

Part Twenty

February 1977

It is February; it is a Thursday; it is a crisp, cool day with a clear sky and the occasional brisk gust of wind. Later there will be a ring around the near-full moon signaling tomorrow's snow. Now there is only the sunlight unfiltered by clouds, though it is no less chill for the afternoon. It is February; it is a Thursday; and Sirius Black has every intention of breaking Severus Snape's nose.

There's little reason for it; or rather, there's as much reason as ever, depending on which side you're on. What matters most is that Remus is feeling peevish, that Snape is stubborn and refuses to call for help, and that Sirius has good aim, powerful fists and little self-control. Some combination of the elements -- some synergy of mood, emotions, scenery -- some twist of fate's humor -- all arrive at this conclusion. Sirius launches himself at Snape to avenge, for revenge, just as Snape recoils and hurls a fresh insult and Remus rounds the corner with a brand new quill and freshly-filled inkwell and what happens next involves three brilliant curse inventions, some staple but no less effective swears, and a great deal of exploding ink.

"What were you *doing*?" Sirius explodes, flapping a wet sleeve at Remus, who is by turns going pink, green, and now a sort of gratifying purply-red. With black speckles. It looks to Sirius as if he might actually throw a punch, which might be the only bright spot in this utterly crap day in this utterly crap month of the utterly crap existence of Sirius Black. "Running an egg-and-spoon race with an inkwell?"

"What was *I* doing?!" Remus snaps, yanking the straps of his bag shut as if he can retroactively protect his precious books from the rain of ink that has already slightly destroyed them. "I was *rounding a corner*, you ridiculous -- what were *you* doing?!"

"Working out some *tension*," Snape puts in, blotting delicately at the bleeding corner of his mouth with a dirty sleeve. "Getting his feelies in where he can," he adds, at which point Sirius, who is in the mood to let his elbows do the talking, steps on his foot and knees him in the neck when he goes down, which effectively ends a conversation that was most likely heading to a dead end anyway. "Gurghk," Snape says, though he no doubt means to say something else.

Remus' fingers tremble. Swinging heavy book-bags (now ruined by an overabundance of ink anyway) into the side of Sirius' head has never solved anything. But perhaps it has never solved anything because Remus has never actually tried it before. Torn between two instincts -- the pacifism to which he reverts whenever Sirius makes him livid and the little twitching in all his muscles that *lets* him know *just* how livid he is -- Remus grasps at a random third option and hopes for the best.

"Bugger -- bloody -- gerroff!" Sirius yelps. By the sheer power of Remus' forearms -- which have always pretended to be noodley by looking noodley but have never been anything less than unflinching man-steel -- he finds himself lifted three inches into the air and yanked unceremoniously backwards. And away, he notes with the utmost regret, from Snape's *face* which it is his *supreme duty* to *kick at least ten times*.

"Gurghk," Snape says again. Remus is quite sure he does *not* mean to say thank you kindly, Mr. Lupin.

"Sit," he bites out at Sirius, who, conditioned by four years of being a dog, does so automatically before leaping upright again, crimson with rage and embarrassment. Snape recovers just enough to wheeze out a "good puppy," which requires Remus to launch himself at Sirius again and employ the Forearms of Iron. In fact he nearly has to employ the Tackle of Iron to stop Sirius' furious flailing, and Snape takes advantage of the temporary lull to Faff Off, though not before treading judiciously on Sirius' fingers. By the time the dust and ink settle, Sirius is slouched against the wall of the hallway, seething with wronged innocence and sucking fiercely at his knuckles, and Remus has even more ink up his nose and is feeling even more homicidal than the swell of the moon requires.

For a moment they both just sit there, breathing and nursing their various wounds, and then Remus says hoarsely, "What is your problem? Do you *want* to go to detention for a thousand years?"

"Oh, bugger off," Sirius snaps, "you insufferable do-gooder. Snape never tells anyone, I always beat his arse up between his shoulder-blades and who'd go about advertising that! Why don't you go practice your vegetarianism, or whatever it is you do for fun?"

They cannot get into a fight, Remus reminds himself. They cannot get into a fight because if Sirius died, James would be very upset. It might even negatively affect his elaborate Valentine's Day plans, and then Remus would be Persona Non Grata in the Potter-Evans household forever and ever, and would never meet their adorable redheaded babies with enormous glasses and questionable diapers. They cannot get into a fight because Remus does not get into fights; Remus does not get into fights because the idea of fights makes his stomach gymnastic; Remus does not get into fights because he does not have the constitution; though sometimes adrenaline takes over and he forgets that. That's what worries him. But they cannot get into a fight, Remus reminds himself. He has ink up his nose, his heart is beating too fast, the moon somewhere beyond the sky is pulling at his joints, and they cannot get into a fight. They can't even have a bit of a row. They can't even have words. What Remus must do is Bugger Off and Go Practice His Vegetarianism Or Whatever It Is He Does -- more along the lines of Sneeze Out Ink For A Month, perhaps -- because they cannot get into a fight. In all their years -- even when Sirius flushed all of Remus' underthings down the toilet, even when Sirius told Snape about everything he'd promised never to tell *anyone* about, even when Sirius was at his most miserable and therefore at his most insufferable -- they have not gotten into a fight. It's been an unspoken rule, an accepted constant of life. Remus Lupin does not get into fights. Other people get into fights. Remus Lupin is a no-fight zone. Remus Lupin is neutral ground. Remus Lupin is Switzerland. Remus Lupin buggers off.

Except Remus Lupin feels suddenly the explosive, maddening pressure of reversion, of turning back in on himself, of crumpling like a wrapper, of being kissed and doing nothing, of watching a thousand and one fights between James and Sirius and seeing them be all right because of it and resenting how easy it is for them to do anything, everything. *Fight. Kiss.* It is easy for other people to fight. Even in this moment, with his stomach doing handstands and triple backflips and upside-down splits, Remus Lupin wants to fight about not being able to fight.

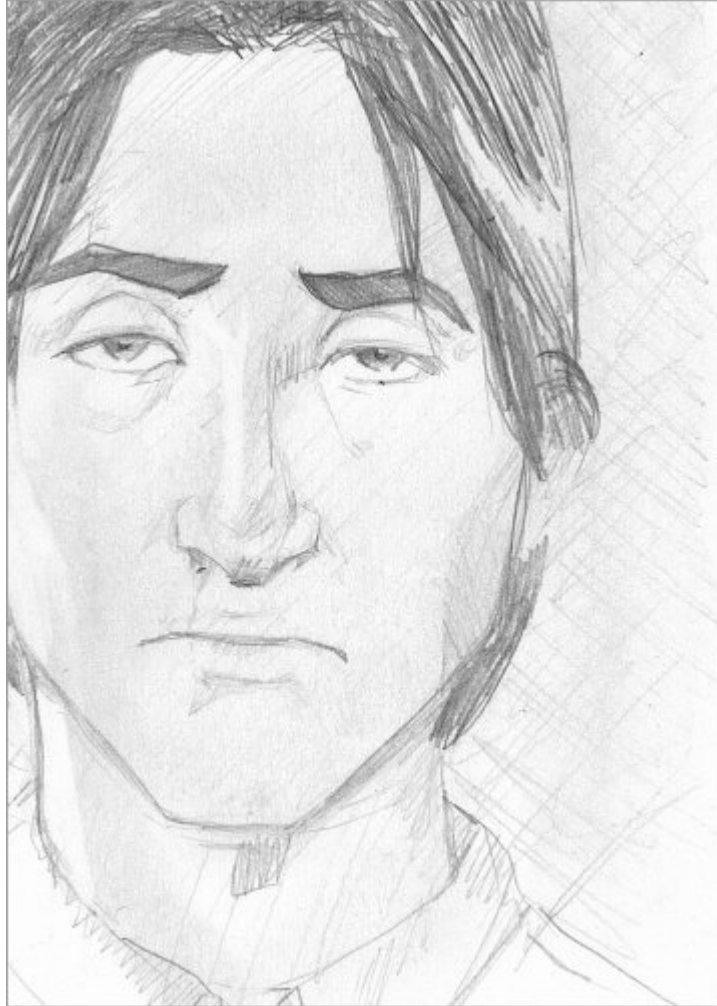
His lower lip quivers independently from his upper lip.

"You look like a two-year-old girl," Sirius says, unhelpfully.

"All right," Remus says, with remarkable calm. "That is *it*. We're done now. You can go beat up whomever you'd like, and I hope you go to detention for the rest of your *life*, and I hope Snape steps on your fingers until

they point in the wrong direction. Have a nice day." He pushes himself upright, flings his bag over his back, and storms off down the hallway.

"Fine!" Sirius yells after him. "And I hope you never get that ink out of your nostrils and everything you eat tastes like exams!"



All of which goes a long way to explain the curious *frisson* that runs through the Gryffindor common room some two hours later, when Remus goes downstairs to find Sirius already settled there, head buried -- curiously enough -- in a book. Sirius looks up and then pointedly looks down again.

Remus is Not Going To Let It Bother Him.

He puts his things down on the chair as far away from Sirius's as possible. Which is where he would have sat anyway, regardless. Because it is not bothering him. He just likes this chair best, that's all. It's comfortable, and he really likes being poked in the left buttock repeatedly by that one spring that pokes out.

"Stop squeaking," Sirius says shortly.

I'm not, Remus wants to yell. I'm *shifting*. I'm escaping this stupid spring. I'm *leaping over this sofa and punching you right in the eye*. Remus grits his teeth and clenches his jaw and reminds himself that what boys like Sirius want is a reaction. That is what they crave. That is what they're groping for. If they don't get it, they go away. They become bored. They are easily distracted. They go off to torture kittens or slugs or ants or babies or other small defenseless things that writhe and die but do not punch. Remus wonders how it would be -- to just punch. To just give in. He would probably break Sirius' face. In half. He is stronger than that, he knows; he can resist the urge, he knows. He just doesn't know if he wants to. He *does* know he *does* want to punch him. It is like fire in his veins. Perhaps this is how Sirius feels all the time, only for much less compelling reasons.

"Squeak, squeak, squeak," Sirius says. He is fishing. He sounds almost desperate for a response, incapable of differentiating between the good sort of attention and the broken face sort of attention. Remus wonders if he knows what he's trying to elicit. Remus wonders if he knows and desires it, some terrible behemoth of anger, some hurricane of werewolf rage, some explosion of all of Remus' arteries, the big vein in his temple at last going, softly, *pop*. "*Squeeeeeeeeeek*," Sirius says, very quietly.

Remus makes a sound in his throat like nuclear weaponry. He has never been decent with insults. He has never practiced insults. He has always been somewhat in awe of Sirius' creativity, of James' seemingly infinite wealth of imagery. He has only ever wielded *insufferable* and *ridiculous* and then, in a corner compartment of his mind, thought of countless snide, subtle asides that no one would ever catch but would taste delicious. And just as he is about to maybe, just maybe, open that box and let one of them wing its poisonous way out, the portrait hole opens and Hell climbs through it.

"No, sweetheart, I'll lift you down," James says, with a dripping, horrible simper. "You know I love doing it."

"You are a real man," Lily says--*Lily*, for whom Remus at one time had some respect. She kisses him on the forehead. Remus cannot look away. "I doubt anyone has ever told you that. Oops! Be careful--"

"It's under control," James says gallantly, despite being now bent into a very painful-looking contortion in which his spine pops disturbingly in and out of alignment. "Just got a little overeager on the lifting. Oh, God. Would you rub my shoulders back into place, valentine?"

"That depends," Lily whispers, in the kind of whisper that carries all the way across the room -- across the school, across the country. There is no escape. "What are you going to do for me?" Her hands crawl disturbingly down his back.

"Well," James begins, perking up, and Sirius throws his quill down and yells, "Will you lot just get in the room please? Some of us are trying to study." In spite of himself, Remus is terribly grateful.

Lily shoots him a disdainful look. "Studying? And for what class, do tell, is Reading Upside-Down a requirement?"

"It's for Murdering Every Single One Of You Studies," Sirius mutters, flipping his book the right way up with enough force to rip it in half. "Whatever. Close the bloody door, there's a draft."

Remus' focus shifts almost immediately, and imperceptibly, until he realizes he is no longer watching James and Lily -- and frankly, who can, except the serially deranged and the desperately sado-masochistic -- but Sirius' hunched shoulders instead. Remus is at once angry and sorry, at once too willing to fight and too willing to understand where Sirius is coming from. Or he thinks. Or he hopes. Not fighting with Sirius for so long has required a depth of understanding Remus has not until this moment realized exists. Infuriating, obnoxious, childish, brilliant, angry, destructive, compelling Sirius Black, who has from the very beginning been a bit too brash and a bit too charming and a bit too immature -- Remus has always known he understood him, but he did not know how well. It is terrifying. And still, the fight does not go out of him; the fight is only encouraged, fanned into a blaze, something eager to cover up its motivations. Yes, Remus realizes, this is how Sirius feels *all the time*. It is horrifying.

"Did you mean it when you said I am a real man?" James asks, with a flourish. A real, live flourish. The sort that is ridiculous even reading about. The sort that makes Remus cringe. Sirius' shoulders twitch.

"Why," Lily replies, disappearing temptingly up the stairs, "why don't you ask me again *later*? When we're *alone*?"

James hurls himself after her, fairly close to tumbling back down again and breaking his neck.

"Disgusting," Sirius mutters, "who the hell is this person? Not the James Potter I know, no, I think not, it's like a -- like a -- like a great big oozing thing with horrible hair and -- bugger!" He flings the book across the room.

And Remus has at last had enough. Something about the sickening crunch of the pages, the smush of the binding, the thud as it hits the floor -- it is wholly ridiculous, that it should be the catalyst. It isn't that Remus cares about the book. He simply *wants* to care about it.

"Only *children* throw books, Sirius," he manages to say coolly, before he crosses to the door.

"Where are *you* going?" Sirius' voice drifts after him.

Remus closes the door very quietly, but he would rather slam it. He knows what kind of boys slam doors -- Sirius -- and what animals break them -- wolves, wolves and their hard shoulders, wolves and their nighttime, full-moon despair. It's a terrible day for making Remus Lupin mad. It's going to be an even more terrible night.





"We can't keep this up forever, you know," Lily says mildly, stretching out across James's bed. One of her socks has collapsed around her ankle. *I love you so much I spend all day wanting to flush myself down the toilet*, James tries very hard not to say. "They are so very miserable. I hate to do it to Remus."

You make me feel like my insides are in the wrong place. "I know," James says, a little sadly. "But I love it so. I

love what it does to their faces. The little noises they make! And it isn't," he adds, glancing quickly at her and deciding she's complacent enough that he can risk it, "as if I completely don't mean it. I *do* like when you think I'm manly."

Lily shifts so that she is lying on her side and props her head up. "Well, I shall keep that in mind for all three seconds out of every month when it's true. I'm sorry, you just aren't very good at it." She yawns; when her eyes close James can see the freckles on her eyelids. James thinks that he has spent his entire life waiting to be profoundly moved by the freckles on someone's eyelids.

"Listen," he says, "do you think I'm revolting?"

"Sometimes," Lily says.

Your freckles make me useless. "I got you a valentine," says James. "I'm trusting you to tell me if it's revolting. I need guidance. I need to be trained."

"You do," Lily agrees. "But I am fond of you. Cheer up. Valentines are hard, and you do try your best. It's rather endearing, actually. Though it isn't manly."

"It's hard to be manly with hearts and cherubs," James sighs. "I try my best but everything is pink and trimmed with lace."

"James," Lily says. "Did you get me something pink and trimmed with lace?"

"Uh." James makes a mental note that part two of his valentine should definitely be scrapped and later burned so no one will ever have evidence it existed. "Not anymore."

"Then I'll do my best with you," Lily replies. "Training, that is. I've always wanted to train a boy. Perhaps I can even teach you to be manly."

If anyone could, it would be you. The terrible thing is, it's true. Lily Evans is more manly than James could ever hope to be. He knows he ought probably to hate her for it, or at least be terrified of her, but he's neither. He's just a confusing pile of awe and worship, which shakes down to feeling like a pudding person. It's as if he came half-formed and half-baked out of a mold. He melts against Lily's side. "It's an awful valentine," he admits. "I ought to scrap it all."

Lily slips her fingers into his hair and pulls his head back with affectionate irritation. "Well, give it to me first, and let me decide if it ought to be scrapped. You are perfectly rotten at this entire thing. It's like trying to teach a monkey not to fling its dung."

"Agh," says James. "I know. All right." He rolls off the bed and onto the floor, which is worth it, because if he had sat up that would have been three extra nanoseconds during which he and Lily would not have been touching. "It's, um. Right." He gropes around under the bed, hoping against hope that it has been eaten by one of the more aggressive dust creatures; but alas, there it is, hopelessly inadequate and wrapped in a pink ribbon that flutters a Morse code of incompetence against his fingertips.

"Here. Don't you dare laugh, because it cost loads, you should know. I wanted to get you some kind of fluttery little nightie thing but I thought you'd have my eyes out, and I know chocolates are so -- chocolates, you know, so -- I don't know. I sort of gave up. Here is your valentine." *In time, you may forgive me.*

"Give it here," Lily says imperiously, and tears into the wrapping more like a hungry two-year-old than a vision of red-headed perfection. James screws up his courage, closes his eyes, and waits for the clip round the ear.

It doesn't come. He opens one eye, cautiously. Lily has gone pink -- pinker than usual -- and she is looking into the little box with a Beater's-bat-between-the-eyes kind of expression. It is over. All of it is over. Their brief, confusing and pudding-like love; the only Valentine's day ever which has not been a disturbing and horrific farce; James's pathetic and, until the appearance of Lily Evans, utterly useless life.

"Don't," James says, in despair. "Don't say anything. I'm sorry. They're awful, aren't they. You don't even wear earrings. It's worse than that place we went on that awful date, with the cherub rapists. Oh God, it's not my fault."

"Oh," Lily says. She sounds rather frantic. "Oh. You can't have. But you *did*, James, it's -- I mean I'd like to make fun of you, you know I would, but--"

"Oh, my lord," James whispers, comprehension breaking like the sun upon the wobbling jelly landscape of his brain. "You like them! I can't believe you!"

"They're *beautiful*." Lily looks at him as if he has sprouted goggle eyes or tentacles. "How could you do this to me? This was supposed to be terrible, and then I'd box you around the ears, but it's *lovely*. They match my *eyes*, James."

"You *are* a girl!" James yelps, torn between delight and paralyzing shock. "Under it all, you like girly things! Look at you! I got you right in the girl parts! I am a marvelous boyfriend. I am a champion. I am the king of the world!"

"You are looking for a punch in the mouth, is what you are," Lily says, but her cheekbones and her eyes are bright.

"Come on," James says, "admit it. I'm manly."

"No," Lily replies. "I have my pride." She holds up an earring. It dangles, bright and winking in the light, next to her cheek, her jaw. It makes her freckles look more vibrant and alluring, which James swears should not be possible. Certainly these aren't the contemplations of a sane young man who has his priorities in order. *I would die for those freckles. One day I probably will. And all it means is, this bird's been spending too much time in the sun.* "But you got it right, James. I mean, you really did. Do you have any idea how troublesome this is?"

James blinks. "How -- wait, what? I don't understand. I thought they -- they match your eyes!"

"They *match* my eyes," Lily agrees. When she kisses him, James doesn't have time to ask for any further explanation. And then, he understands. Like falling off a broom and catching the golden snitch, then hitting the ground hard from too high up. Like being flushed down a toilet and coming out, soggy and disgusting, in the

middle of Filch's private files. It's like all that to the extent that it's all James knows -- and at the same time James knows it's more than his puny sensibilities can ever explain. James understands and *troublesome* is exactly the right word.



Taken by accident before Prongs had full control of where he stepped. Result: One picture. One crunched camera.

Padfoot paces, forth and back, feeling the strange absence of Pack. There is nothing unsafe here, nothing he can't fight off, but the aloneness under the wide, wild smell of night is unfamiliar, unsettling. There is a sharpness, an imbalance that he doesn't like, and when the first howl comes his feet don't fly naturally to meet it the way they usually do. He has to turn, hesitant, force himself around, layer an odd human conscientiousness over instinct, just to pace toward the old hut and the steel tang of the wolf.

And it is, of course, the human layer that makes him hesitate. One part of it is a very basic warning, little snippets of old tales and of whispers in a youthful dark. *Little by little a fear invaded him, a strange fear which he had never felt before, the fear of the dark, the fear of solitude, the fear of the deserted wood, and the fear also of the fantastic wolf who...* And another part is personal, a slight hitching wince between the ribs, where the flesh and the body and the heart converge, and everything is terribly weak. Padfoot listens to the grass worn down beneath his paws. Then, when the second howl comes, he goes to it.

Sirius, riding low under Padfoot's mind like currents drifting underwater, is still angry. That's the worst bit. You can't afford to be angry; it makes your mind too loud. Things get confused. Dogs don't understand angry, any more than they understand jealous or betrayed or wronged or any one of the numerous loud, human emotions that Sirius can't seem to stop himself feeling. It makes things bumpy, makes his feet get mixed up and his nose feel itchy and out of sync with the rest of his brain and makes it hard to follow familiar scents; he has to share instinct with his eyes and his ears, and Padfoot doesn't like doing that, and neither does Sirius, and it's all a jumble and he's so busy being angry at the fact that he's angry that he runs straight into the trapdoor and bruises his nose.

This only makes him more angry. That's the thing about angry; more often than not it just leads to more angry, and more angry after that, until the whole day's ruined. He gets angry when he realizes he's getting angry -- not that he knows how that works, but it does, and it makes a right mess of things. Sneezing and growling at the trap door, whose fault that certainly was, Padfoot shakes dust off his muzzle and pads into the shack. Beneath him the floor is creaky -- creakier than usual? Or is that just because he's the only one about to hear it creaking; and that always makes things seem louder?

Creeeeeeeaaaaaaaaak. Padfoot trots up to the stairs and sniffs and tries to savor the combination of scents, of wood and age and spooky and wolf up above, earth beneath, trees rustling, little small animals hiding, but there's too much of Sirius in him to be anything but revolted. He sneezes again. What a waste of a night. For Padfoot, there never is. For dogs, nights are really never wasted. For people? Nights are wasted all the time. Padfoot huffs hot breath into the chill air. He tries. He tries hard. He even thinks about fleas.

It's no use. All he can think about is being angry, and wasting a night, and hating the moon for waxing at the most inconvenient time. Upstairs comes the howl again, pure wolf, never anything but wolf; and Sirius takes a moment to hate him for that, too, for always being wholly one thing or wholly the other. Sharp comes the smell and Padfoot drags toward it, feeling heavy, leashed.

The wolf hurls itself against the door, once, twice, shaking the wood under Padfoot's feet. For an insane, spiteful moment, not really Sirius, not really Padfoot, he considers leaving, letting it dash itself around the walls all night. Leave danger and strange smells and run back, dropping the mind that confuses him and just letting himself be a sulking boy again, which is all he really wants.

But Remus' face -- all boy, all disapproving -- looms above him, like some comical conscience. Or perhaps not even that, just a large nose and pursed lips and a furrow in his brow and that streak of sadness across his mouth, nose, cheek. Remus doesn't do it on purpose. That's just it. Remus doesn't even know he does it, and Sirius doesn't even know what it is, and so between them both, you see, they're knocking about in the dark getting angrier and angrier and nowhere at all. Sirius growls again, low but louder, and the sound of the wolf shaking the foundations of the shack stops. The howls stop. There is only silence and the sensation of heavy breaths across a spit-soaked muzzle.

Padfoot doesn't leave. Padfoot hears the breathing across the door and down the windy, rickety staircase. He takes a few steps up, and a few more, stopping and sniffing the air. It smells different. Angry. Or he could be thinking angrily and translating everything as angry. Or he could be pretending, as he always pretends, that the world writhes in Sirius Black's every twinge and turmoil. There could be no anger at all. There could be only that half memory, lurking.

From a distant country had come, in the very nick of time, a message that took me out of the danger of the snow sleep and the jaws of the wolf.

When the door snaps upon its hinges and the wolf leaps down upon him, Padfoot is only half prepared.

Half is still better than none. Padfoot rolls, flips up onto his feet, surprised now and angrier and warier, pain bunched and dull on his shoulder. The wolf rises up slowly, hackles raised, long teeth bared, and its eyes gold in the moonlight. This is not what Pack does, this is not how things work, the marks of the wolf's claws in his shoulder and its yellow fangs glinting, and Sirius hates him suddenly and violently more than he can remember ever hating anyone.

There's too much to reconcile, boy and werewolf, friend and Remus, all of the time. It isn't just on nights when the moon confuses madness; it isn't just during arguments or pointed not arguments. It's all the bloody time. Something -- surprise, pain, a growing hurt, balance shifted to imbalance -- ignites between them.

They fight like animals, like boys can't, so that the shack shakes and they are forced to pull away at times to pant and lick their wounds and judge the distance between. When they leap to be together again it is with growls and the low whining snaps of wolf teeth, the sharp battle of forepaws and hind-legs, a flipping and twisting battle not for something so simple as dominance. It's to win. It's too complicated, too complicated. Padfoot's back hits the floorboards over and over; the wolf is too big and too terrible and too strong. And he feels his nails dig into the wolf's belly even as he feels the wolf pin him; and then kicks the wolf off; and then it begins again and anew. They can't do this forever; but they are going to do this forever. Or until the two of them tire. Or until the night dwindles into morning.

Sirius wakes up naked and aching, which is not exactly a new experience, but he's also on the floor, splinters driven into his elbows and dust in his hair and no visible excuses nearby. He pushes himself slowly up onto his elbows and coughs, painfully.

"Ow," he says, to no one, and then, a little stronger, "fucking ow! -- *ahhh* --" as he accidentally puts weight on the wrong thigh, the one that, he has just discovered, is covered in a carpet of yellowish-purple bruises and three long tracks dragged down to the knee.

"Christ," he says, slightly awed. It's pretty alarming, this injury. It looks, frankly, like he was caught in an enormous cheese-press. That's the thing about such injuries -- they always look a little bit queer, like someone in the night tried to turn you into sausage or pastry. It takes half the danger out of scars. The other half disappears when you know the real story behind them -- it's never "That's the time I fought the giant rats" and more often than not "That's the time the bookcase fell on me because I dropped my underwear behind it." And of course the one time you get in a fight with a werewolf, it's a story you can't ever tell. He thumbs one of the dark, dark bruise edges gingerly, hissing. They're the shape of -- distorted, stretched, but -- a giant paw.

Sirius shakes his head, remembering the night like a bad dream, a bad exam, a bad dinner party with his relatives. It all feels too real for too long after. This time, he has the war wounds to prove it *was* real.

"Nnaugh," someone moans from the corner, sounding much like Sirius feels. Then, there's a creak and a series of small crashes followed by another, even more pathetic "nnaugh."

Sirius pushes himself up, feeling the tremble and strain in his arms, and stumbles upright. "Oi, Moony, you all right?"

"Don't," says the someone, in tones of unbearable agony, "please don't. You talk like an air siren, it's honestly unbelievable. Augh."

Sirius picks his way across the floor, across new gouges in the floorboards and walls and splintered furniture. The sun trickles weakly through the disjointed boards, striping the room in bars of pale yellow like a cage, and then a pile of rubble somewhere near Sirius's feet stirs and says, faintly, "I want to die."

Sirius ponders the possible responses -- all witty, eloquent, incredibly pithy -- to Remus' statement which is, frankly, not up to par. *Guess you've met the cheese press* is one, and *You look like a sausage* is another. Beyond that, though, bubbles a surge of awe: *I did that to you?* and *You did that to me?* Remus -- the great groaning motionless Remus lump -- has deep gouges up the length of his forearms and thighs and blood in his hair along with the dust, and a splinter in the back of one knee, and bruises everywhere. He does look like a sausage, all spotted and untrustworthy. Sirius looks down at his palms to the faint gray memory of paws.

"You look dead already," Sirius says, crumpling down beside him.

"I do not feel dead," Remus replies. "I want to feel dead so that I don't feel almost dead."

"You have a splinter the size of a pony in your leg," Sirius points out.

"So that's what that is," Remus murmurs. "I wasn't quite sure."

"What did you think were the possibilities," Sirius inquires, giving up on the effort of staying upright and collapsing stretched-out on the floor, "an actual pony? A tree? Part of the house?"

"Your teeth," Remus says, "permanently attached to my fibia, like a clamp -- oh God." He sits up suddenly, face washed free of color. "Oh God, I didn't--" He looks strange, asymmetrical, his bare chest and stomach sickly pale and blooming purple and his wild hair matted down over one eye. For a moment Sirius feels ill and weightless, a distant terror filling up the back of his throat.

"I didn't," Remus insists, his hands hanging uselessly in midair. "We. Have you -- but how could I not?"

"I don't know," Sirius says hoarsely, after a moment. "How would one...know?"

Remus grabs him by the shoulders with hands still surprisingly strong, fingers rough and freezing and dry, but doesn't shake him. His fingers tighten like ten small vices. "Because you were a dog," Remus says, "please, because you were Padfoot -- because it doesn't work that way -- does it?"

"I don't feel any different," Sirius tries to assure him.

"Neither did I, at first," Remus says. His fingers drop; he pats Sirius down, trying to avoid bruises. Of course he fails, because Sirius is one enormous bruise, but Sirius grits his teeth and tries not to make pathetic mewling noises. "You feel like a boy," Remus whispers. "That's all, you -- you feel like a boy."

"So do you," Sirius points out, and wishes immediately after that he hadn't. "No, that's not what I meant. I mean -- well, I'm not going to say *How bad can it be*, that would be -- well I'm *not* -- but I don't think I *am*. Do you see? I mean the first time -- the first time I was Padfoot -- I think you bit me then and it was all right." Relief floods him, warm and wonderful. "I even had a mark for weeks, Moony, and everyone kept making comments about how I was a sly dog and then you said 'Not sly enough' and we all had a laugh about it. You see, it's all right. It's all right." He flicks wood out of Remus' hair, unsure of what to do with his hands. "You see," he repeats, "Remus, Moony, it's all right."

"*All right*," Remus echoes, sounding stunned and furious and altogether entirely fourteen years old and before nature made him a man, "*all right* you daft stupid idiot?"

"Your voice just broke," Sirius feels compelled to point out. "Look, I had a bit of a panic too, but it's all right, I said it's all right, let's just..." His knuckles graze Remus's shoulder, which is freezing; Sirius yelps and grabs his hand away.

"What," Remus asks, growing even tenser around the edges, "what?"

"Nothing," Sirius placates. "You gave me the cold shoulder -- get it? -- ha ha. Do you realize we just got in a fight?"

"I doubt I will forget it within the next month," Remus says, relaxing slightly and wincing as a tender part of his palm grazes the floor.

"Untrue," Sirius says. "Werewolf. I can see those bruises fading already. Whereas I, oh God, *I* will be hopping about on one leg until I am well into my twenties. The point is, we got in a *fight*!" He's always sort of wondered what it would be like, Remus in a fight, and imagined it would start with all coolness and sort of crazy kung-fu style movements and then at the end a great deal of stumbling and tripping over oneself. He didn't really think he wouldn't remember it after it happened. "We don't get in fights."

"I am as mystified as you are," Remus mumbles, examining his raw-scraped palms and carefully not looking at Sirius.

"You're not going to be all dodgy about it, are you?" Sirius asks. "You're not going to be embarrassed about it or upset about it or write about it in your diary and wonder what it *means* and what I'm *feeling*, are you?"

"Don't be stupid," Remus mutters. "I'm going to heal and you're going to be hopping about on one leg until you are well into your twenties. There's a difference. I could have -- we thought for a minute that I *had* -- it's not a fight, Sirius, it was trying to bite each other's eyes out."

"You never actually went for the eyes," Sirius says. "You bite below the belt, apparently. Who knew?"

"*Sirius*," Remus warns, before pausing to really think about it. It's not their first fight; it can't be. And Sirius is always getting into fights with everyone, because there is something wrong with everything in his brain. But this isn't a fight -- there were human reasons for it, and animal reactions. Remus doesn't work that way. It's too dangerous. "We did have a fight," he concedes, finally. "I don't remember it. Did I win?"

"Yes, you won, you're like seven hundred pounds of steel and snarly, of course you won. You're not looking at me, Lupin." Sirius frowns. "You *are* going to write about it in your diary and wonder what it *means* and why you're so *confused*! You *are*!"

"I most certainly am *not*," Remus replies, sniffing. "I'll write in my diary about what I please and perhaps it will focus more on why you are so often naked when you don't have to be." That is something that on second thought maybe he should not have said, but Sirius in his blessed oblivion steams right over it.

"We had a fight, Moony," Sirius says. "We ought to get cake, and celebrate. It feels -- it feels -- do you know how I feel about it? I feel *good* about it. I was this close to knocking your head between two books, you know. If I had had opposable thumbs, I mean, and could have held a book."

"I wouldn't have wasted the books on you," Remus admits, "but I think I know what you mean."

"You didn't need the books," Sirius says, "you were knocking my head between your two enormous paws like -- like a bloody great wolf fighting a tiny puppy, which is exactly what that was. The point is, I did fairly well under the circumstances. I mean, for heaven's sake, I'm still alive!"

"It is shocking," Remus agrees. "Look, for all our sakes, would you mind terribly putting on some trousers? Or some upholstery or something?"

"You kick, is the thing," Sirius says, warming to his topic. "It's utterly unnecessary, because you have claws like steak knives, but you kick. Keep that in mind. It was all I could do to keep you from ending the House of Black forever and ever." With some effort, he yanks a small carpet out from under the upended table and wraps it grandly about his waist. "What do you think? Appropriate scion-wear?" He turns, preens a little, smoothes it down. It's purple. Purple is a good color for him. It matches the bruises.

"What about Regulus?" Remus asks.

Sirius snorts. "Gay as a maypole. No grandkids from that direction, I shouldn't think. Do you want cake? I think I want cake."

"Has there ever been a time in your life when you didn't want cake?" Remus grumbles, steadying himself against the wall. "Agh. Pass me that tablecloth."

"What a pair we'll make," Sirius says, tossing it over. Remus, gingerly, pulls it up over his shoulders and swaddles himself in it "Their Supreme Majesties, King Hearthrug and his consort, Lady Linen Closet--"

"I don't see why I should be the consort," Remus interrupts, carefully folding the ripped lace into a sort of toga. "You have more consort-y hair. You're practically Lady Godiva."

"You know I get shaggy around midyear," says Sirius, sounding injured. "I'd ask you to cut it, but I don't trust you with the scissors. You *kicked* me."

"You deserved it."

"Oh, did I? How did I deserve it, exactly? Bloody great claws!"

"You've been insufferable for months."

"That's—as if I—it's you! *You've* been insufferable for months!"

"That's because you were insufferable first." Remus shifts, trying to catch sight of the splinter gradually working on giving him gangrene. "Like this splinter. Just -- wiggle wiggle, poke poke, only -- you know, you."

"I knocked the English language out of your head," Sirius wonders. "I can't believe it. I must be stronger than I thought."

"And more insufferable than you thought," Remus reminds him. "You are a very poor judge of yourself."

"Hang on a tick," Sirius protests, "I haven't been all that bad. Not worse than usual."

"I have contemplated murder. It's always," Remus makes vague, forceful motions, hating his lack of aptitude for physical expression, "you know, you being—sulk sulk, and awkward, and even when it's not awkward it's awkward, and now with Lily and you not being James's best girl anymore, it's awful, Sirius, it's unbearable."

Sirius frowns again. "So that's what this is all about, then? You could have just *said* something, you know."

Remus groans. "Sirius, you would have laughed me from here until the toilet and you wouldn't have stopped until graduation. It's unfair. If I were James I'd put frogs in your underwear but though that solves things for James it just means I'll have frogs in *my* underwear the next night and that's the last thing I need; it's no solution at all." Remus purses his lips. His shoulders tremble.

"Go on," Sirius says darkly. "Say it."

"You've just been insufferable for months," Remus repeats.

"Your reaction was worse," Sirius mutters. "It was like dealing with Remus Lupin, age twelve, all over again. Like I said, head, books, temptation, so hard to resist." He pauses. "But I'm not mad with you anymore. Funny, isn't it."

"Funny," Remus says.

"Perfectly explicable, in my opinion," Sirius says knowledgeably. "You know. Bash the daylights out of someone, all of a sudden their presence becomes much easier to tolerate. On this is based my entire relationship with Severus Snape. Look, I'm a twit. I thought you knew that when we started being friends."

"I knew," Remus admits. "I just had no idea of the extent -- the point is, I'm sorry."

"No you're not," says Sirius unexpectedly. Remus looks up. Sirius is watching him very carefully, dark eyes unreadable. "You're really not. It's marvelous. You've been wanting to do that for ages. So have I," as an afterthought, "but then I'm always beating people up. So. That's not an apology, by the bye, in case you want it to be."

"One of us has to be sorry," says Remus, mildly perplexed.

"I'm not sure that's true," says Sirius, offering a hand. "Come on. You can't lean against that wall forever. Heave-ho."

"No, I am sorry," Remus insists, taking the hand and pulling himself up. Wobbly. He's very wobbly. "I'm sorry I didn't beat you bloody sooner, to save us all the aggravation of waiting for it to happen."

"That's a little more sincere," Sirius says. "I'll accept it. But I'm not telling you *I'm* sorry because apologizing for being my charming self is sort of pointless, isn't it?"

"It might be more necessary than you realize," Remus mutters, but good-naturedly.

"I never apologize to James, you see," Sirius explains. "This isn't really how fighting works."

"I'm not James," Remus points out.

"True. James hits like a girl. You don't. Always thought it'd be the other way 'round, though. We both have hidden depths." Sirius slings an arm around Remus' shoulders and leans heavily against him. "I'd say our lesson is learned, wouldn't you? Always hit each other before we explode. Point made; we'll never make that mistake again."

"Don't you think we ought to consider *why* we wanted to hit each other so badly?" Remus asks wryly. "That might, you know, solve future problems before they even start."

"Boring," Sirius says. "What shall we conquer next?"

"The infirmary," Remus suggests. "You can always have a first year bring you celebratory cake."

"I think," Sirius says rather shakily, "upon moving I have determined that cake is perhaps not the best idea. What with my intestines being, you know, in knots. I think I'm going to pass out."

"Don't," Remus pleads, slipping another arm under his shoulder. "Oh God. You'll take me down with you, and who knows if I'll ever get up again?"

"Shut up," Sirius says, "you crippled me. You crippler. Mind the carpet, there, it's a little precarious."

"God forbid we revisit the ducky situation," Remus mutters, obligingly rearranging his arm. "It's been a very odd year."

"And promises only to get odder," Sirius agrees. "Do you think if we're convalescing we don't have to watch Evans and James exchanging revolting tokens and drooling onto each other's faces?"

"Doubtful," Remus says. "The drooling is fairly omnipresent."

"Hnggh," Sirius grunts expressively.

"I know," Remus says, feeling black. "However we too are quite the pair."

"At least I do not hold doors open for you or spend every minute of my life caressing your tender cheek and your fiery hair. Or slurping about your face as if you are ice cream." Sirius tries to laugh and winces. "Or perhaps that wasn't all that funny, considering -- never mind, let's be off. To the infirmary. And blessed medication."

Remus never tells Sirius afterwards how much of the way he mostly carries him there.

Madam Pomfrey is used to the very strange comings and goings of Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, James Potter and Peter Pettigrew; weekly there is some combination from or of the four arriving with terrifying boils that have teeth or whiskers in unspeakable places or with extra arms and the like. Gryffindors will be Gryffindors, she tells herself, and makes up the appropriate number of cots, and dreams of the good old days when boils only had eyes. Today it's two beds, and it's surprisingly early, and she was supposed to go out and get Remus herself -- all of which is more than a little unsettling.

"Now tell me again," she says, doing her best to sound comforting and reassuring, "you did what?"

"He threw me off a building," Black answers smoothly. "Terrible, terrible. I don't want to get him in trouble or anything but, you know, there it is."

"Those look like clawmarks," says Madame Pomfrey. They don't *look* like claw marks; they *are* clawmarks. Poppy Pomfrey was not born yesterday. She fixes Remus with a stern, tell-me-the-truth-or-else look, but he's gone slightly pink and is examining the ceiling with great interest.

"Those would be from the dogs," Black goes on, not missing a beat. "Huge horrible creatures, probably

Grubbly-Plank's breeding them, you ought to look into it, someone could get killed."

"The two of *you* got into a fight," Poppy repeats. She feels a little silly, but these boys are enough to make Helga herself go gray around the edges, and that's when they don't fight. It would try anyone's patience. She can practically feel her hair turning white. "Remus Black and -- Remus Lupin and Sirius Black." Remus Lupin doesn't fight. Especially not with his friends. It's practically the only way he *hasn't* injured himself. "Are you quite sure it was the two of you?"

"Oh yes," says Black with a little too much enjoyment. "Huge fight. I went to go find him this morning and he was all naked, for some reason, and just went off on me. Ashamed, I expect. You should have seen it. Hair and blood all over and no trousers to be found. Confidentially, I think he's been drinking."

Poppy changes tactics. "Remus, you've barely a scratch on you." It's usually safer to address yourself to Lupin, who at least has the sense God gave little green apples. "You're telling me you two got in the same fight?" He heals fast, needless to say, obviously, poor boy, what with the condition, but surely not that fast. They'd had to have finished a good six hours ago, which would be during the night, and if they'd fought during the night...

Remus mumbles something into his infirmary-grade pillowcase-gown. "Speak up, dear," Poppy soothes, "whatever it is, just say it so we all can hear it, there's a lad."

"Sirius Black fights like a girl," Remus mumbles, but audibly. He lifts his head. "It was all running and screaming and tripping over his own toes the second I went after him." Sirius boggles. So does Madam Pomfrey. There is an awkward sort of silence. "He fell right out of his trousers," Remus plows on, getting a little braver. "I'm not quite sure what his strategy was, exactly -- blind me with nudity or turn me to stone or what-have-you -- but, well, there you have it. Er. That's how it happened, I mean."

"Fights like a girl, eh?" Sirius hisses, but looks unexpectedly proud.

"Well," Poppy says, then, "well, well," a few more times, trying to get a hold on the situation. "Well. If you're sure nothing..." She pauses. "Nothing *dangerous* occurred?"

"I wouldn't lie about something like that," Remus assures her gravely.

"He attacked me," Sirius blusters, puffing. "He ought to be locked up. Throw away the key. Take away his library privileges. You know, the usual. Maximum security, too."

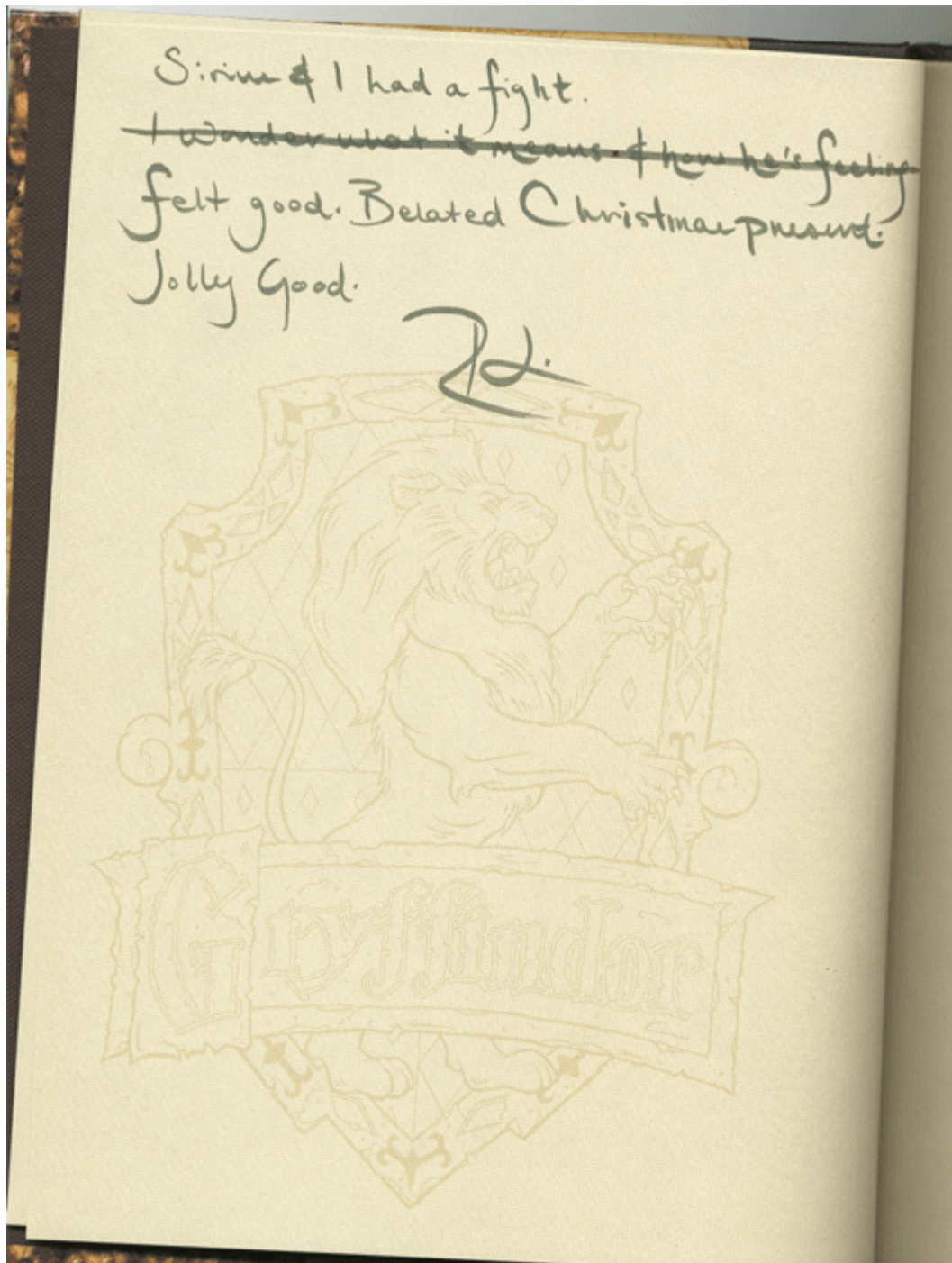
"We'll look into it," Madam Pomfrey assures him, brow lifted. "Now drink up, there you go, and be sure *not* to go wandering about -- wandering about -- *looking* for people at such a time again, have I made myself clear? Dangerous things could happen! Very dangerous."


"Very dangerous," Sirius repeats, as if butter wouldn't melt.

Poppy gives them a long, hard, searching look as they drink beakers of her home-brewed Gryffindor Cure -- heals cuts, scrapes, bruises and especially black eyes in no more than twenty-four hours. They aren't telling the truth, that much is for certain. But it's hardly something to be concerned with if what they're trying to cover up isn't -- well, something dreadful. And Remus Lupin wouldn't lie about that, poor dear; oh, no. He's a good lad.
Poor thing.

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," Sirius says, offering back his glass. "Yum. You've put pumpkin spice in it, haven't you."



"Mm," Poppy says, before she bustles out. "I suppose I have."




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

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

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