

Part Fourteen

August, 1976

Remus wonders as the train pulls into the station why it is he's wearing a scarf in August. Ostensibly, he *knows* why he's wearing a scarf: his mother thought the train ride might be cold, or it might be unseasonably chilly in Devonshire, or he might need to strangle a serial killer on the train and a scarf would come in handy. However, now that the train is pulling into the station and his mother is no longer winding it seventeen times around his neck -- rather more like trying to choke him than for protection against the elements and the unforeseen but no doubt tragic future -- Remus wonders why it is he's still wearing the scarf. A sense of loyalty, perhaps, or duty, or the fact that it smells nice.

All right, Lupin, he tells himself. Don't look too eager, the Potter family is nice but they're not that nice. He slides a very subtle glance out the window at the slowing movement of the station, a few families here and there waiting for relatives they no doubt despise, a small fat man with a very large hat, a group of young wizards trying to look Muggle and failing. No Potters yet. Remus unwraps and rewraps and unwraps and rewraps his Train Chocolate. *Stop being nervous, he repeats, mentally, for the thousandth time. These are nice people who will not eat you. They will have put dungbombs in your bed but they are nice people who will not eat you.*

The train grinds to a halt, shaking awake the worn-looking old witch in the seat across from him, who stretches hugely and favors him with a toothless grin. "Up for the hols, me boy?" she says in a voice like ancient paper.

"Yes," Remus says. Trying to smile at her while simultaneously scanning the platform for the still-absent Potters is giving him eyestrain.

"Don't touch any of the sheep," the old witch warns. "I read about holidaymakers touching our sheep. Ain't never hurt anyone, a sheep." After giving him one long, narrow look, full of deep accusation, she falls promptly back asleep.

"Er. I won't," Remus says, speaking carefully, so as not to wake her. With one last befuddled look, he grabs his suitcase off the rack and scurries out.

The platform is shrouded in steam. Remus tries not to *look* as if he's looking, but his heart is beginning to sink or his stomach is beginning to rise. One of the very un-Muggle boys is giving him a withering look, and Remus doesn't blame him. His Train Chocolate is beginning to melt in his pocket and he supposes the large dark stain on his trousers and the fact that he is still wearing a large, prickly scarf, which has no doubt given him heat rash, is doing nothing to recommend him.

Your pants squelch but there is nothing to be nervous about. Remus chews his thumbnail. He removes his scarf. *Your face is covered in large, wool-induced boils but there is nothing to be nervous about.* Remus wonders if a napkin can help the mess in his pocket. He sticks a finger in. Chocolate is always good, no matter how gooey. *Now there is chocolate on your heat-boils and what is that man looking at anyway, has he never seen a madman before, but there is nothing to be nervous about.*

"Smile," Sirius says loudly from behind him.

The camera flash goes off.

"He wants to preserve these delicate, tender memories," James explains.

"I'm blind," Remus says.

"Well you *look* dashing," Sirius says. "Is that chocolate in your pocket or are you--"

"Well it's very *hot*," Remus mutters irritably.

"That explains the limpness," James says knowledgeably.

The camera flashes again; Remus twitches. "Is that really necessary, Sirius?"

"Yes," Sirius says. "I couldn't really see the stain in the last one. It's quite something. Do you want to borrow some trousers?"

"Are we going to be in public for much longer?" Remus mutters.

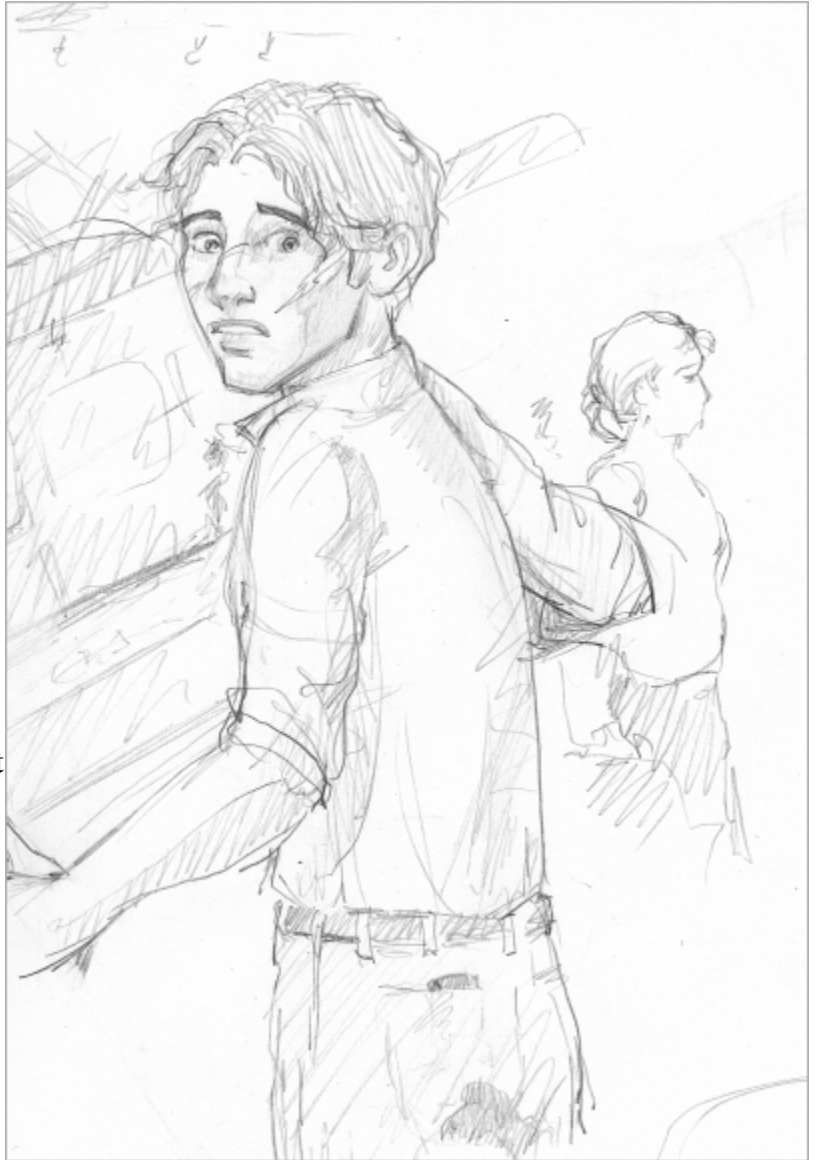
"I could walk in front of your arse," James offers. "Or behind it, I suppose. To shield it from view. Or have it all to myself."

"You'd look a right shirtlifter," Peter says, and sniggers.

"Right!" Sirius says officially. "Let's not waste any more time in this cultural wasteland, shall we? Who's on the motorbike clutching my manly shoulders adoringly and who's on the carpet with the Potters?"

"I'm for not with my mum," James says quickly, raising his hand.

"I don't know," Remus starts, but then subsides. It's just James' parents. He doesn't need James to be around James's parents. Parents are easy: they can talk about literature and what has Remus been doing for the summer and in half an hour it'll be over, which is more than he can say for this increasingly ill-advised visit.





"It's just my shoulders you want," Sirius preens, "given the moments when they are yours are fleeting and few."

"All right, yes, we know," James says, "you've a girl named Sophie who whispers sweet nothings in your ear in French all the night long. Good luck, old boy, but no one cares anymore."

Sirius cups one hand to his ear. "Is that jealousy, Mr. Potter? Do I detect its clang of discord in the otherwise harmonious summer air?"

"I am *not* jealous," James says. "I am merely perturbed she spends so much time *licking* parts of you I have *seen* during the winter which *drip* and get all *sneezy*."

The camera flashes. "Exhibit C: James Potter, jealous, on the station." Sirius beams.

"Carpet," Remus says decidedly, hefting his bag and starting off down the station.

"They've been like this for the past three days," Peter says, scurrying to catch up. "Don't blame them, though. Sophie's -- I mean, she's -- well, *you* know. Have you seen the pictures?"

"I *don't* know," Remus grinds out. It's the truth. He doesn't. "And yes. I have." He supposes that Sophie is, indeed, very attractive. He supposes that, after all the fuss his friends have been making about girls since they first hit puberty, and before that, pretending they already had, she is perhaps the pinnacle of Girl, the ultimate Bird, a triumph of the gods and the Singular Goal of the Adolescent Male. He wonders if James stutters in front of her and how often Sirius has tripped over his bootlaces to make her happy. He wonders if, when they're out on dates, people stare and Sirius puffs up like one of those blowfish, looking all spiny and unattractive. He wonders if Peter turns the color of good, bloody beets and starts spouting unfortunate pickup lines -- a strange and somewhat distressing reflexive habit he's somehow developed. He wonders why it is that very attractive girls seem to send boys into such a flurry of distress and madness and inconsistency. Remus understands, aesthetically, that Sophie is no doubt the Venus de Milo of summer relationships. He understands that James becomes a flop-tongued idiot in front of girls and Peter becomes oily and repulsive and Sirius becomes disturbingly helpful, and understands that he, himself, cannot possibly understand why. They're just girls. They're people, only with breasts. They are often far nicer to talk to.



"That stain," Peter is saying, "is *really* unfortunate from behind."

James' parents are as unfailingly friendly and solicitous as Remus could hope for, although he still finds James' mum vaguely intimidating, and his dad offers a vision of Remus' own future that is simultaneously frightening and comforting. They've set up a bed for him in the living room complete with teddy bear perched on the yellow pillowcase, the which inclusion leads to a screaming row between James and his mother over Mrs. Potter's penchant for revealing the darker parts of James's childhood.

"I feel bad," Remus says, holding the bear stupidly at arm's length.

"Don't," Sirius says, consolingly. "He's not really embarrassed. Honestly, I think he's just afraid you're going to spill something on Mr. Toodles." He fixes Remus with a sharp look. "You're not going to spill anything on Mr. Toodles, are you?"

"I couldn't possibly," Remus says. "Look at his dear little face."

An almost silence descends. Remus can still hear James and his mother going at it, throwing meaningless household objects such as pillows and clocks at one another. At least, that's what it sounds like. Remus imagines James' mother must have an *incredible* arm. *There goes a salad bowl*, Remus thinks as something crashes and James screeches and a dog two houses down begins to howl like mad.

It's nothing like home. Remus doesn't remember actually fighting with his parents, just skirting around arguments and everyone feeling guilty but quiet. His mum and dad stopped fighting long ago. He supposes they think it isn't good for him. Instead, they talk quietly about money while he eavesdrops and they give one another happy smiles over dinner and, while he feels sometimes as if they are all very fleshy ghosts, the happy smiles are happy. They all love each other, anyway.

"So," Sirius says, apparently addressing the ceiling.

"Ah," Remus agrees.

"Where's my underwear?" Peter calls from the guest bathroom.

"You'll never guess," Sirius whispers.

"With the dirty dishes," Remus replies.

"*Bugger*," Sirius says. "How do you *do* that?"

"Practice," Remus says. He's wondering what ridiculous piece of useless conversation he should fumble with next when from upstairs comes the unmistakable sound of something enormous crashing, cannonball-like, into the floorboards, followed by a stunned silence.

"Wardrobe?" Remus suggests.

"Truce," Sirius corrects him, nodding sagely.

Sophie is, as promised, the Venus DeMilo of the summer relationship: graceful, slim, and impossibly lovely, with impeccable manners and an accent like dark chocolate that makes Remus think of all the Parisian cafes where Fitzgerald wrote and which he will never visit. She even shakes hands well. Firm. Good eye contact, Remus thinks idiotically. James, who has on previous occasions scorned the female handshake as the only universal blight of the fairer sex, probably had a heart attack.

"Er," Remus says. "So you're Sophie. Lovely to meet you. Sirius talks about you all the time." Sirius, who is standing about two inches behind Sophie with his hand resting protectively at the small of her back, shifts a little and smirks at the floor.

"So you're Remus," Sophie says, with a mysterious little hint of a smile that never seems to leave her face. "I could say the same, hmm? Though," she leans her head back to look at Sirius, smiling now, "he never said you were so 'andsome. Always," in a darker, more intimate whisper, only ostensibly to Sirius, "you leave out the most important things."

Sirius mumbles something about not wanting to build up the competition *too* much and kisses her on the tip of the nose for rather too long. Remus shifts from foot to foot for a moment and wonders what he is expected to do in this situation, finally settling on staring out the window as if something very interesting is happening in the birdbath. He is actually imagining birds being completely non-sexual with one another in the birdbath. Ah, the safety of birds. He doesn't particularly like birds, and sometimes gets an uncontrollable urge to chase them in circles around the curb, but birds have no snub French noses and Sirius would probably never kiss one on the beak, unless dared to, or very much under the influence.

"So," Sirius says, "uh, what are you looking at, Remus?"

"Birds," Remus replies without thinking.

"But there are not any birds," Sophie murmurs.

"They've flown away," Remus says. "I was thinking about -- about birds that aren't there."

"That is very deep of you, Remus." Sophie says his name as if it has always been French -- which is, Remus recalls, generally the way French people say everything: as if it has always been French. *Ray-moo*. He wants to remind her that he does, actually, have an S at the end of his name, and he likes it, but her eyes are so dark and round and surrounded by thick, long eyelashes and full of feminine shadow that it distracts him before the words form. "You did not tell me your friend watches birds that are not there."

"I watch birds that are not there," Sirius says quickly. "All the time."

"Mm," Sophie says, one eyebrow raised.

Remus realizes then that he likes her. He doesn't want to kiss her or suck on her nose like Sirius was doing before. Nor does he want to get clumsy around her like James or drool in his sleep about her like Peter. But, despite himself, and against the natural order of things, Remus likes this French girl who has come into his life and stolen his friends.

It is mind-boggling.

Something is *wrong* with him.

He wants her to tell him about *France*.

"So," Sirius says again.

"Birds," Remus says, which is not exactly what he meant to say. He can now, having already said "birds," think of *twenty thousand* things to say, including, in suave tones, 'So, Sophie, where in France did you say you were from?' because she *hasn't* said yet, and that would lead to a *conversation*, which is what normal people have with each other. But now he's said "birds," and she's smiling at him like he's insane, which he supposes is not too far off the mark. He wonders, for a brief, panicked moment, if this is what it feels like to be James, *all the time*.

"Remus," Sophie murmurs. She slips her arm into his and puts a small, cool hand on his shoulder. "Would you like to walk me to dinner?"

"Now hang on just a *tick*," Sirius indignantly yelps, but Sophie half-turns and puts her hand on his cheek and whispers something in his ear and he subsides, though still twitching a little.

"Er," Remus says, concerned and bewildered.

"No problem," Sirius mutters. He glowers at the air just beyond his ear. "I told you. House on fire."



"Well, she likes *you*," James leers in a voice heavy with suggestion, when he and Remus and Peter are playing Exploding Snap in his bedroom after dinner and Sirius and Sophie are saying their lengthy goodbyes downstairs. "Tell you what, Moony, you play your cards right and you could be in for a little canine threesome."

Remus' hand explodes at his head.

"Is my nose still on my face?" is the first thing he thinks to ask. Cards, when flying at his flesh, are apparently very sharp.

"Large as ever," James informs him. "Tough luck."

Remus winces and sets about picking up his cards, trying not to show the intensity of his wounds.

"If you listen hard enough," Peter whispers, "you can hear the sounds they make. They're very wet. The sounds. That they make. It's a wonder their lips are still, you know, on their own mouths."

"Peter," James says, "that's truly disgusting."

Remus opens his mouth to add something to that, equally horrified, but James holds a finger to his lips, the universal sign for Shut Up Because I Want To Listen. Tomorrow, Remus is going to buy earplugs. Today, Remus is

going to hide in the bathroom.

"Bathroom," Remus mouths, and flees for sanctuary.

Unfortunately, the bathroom is filled with feminine products from Sophie, all neatly arranged and smelling attractive, and Peter's mess, and wet towels, and steam from someone's recent bath. Remus sits on the toilet with the seat down and dabs his nose delicately with a wad of tissue. The echo of kissing sounds, smacking and sucking and pulling and licking, bounce over the tiled walls. This is not how Remus ever expected his vacation in Devonshire to be. He thought it would be fun, full of the things James and Sirius did together which he will never understand but will always be fascinated by. He thought there would be pranks and James' mum's cooking and parading around naked all day long in the heat, scaring the neighbors. Even random acts of exhibition are preferable to hiding in the bathroom while his hair puffs in the humidity. Can it be possible to spend three weeks feeling always as if there is a melted chocolate bar staining the seat of his trousers?

Apparently, there are worse things, which Remus realizes when he stumbles yawningly into the bathroom on the morning of the fourth day to find Sirius climbing out of the shower in typical *après-shower* couture.

"GNAUGH," Sirius yelps, and promptly falls into the bathtub.

"SORRY," Remus chokes out, and then stands frozen to the spot like a complete arse for what feels like about an hour, hands uselessly at his sides, squinching his eyes closed. There are the wet, slippery sounds of someone climbing out of the tile, and then Sirius's voice, breathless, says, "Christ, I thought you were James' mum."

Remus feels like James' mum. "Right," he says, feeling leaden. "Sorry. I just didn't realize anyone was in here."

"It's kosher, Moony, it's just us, we've all seen each other in the altogether, no harm done." Sirius's words trip over each other, magnified by the tile walls and the steam that heats Remus' face and curls the tips of his hair. *In the altogether, in the altogether, in the altogether* becomes *I am naked, I am naked, I am so, so naked*. Remus cracks one eye open.

Sirius, in the absence of any towel within arms' reach, other than the one Remus has swung around his neck, has wrapped himself in the shower curtain. A little yellow ducky decal rests neatly between his thighs. Remus feels a bubble of hysteria clawing at his throat.

"Right, well, can I use the shower when you're done," Remus says, clawing behind himself for the doorknob.

"It's yours," Sirius whispers. "Ha...ha."

"Thanks," Remus says, and then suddenly falls backward as the door opens behind him apparently of its own accord.

"Oops!" James's mother exclaims cheerfully, raising her eyebrows. "Excuse me, boys! Didn't mean to disturb! It's eggs for breakfast, no one minds scrambled, do they?"

Remus gapes at her, willing his mouth to make words.

"I love eggs!" Sirius says from behind him. At least he sounds much like Remus feels. "I love all sorts of eggs. I love scrambled eggs. I love deviled eggs. I love fried eggs. Boiled. Scrambled. I already said scrambled. That's just the way I get about eggs. Wonderful eggs. Delicious. Can't wait!"

"Well, hurry down before they get cold," Mrs. Potter scolds, waggling her expressive eyebrows at them. Remus opens and closes his mouth several times, and finally makes a noise like "nks," but Mrs. Potter has already gone, closing the door behind her.

Remus reaches carefully for the doorknob, turns it, and pushes out. Nothing happens.

"It swells," Sirius says in a hollow voice, "the door, sometimes, with the water."

"Argh," Remus groans, and pushes again. There is a very long silence.

"Here," Sirius says at length, "let me." Still clutching the shower curtain across his legs, he edges across the bathroom. Remus flattens himself against the opposite wall, feeling very distant from his own body. If ever there was a time for an out of body experience, he thinks. He can imagine himself, watching himself, the expression on his face, Sirius about to pull the shower down, and James' mother skipping merrily down the steps not actually wondering why her son's two friends were in the bathroom together until she starts cracking the eggs, and her hand clenches spasmodically and one poor splurty egg explodes all over her face and she gets salmonella poisoning from somehow breathing in raw egg and has to be taken to the hospital and Remus uses the commotion to run away to the forest, wherever that is near Devonshire, to take it up with the birds who never take showers and are always comfortably clothed in feathers.

Sirius turns the knob in the other direction. That explains everything. The door gives an obliging little creak and swings open.

"There you are," Sirius says, regarding the ceiling fixedly. "Open."

"Thanks," Remus says. "Have a good shower! You should maybe lock the door next time! Your duck is slipping!"

Without waiting for any sort of response -- it would probably kill them both -- he runs and hides under the bed until James' mother, who hasn't had the decency to go to the hospital yet, calls up that it's time for breakfast and the smell of bacon manages to drag him away from the friendly, friendly dust-bunnies who love him no matter what dark stain is spreading over his rear end.

"So I think," James says, "we should go swimming."

I think, Remus' brain says, I should have you stand over me to behead me moments after I gut myself with a ritual knife to bring honor back to my family.

"Without Sophie," James adds.

"I didn't bring trunks," Remus says. "Nothing to swim in. Have to stay home. Sorry. Terrible. Have fun without me!"

"Marauders," James says firmly, "do not need trunks."

Marauders, Remus' brain says firmly, *are going to be one less after I drown myself*. "All right," Remus' mouth says.

"So," says Sirius, skipping into the room and rubbing his hands together eagerly, "what's on the menu for today? What kinds of daring exploits are we going to cook up? I have to work tomorrow night, so it can't involve mutilation or my hair, but other than that, I am hungry for adventure."

"Sophie busy tonight?" Peter asks innocently.

Sirius deflates slightly. "She's having a Girls' Night with her cousins. Which apparently is not at all in real life the way it is in my imagination."

"Don't let that stop you," Peter says encouragingly, and Sirius gives him a look.

"We're going swimming," James says. "Stop being so pornographic. *Cousins*. What's wrong with you? In any case: we're going swimming."

"Fantastic!" Sirius says, with great enthusiasm. "Swimming! Finally. Tonight's the first time it hasn't rained in ages. I hate it when I can't go three hours without being soggy. Can we go to that place at the bottom of the pasture where we went last year? Oh, James, and can I nick a pair of trunks off you, I don't have any."

"Since when do you wear trunks?" James says, utterly bewildered. "Last year you said, and I quote, 'Trunks are for elephants and the unmanly.' Who are you? Where's the Padfoot I know, waving it about all over the place and scaring the birds?"

"Well, I've got a bird of a different sort now," Sirius says, going rather red. "Can't just run around sharing the wealth with everyone, willy-nilly."

"Well, I haven't got an extra pair," James snaps irritably, "so you're just going to have to go willy-nilly the way you always do, like normal people. Both of you," he adds, pointing an accusing finger at Remus. "Honestly! Clothes! What's next?"

"Never thought *you'd* lobby for clothing," Peter tsks at Sirius, reprovingly. "Everyone's gone mad, except for me."

"*And* me," James points out.

"You'll be mad once we get back to school," Peter explains.

"True," James says. "But at least *you'll* never betray me by wearing *trunks* to go swimming in."

"Naked all the way," Peter agrees.

Remus wilts like a squashed balloon.

"Looking forward to it," Sirius says. "Really."

Remus holds his towel strategically in place. James didn't let him bring a book -- it would have been much more subtle, just as useful, and Peter wouldn't be giving him strange looks every two minutes -- for which Remus will always harbor a quiet and powerful resentment. James and Peter look so comfortable, naked, carefree, frolicking. Well, perhaps not frolicking -- more like eating sandwiches and waiting for the water not to shrivel their skin off with the cold -- but if they *wanted* to frolic, they *would*. If Remus wanted to frolic, he would trip over his strategic towel and break his neck upon the rocks below. Luckily, if Sirius wanted to frolic, he would have to come out from behind that tree first, and it doesn't seem as if he'll be doing that any time soon.

"Come *on*, Pads!" James yells through a mouthful of turkey. "It's not like we've not seen Little Sirius before. What's *wrong* with you? Are you covered in boils?"

"No," Sirius says from behind the tree, very careful. He actually sounds as if he's considering his words, which is so un-Sirius that it's actually a little bit frightening. "No, no boils."

"Well then what *is* it?" James moans. He flops to the ground in exasperation. "I hate you right now. I'm eating your sandwich."

"Unfair," Sirius says, voice followed by some mysterious rustling. "It's just that I've no particular desire to freeze my nadgers off in some icy Devonshire sludge, thanks loads."

"Last year," James mutters as he stuffs half of Sirius's sandwich into his mouth, "you were frolicking in the sludge without half a care for your precious nadgers."

"Last year I was the only one who would miss them if they were gone," Sirius says with dark, lecherous amusement.

"I hate the French," James confides in Remus. "What the hell are you doing with that towel?"

"I," Remus begins, but is cut short by an explosion of rustling behind Sirius' tree, followed immediately by Sirius' grand entrance.

"Tada," he says. He throws his arms out wide.

"Well," James says. "It does seem as if you've found the world's largest leaf for the world's smallest prick. Congratulations, Sirius. I disown you! *Disown*. You are dead to me. I am eating all your sandwiches, dead people

don't need them."

Remus begins to classify the leaf. Some sort of bush leaf, perhaps, with an odd, spiny edge, and browning slightly. Or perhaps it's from some rare kind of fern, or another form of plant life that will cause Sirius' nadders to break out into an uncontrollable rash. The thought is cruel, but heartening.

"What are you smiling at, Remus?" James mutters. "You've turned your towel into a skirt. Next thing I know you're going to wrap it around under your armpits and get shower shoes and one of those little head towels and start singing operettas."

"He does that already," Peter says, munching an apple. "Remus loves his operettas."

"You can *hear* those?" Remus asks, mildly horrified.

"Moony," Sirius says, pityingly, "we can *all* hear those." It's not at all fair, in Remus's opinion, to be condescended to by someone wearing a leaf of mysterious origin over his bits. "Give me those sandwiches."

"Oi, Peter, do you hear something?" James says, staring vacantly past Sirius's bare thigh. "I could have sworn I heard the wind rustling: 'Sandwiches!' it seemed to cry. It almost sounded like someone I knew, before he *died*. Tragic. Just tragic." Sirius, thoughtfully, kicks him. James does not respond at all, except to meditatively cram another half-sandwich into his mouth and shake his head sadly.

Peter sighs and rolls onto his back. "What's the matter with us?"

"*Uff*?" James demands indignantly, spewing crumbs. "Iff *im*! N iff femch grfemd!" and he points an accusing thumb at Sirius.

"Maybe this is what happens when you leave behind childish things and enter the tangled forest of adulthood," Sirius says wisely.

Peter shakes his head. "Don't think so. Moony's mature, and he doesn't wear leaves over his bits."

"*Yet*," Sirius points out. "You'll all be doing it come next season. It's all over Milan."

"If the wind is insinuating it knows more about the latest fashions because of his girlfriend, let us remind the wind how *smelly* it is in Paris, and see what the wind has to say to that as I eat his second sandwich which is, if that's even possible, better than the first," James says, and promptly stuffs in more sandwich than should be able to fit past his teeth.

"The wind is merely pointing out," Sirius mutters, "that when certain sandwich-stealers of ill-repute went about crying great, pearly tears of woe and misery that this redhead, what's her name again, didn't love him for all eternity, we were all *very* understanding of just how boring *he* was."

"No the wind was not," James replies. He doesn't turn around, now, focusing vaguely on the water. "In fact the wind once told me that if I didn't stop whining and turning splotchy I'd have to take it up with the bathroom ghosts and cry forever in a toilet bowl, as the wind didn't want to have anything to do with me now I'd become an

unsavory, moping little girl."

"I remember that one," Peter says. "Hey, can I have the other half of his last sandwich?"

"He's dead; dead and gone," James sighs, "and the sandwiches he left to us, with his last shred of sanity."

Remus really, *really* wants his book. When Sirius found out he had brought books with him they went through the necessary motions, Sirius mocking him and Remus making a sly comment, but then silence again descended and they coughed a lot, until James' mother came in to tell them that French lass had shown up again. *Really*, James' mother had said, *I just don't understand it. None of us even speaks French!*

"I wish I had a book," says Peter after a few silent moments, and it suddenly strikes Remus that perhaps things are even more dire than he was aware.

On the seventh day, he wanders into the kitchen to find Sirius and James looking stunned at the kitchen table. James is holding a letter in his right hand and something glittering in his left; Sirius is staring at him as if he has sprouted tentacles out of his face. At Remus' entrance both pale faces turn to him.

"Oh *God*," James says.

Sirius's mouth opens and closes again. Remus stares from one to the other of them, growing increasingly panicked. "What? What's happened?"

"James," Sirius croaks, and makes a vague gesture towards the paper in James's shaking hand. "James -- he -- he's--"

"Are you dying?" Remus asks. "Sick? Joining the army? What's *happening*?"

"Head boy," James says suddenly, the words exploding out of him. "Dumbledore's just written me and told me *I'm head boy* which makes absolutely no sense whatsoever, we thought it was for you, so we opened it, sorry about that, but no, it's for me, see, right here, it says *James Potter* and that's my name, not yours."



Remus stares between the two of them, not sure whether to be relieved or somewhat pained. He never actually

wanted to be Prefect, to begin with -- he had always assumed James would be -- but keeping the badge shiny and well-polished did give him a sense of purpose. Upholding order because he had to was also of course much easier than upholding order because he wanted to. Being a Prefect gave him an excuse to practice lifting one brow just enough to let Sirius know *that* was a bad idea or *this* was something he couldn't in all good conscience allow. Being a Prefect, of course, also meant that one day Remus might very well be Head Boy, if precedent was anything to go by, and Remus *had* been wondering about that. The idea of it is very nice, of course; it would give him more of an opportunity to keep the natural order of things, to orchestrate just the right balance. However, with that responsibility would inevitably come power. Remus knows he doesn't have the people skills to wield such power. He would have to talk to *everyone*, probably *all the time*, about their problems, and tell people what to do, and when, and while he would know what to say, actually *saying it* would be a much more complicated proposition.

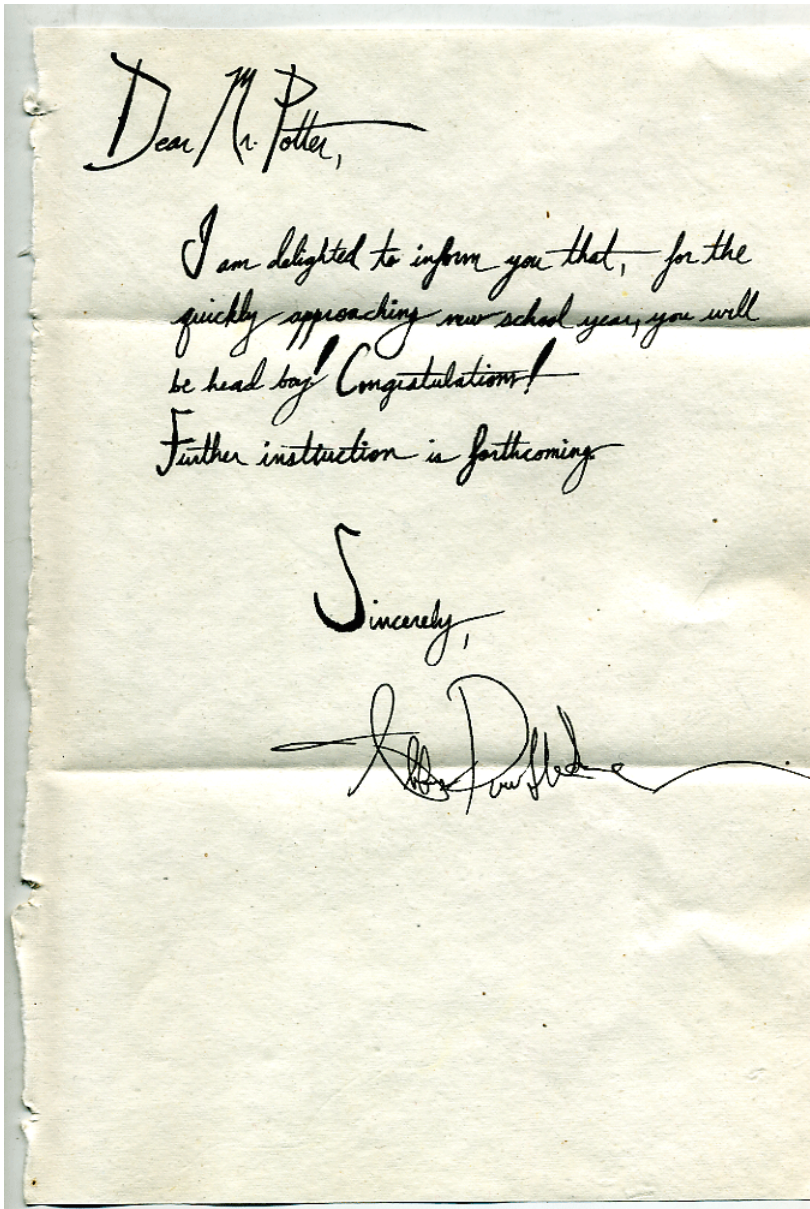
"Congratulations," Remus says, breaking out into a true smile. "Congratulations, James."

"Huhhhh," James says, a long exhalation of startled air.

"I'm not angry," Remus says quickly, to preempt the question.

"Head Boy," Sirius echoes. He looks, if possible, more shocked and terrified than James does. "*You're* meant to be Head Boy. What are we going to do with *him* as Head Boy? We can't have two of you being responsible at once. You're *Head Boy*?" He turns to address James at this last, in utter bewilderment.

"I don't *know*!" James wails.



"Who's Head Girl, does it say?" Remus asks. "James, this is really exciting! Stop looking like a fish and get excited about it!"

"It doesn't," James says robotically. "How am I meant to get excited? This is a mistake. This is the worst mistake ever made."

"I bet it's Mafalda Hopkirk," Sirius says. "Congratulations, Jamie!"

James makes a noise like a small animal dying and collapses to the table.

"I can't bloody believe this," Sirius mutters.

Remus sort of wants to hit him. No, actually, he really wants to hit him. A gigantic wooden mallet, perhaps, or a frying pan, or a dictionary. "James," he says, pushing this urge aside, "it's really fantastic, you being Head Boy."

"Nghr," James says.

"Just think of all the work you'll get to do with Dumbledore! Shaping the future of Hogwarts itself!"

"Ghnn," James says.

"And," Remus adds, triumphantly, "you'll be able to take points."

James's head flies up from the table like a shot. "Eh?"

"You will," Sirius breathes, straightening up. "At your discretion. Any points you like from anyone you like."

"Well," Remus attempts, "it's not really your discretion."

"Oh my," James says, a small, evil grin curling the corner of his mouth.

"Nonono," Remus says, backtracking. "No, it's not at your discretion. It has to be based on logic; it has to be *fair*; it has to be *sensible*--"

"Eight *billion* points from Slytherin," James says. "Yes. *That* sounds good."

"Nonono," Remus repeats, "that isn't how it works, James."

"All hail James Potter, Head Boy," Sirius whoops, leaping up and giving a low bow. "He's got the whole world in his hands!"

Remus makes a small, dying sound.

"Eight billion points from Slytherin because Snape's *nose* is *bothering me*," James amends. "How does that sound? *Lovely*, that's how. Merlin, it's like *heaven*."

Remus scrambles for the letter. "Look," he says helplessly, waving it around, "it says right here, this is power not to be abused. It's to be taken seriously, James; you're to *take it seriously* and with *utmost expression of maturity*."

"Eight billion points from Snivellus' nose!" James howls gleefully.

Remus wants to cry.

Dinners are the most awkward times of all. Dinners with someone else's family, even when the dinner itself isn't exactly awkward, always *feel* awkward. Remus can converse with parents, and he can converse with his friends, but parents and friends together and he goes rigid like a cranky clam until the food is eaten and its time to offer to help wash the dishes. James' mother is at least an excellent cook, and the food is always very easy to busy himself with. It doesn't block out the sound of stilted dinnertime conversation, James' mother soliciting information and James sliding lower and lower beneath the table and, on this their eighth night together, Sophie being very, very charming over her peas.

"...so now, all the chic Parisienne witches are wearing these pink 'ats, and no one knows it is because I am playing thees trick on my sister," Sophie finishes, grinning, and James's mother dissolves in whoops of laughter, rather more boisterous than the situation requires. James's father even gives his little cough of a laugh. Sirius shines a little grin on her, his hand creeping uncomfortably high on her brown thigh.

"Oh," James' mother says, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, "my goodness, Sophie, having family in high fashion must be just *thrilling*. This household's idea of style is putting a shirt on the right way out," and she fixes James with a stony glare.

"*Mum*," James says, in tiny, murderous tones, slouching even deeper into his seat.

There is a short silence. Everyone picks at the food.

At last, Sophie again leaps in: "This chicken is *fantastique*, Mme. Potter," she says brightly. Everyone else chimes in hurriedly with "mmm!"s and "Oh yes" and "Just delicious, really," but eventually it dies down again and the only noise is the clinking of cutlery and china and the occasional, half-hearted "mmmm."

"Pass the bread please!" Peter says, much too loudly, and everyone jumps.

Remus passes the bread to Sophie. Their fingers touch. Sophie passes the bread to Peter. Sirius gives Remus a look. James slips beyond sight below the table, hits his head on the edge, and yelps from beneath the tablecloth.

"James!" James' mother admonishes. "James, *what* are you doing?"

"I think he's hiding, Mrs. Potter," Peter says. He butters his bread.

"So," James' father says, "Remus, I hear you like swing music."

"Yes," Remus says. "I do. Like swing music."

"Well," James' father says. "That's very good to hear. Taste in our youth. And all that."

"He does," James says from beneath the table. "Like swing music. Keeps playing it all the time when he thinks no one is listening. You're not the only one who gives me nightmares about Benny Goodman."

"Ah, Benny Goodman," James' father says fondly.

These conversations are not going as planned. Remus has been watching Sirius' hand creep up Sophie's thigh as slowly as possible, so that he simply wants to take matters into his own hands. Well, not literally. What he wants to do is take Sirius' hand with his own hand and just put it on Sophie's rear already. Why beat around the bush? What is the matter with these people? How has he ever been able to stand them for prolonged periods of time? How can *one person* make eating *one pea* off a *stupid fork* seem *so attractive*?

Remus would hide in the bathroom again, but all he can think of is Sirius' yellow ducky when he goes in there. His personal hygiene is suffering because of it.

Next to him, Sophie suddenly makes a shocked, pleased little noise and slaps Sirius's hand. Everyone looks up. Sirius tries to look innocent and ends up looking evil. The tips of Mr. Potter's ears turn red.

"I've got to go the loo!" Peter announces, and does. All seated watch him go.

"Good peas," Remus says weakly. They are good peas, even if they do bring back painful memories.

"Mm," everyone agrees, and "delicious."

"What should we do now?" James asks, sounding miserable. Remus pokes the campfire morosely.

"We could tell ghost stories," Peter suggests, but not with any real conviction.

"No," Sirius says. "It wouldn't be the same outside the Shack. Moony, how are those tomatoes?"

Remus stares at them. They look, he thinks, like small dead livers; there is nothing remotely appealing or Boys Own Adventure about them. One of them pops, halfheartedly. "They're...coming."

"We could play Guess Who's Got No Trousers," James offers. "That game's always good for a laugh."

"It's always Sirius," Peter points out.

"It might...not be," Sirius says, rather lamely.

"Sirius hasn't got any trousers," Peter says.

"Damn." Sirius scowls. "Well, yes, you win. *That* was fun."

"You don't think anything's fun without Sophie, anyway," James mutters. "Especially Not Having Trousers."

"James is jealous that I am getting snogged within an inch of my life on a regular and *most* exhilarating basis," Sirius explains. "This is why, children, he is acting as if his underwear is too tight. It doesn't mean he doesn't love you; he *does*. And it doesn't mean *I* don't love you, either. You know I always will. It's just that sometimes, a man's eye wanders."

"I'll give you a wandering eye," James says, and launches himself over the fire at Sirius on the other side of it.

"Well," Remus says. He pokes the tomatoes sadly. "These look disgusting, don't they, Peter?"

"I hate it when mum and dad fight," Peter sighs. "D'you think they'll separate?"

"I think *we* should separate them," Remus replies. "*That* must hurt."

"Sirius is resilient," Peter points out. "Even if that stick *was* very pointy."

There is a sudden screech from the other side of the campfire, and Remus looks up in a panic to see that Sirius, in a particularly overenthusiastic shove, has just set James on fire.

"Oh God," Remus says, feeling the blood drain from his head.

"Fuck!" Sirius bellows. He throws himself on top of James, who lets out a few muffled yelps of protest and beats ineffectually at Sirius's head.

"It's all right!" Sirius yells. "James, Prongs, mate, it's all right! I've stifled it out."

"It was just my *sleeve*!" James roars, spitting out twigs and socking Sirius hard in the abdomen. "You utter epileptic, it was my *sleeve* and I don't *deserve* that and get *off* me."

"I thought I was saving your life!" Sirius snaps indignantly. "That's gratitude for you!"

"You *pushed me in*!" James spits. "I've had enough of this! Who's with me?"

"Oh oh," Peter says, raising his hand high. "Pick me!"

"Right," James says. "Peter. You. Me. That tent."

"What are we going to do?" Peter asks, wide-eyed.

"Sleep. Ignore the other half. Set Sirius on fire in the night. Yes," James adds, giving Sirius a warning look, "watch yourself. It'll happen when you *least expect it*." He grabs Peter by the collar and storms off to their tent, in a crunch of leaves and a flurry of burnt sleeve and the smell of ashy fabric.

"Just you and me now," Sirius mumbles. He brushes the twigs out of his hair, not quite looking up. "Just you and me and the tomatoes."

"I think I'm going to throw the tomatoes out," Remus says. "I mean they're really not coming along, and they smell funny, and *I* can't imagine eating them, I don't even really like tomatoes all that much, so--"

"Now why," Sirius explodes, "*why* would you do something like that? I said it's you and me and the tomatoes and *why would you throw the tomatoes away?*"

"Uhm," Remus says. "I'm sorry?"

Sirius lets out a long huff of exasperated air, and says, "Never mind. God. Just -- never bloody mind."

"I'm not minding," Remus says, increasingly bewildered.

"Fine," Sirius replies darkly. For a moment they sit in silence, Remus still holding the pan of humiliated tomatoes awkwardly away from the flames, unsure of what the next move should be.

"Just throw them out," Sirius says at length, apparently speaking to the fire. "They're no good. Not adding anything to the company."

"Good," Remus says, relieved. He flips the pan unceremoniously upside-down. The tomatoes flub pathetically to the ground.

"That was a wasted opportunity," Sirius says darkly. "You should have really flung them. Right into the trees. Used the pan like a catapult."

"The pan was hot," Remus explains. "If I'd used it like a catapult I'd probably have burnt myself."

"That's so boring," Sirius mutters. He says it like, *You're so boring*. Remus stares at the humiliated tomatoes, burnt around the edges, soggy in the middle, left to die in the grass. He feels, suddenly, irrationally bad for them. It's like throwing away an old toy. He puts the pan down.

"I am sorry I am boring," Remus says.

Sirius stares at him. "What?"

"I am sorry I am burnt around the edges and soggy in the middle like these tomatoes," Remus tries to explain. The words are coming out lunatic. The usual bubble of panic at his inability to communicate like a normal human being doesn't rise in him; he only feels worn and dejected, and the seat of his pants are covered in grass stains and chill, nighttime dirt. It's hard to feel wounded pride when your rear has been asleep for over three hours. "I tried to cook them," he says, "I *tried*, but I'm only good with cheese toasties and unwrapping chocolate."

"You are not *boring*," Sirius snaps. "You know who is boring, *James* is boring."

"You'd think *he* was the one you kissed," Remus says, without thinking, "from the way you're acting about it."

Mistake! Remus' brain howls not a moment later. *Abandon ship. Run for cover. He'll set you on fire next!*

Sirius looks as if he's forgotten how to use his face. It's more than a little frightening. After a moment, he says uncertainly, "Moony, about that."

"There isn't an about," Remus babbles. "There is no about to that happening. Because we weren't talking about it. It is That of Which We Do Not Speak. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, it was just the tomatoes and you being in a sulk--"

"It's just," says Sirius in unnaturally high tones, talking over Remus' insane dribble, "I wanted to tell you, I didn't mean for it to be a *thing*. It was just, you know. With seventh year, and I thought you weren't going to come for the summer, and I was -- I didn't mean to, you know, make it a *kiss* kiss. I'm really, really sorry. I don't want you to take it like that. You're my best mate. I mean," as an obvious afterthought, "obviously James is my best mate, but you know, you're *Moony*. It would be weird. And *you* must think it's weird and also scary. And so I keep thinking you think it's weird and so I get weird about it. But it doesn't have to be. If we both decided it shouldn't be. Right?"

"Er," Remus says. One tomato gives a last, despairing pop beside his knee.

"That didn't make any sense," Sirius says miserably, "did it. Look, can we just stop being so twitchy about it? It's only a kiss. It's just Misplaced Something-or-other that I'm sure you've read about. I didn't mean to *say* anything by it."

"It's the dormitory situation," Remus says automatically, "that's what it is. I've read about it before. We spend so much time in close proximity to one another, and besides you're always calling me a girl, that hormones get confused. Well, that's not it entirely, but generally, that's the idea. Happens to a lot of people. All the time. Doesn't mean anything."

"Could have happened to anyone," Sirius agrees. He looks relieved. Remus is glad they don't have to think about it ever again. "Probably *has* happened to, I don't know, not *everyone*, but -- a lot of people. Right?"

"All the time," Remus assures him. "That's what, uhm, the book said."

"Books never lie."

"Based on meticulous research."

"That's a relief to know. Good job, Moony." Sirius leans over and pats him on the shoulder. Remus wonders if now they can do a better job of just forgetting it ever happened. Does this mean he'll be able to close his eyes and go to sleep without being sure of the torture that awaits him, lurking in his innermost psyche?

"I'm glad," Remus says. "I am so glad. This has been so awkward."

Sirius laughs nervously. "*Awful*. Just, you know, really awful."

"And, you see, you have a girlfriend, and she's very nice, and that means that the kiss -- you know -- it was --"

just--"

"Friendly," Sirius says. "A friendly kiss. Girls do it all the time, Sophie says, but she might be just, haha, having me on, getting me all revved up. I'm her little engine. You know. That -- that sort of thing."

"I'm glad," Remus says again.

A few crickets actually chirp.

"Ahaha," Sirius says. "I should probably apologize to James for lighting him on fire."

"That would be good," Remus agrees. "Yes. Why don't you do that."

"All right," Sirius says, sounding like a man reprieved from the gallows. "Look, thanks, mate. And no harm done, right? So now I can go starkers in front of you without you thinking I'm going to rape you?"

"Haha," Remus says. "Absolutely. Naked as you please."

Sirius gives him a roguish wink and then slips off into the darkness beyond the light of the campfire. Remus, feeling rather lightheaded, collapses backward onto the spiky ground and has only time to hope that no one else catches on fire because he's far too tired to do anything about it and then:

He is in an enormous goldfish bowl. Dumbledore is ice-skating above him, singing an obscene song about sugar bowls and turning various shades of purple.

--Hello, says a huge squirrel that has suddenly appeared before him. Remus breathes out bubbles. --Would you like some birthday cake?

"Thank you, God," Remus says, overwhelmed with joy. "Thank you, God, for squirrels."

"It's Lily Evans," James says. "Lily Evans is Head Girl." He stares down at the piece of paper in his hand with Dumbledore's spindly handwriting squeezed in neatly across it. "That's what it's trying to tell me, that I'm Head Boy and *Lily* is Head Girl and *we* are Head Boy and Girl and we are doing it *together*. That is what it's trying to say, Remus. Isn't it? Have I gone blind? Have I gone mad? Is this the end?"

"Dear Mr. Potter," Remus reads, "we are pleased to inform you that, as you already know you are to be Head Boy for this coming term at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Head Girl, with whom you will be working for the benefit of all students in all years and all houses, is Ms. Lily Evans. It is encouraged that you come in contact with her before the end of the summer holidays, simply to make yourselves better acquainted with one another, and to plant the seeds of harmony for all your future endeavors."

"Well," Sirius says. "It's going to start in three--"

"What's going on?" Peter asks as he comes in, looking rumpled.

"Two--"

"Any toast left for me, then?" Peter says, when no one answers him.

"One--"

"Lily," James moans, and moves to fling himself out the window.

"Won't do you any good," Sirius says, physically restraining him. "It's about a three-foot drop."

"Then just let me try," James groans, straining toward the window-ledge. "I can't do it, Pads. I can't subject myself to the torture, the humiliation, the citrus-y hair product smell, I *can't*. Not again. Not after last time."

"Maybe things will be different!" Remus suggests, feeling that optimism is probably the best policy to keep James from throwing himself into his mother's lovingly-tended primroses.

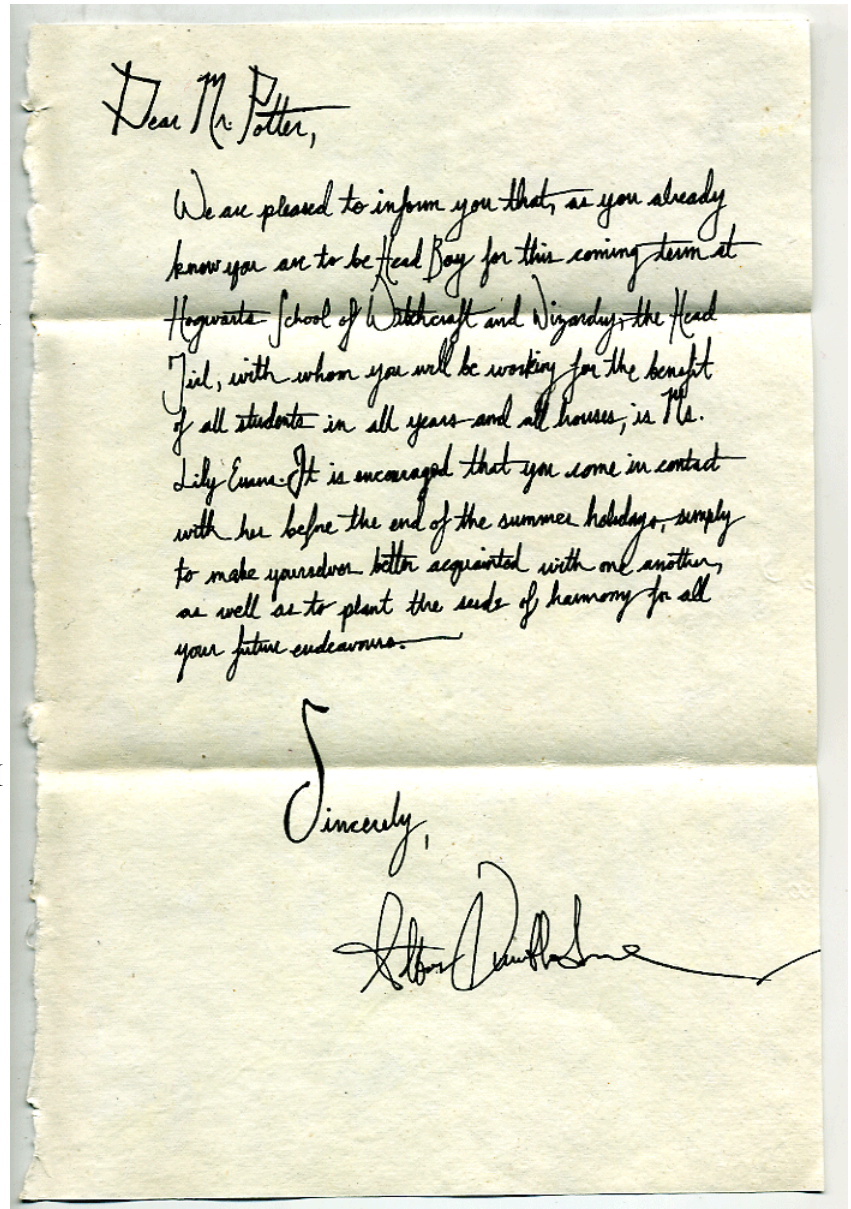
"Maybe she's had a lobotomy!" Sirius says, helpfully.

"Are we talking about Lily Evans?" Peter asks, rummaging through the refrigerator. "She really, really hates you now, right? I heard she went to Bath with Kingsley Shacklebolt this summer."

James makes a sound like the end of the world. "Sirius, if you were a good friend, you would just let death take me."

"Your mum would have my head," Sirius points out. "Those primroses are like her children. AGH no biting, you tricky little bugger, don't make me gag you."

"Think of it as an opportunity," Remus adds. "Think of it as a way to spend more time with her -- a way to show her



what you're really made of -- a way *not* to abuse the privileges of head boy!" Secretly, Remus is thrilled. He hopes he's doing a decent job of keeping it from showing.

"Look how happy Moony looks," James howls. "My pain is his bliss, I know it."

"Now, James," Sirius says, tugging him back to the table. "Why don't you sit down, let Peter make you some toast, and think rationally about this for about two minutes. We can't have you getting a primrose rash--"

"I don't think those are--" Remus begins.

"A *primrose rash*," Sirius presses, shooting Remus a Look, "right before you have to go back and prove your worth as a man to one Ms. Evans, Hogwarts Head Girl, now can we? That wouldn't do anything for our cause."

"You can woo her with rules," Remus adds. "You can show her how *seriously* you're taking this."

"No one," James points out, "*no one* is as serious as Kingsley Shacklebolt. He doesn't know what a joke is! It's always 'I have a shiny bald head and *no* it is *not* funny' or 'Look how humorous my rippling abdominals are *not*.' Do you catch my meaning? I cannot compete!"

"It's true," Sirius points out. "He has no abdominals. They don't ripple. They sort of droop."

"Some women find abdominals intimidating," Peter says sagely, pushing two slices of toast onto James's plate.

James regards them disconsolately. "I'm not hungry. And oh yes," he adds, resentfully, "many's the time I've heard a girl say to her mates, 'Now, you know what I hate, is stomach muscles. Why can't I find a weedy Quidditch bloke to love?' And, oh, do you remember how she *already dumped me*? There is no light here. All is blackness and despair."

"Rules," Remus presses. "Dignity. The not-taking of seven billion points from Slytherin for imaginary offenses. Did I steer you wrong last time?"

"Last time!" James says bitterly. "What, you mean, the time I got *dumped*?"

"That was so *incredibly* far from being my fault that it is almost painful to explain," Remus says.

"He has a point," Sirius volunteers.

"Yes," James says. He lifts his head. He fixes his scary, weedy Quidditch bloke eyes on Sirius. "I remember whose fault that was, actually."

"Blame Snivellus!" Sirius protests.

"Oh," James says, "I blame him, *too*."

James' muscles coil. He presses his palms against the tabletop. Sirius begins to back away, slowly, unsteadily, trying not to make any sudden movements. "Now, James," he attempts to placate, "we've been over this. You'll get

her back! Pip pip, the good ship James Potter sails on, just a bit of a leak down below, but that's easily stopped up with some cork and soon enough she'll be ready for stormy weather and all -- that -- yow!"

Sirius flees, James hot on his heels. Somewhere in the living room, they are about to break a lamp.

"Well," Peter says. "That's lucky. More toast for us, eh?"

It is really, really nice kissing Sophie on the mouth.

Sirius often thinks, during a lazy, sun-drenched afternoon like this one, that he could really spend days like this: just kissing people. Groping is nice, too, obviously, and getting off, and he loves it when Sophie puts her hands at the small of his back or runs her fingers up through his hair, but really, he loves kissing pretty much more than anything else. And he loves kissing Sophie in particular. Her mouth is soft, a little sticky or slippery with lip gloss, and she makes pleased little sighing noises when he nudges up against her or runs his fingers over her hip or slides his mouth in sideways over her chin and cheek -- a habit which some girls, to his bewilderment, seem to find sloppy; Alice Prewett once informed him that it made her skin feel like cardboard after. He pushes his knee in between her legs, steadying himself just so against the warm grass, and she presses up into him, hitching her skirt up a little farther over her thighs.

Sirius can let himself drift away, lulled with sun and Sophie's warm mouth and warm body and the drone of insects in the hedges. He can think of how nice it is the way her hair curls up around his fingers in the sweaty heat, and the way her long, slim hands smooth over his shoulders and back and move to skritch the back of his neck, and how sharp her nose is when she turns to catch his lips again and it digs into his cheek. He can think how lovely the Potters' backyard is, and how empty at noon, and how the sun feels against them, and doesn't have to listen to himself after, when he murmurs something into her mouth without even really paying attention to what it is.

Until the word, caught between their lips, starts with a *Re* and ends with a *mus* and Sophie pulls back, cheeks flushed, tan from all the summer sun, her hair forming a canopy over their faces.


"That is so funny," she says, as cold heavy rocks settle in the bottom of Sirius' stomach. "I was thinking the same thing."



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