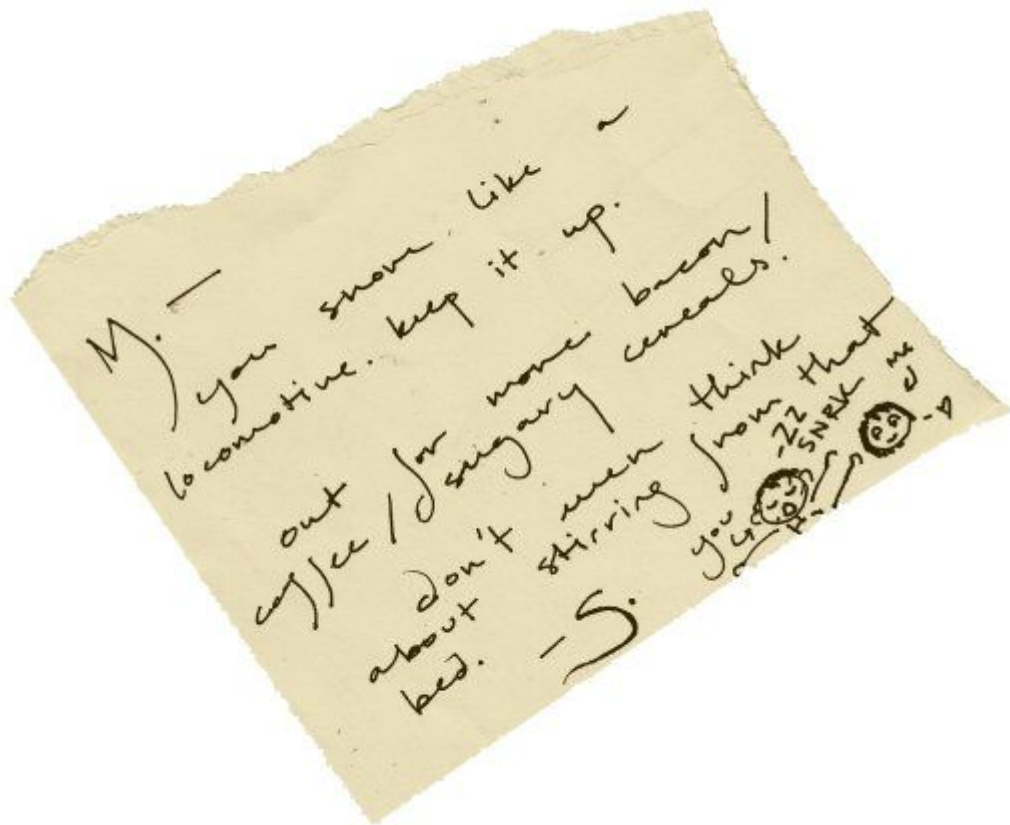
But no, all of those are things they can *do*. This, *this* is what they're *for*.

For perhaps the first time in Remus Lupin's conscious life, he actually understands himself.


Maybe he doesn't understand all the tangles and strange dark movements and curled-in places, but in his bones and skin and shifting muscle he feels a sudden, breathtaking sympathy that's never been there before. It has to do with the solid heat of Sirius's body against his, the intense clarity of Sirius's eyes, the primal flash of Sirius's teeth when he smiles the way he's smiling now. Sirius pushes up on his arms and kisses Remus again, thrillingly hard. Remus, arching and slamming his hands back to clutch the bedstead, knocks over the lamp.

"Bugger," Remus gasps.



"Wish, command," says Sirius, grinning wickedly, and doesn't stop cackling until Remus socks him in the face with a pillow and yanks him down by the nape of the neck.






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

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

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

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

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

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

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