

Part Seventeen
November, 1976

In History of Magic, after lunch. Continued in Potions, after History of Magic.

ALRIGHT MATES
guess whose birthday
it is in two days,
I'll give you a hint,
MINE.
Whats the plan??

Plan, what plan, is there
supposed to be a plan?
What's all this talk of
birthdays? HA- HA.

NOT FUNNY.
I want a PARTY.
I didn't get one
last year!

This is because we do not love you.
It is tragic. 

ALSO YOU WERE
JUST DISOWNED RIGHT,
I DON'T THINK YOU
WERE FEELING VERY
PARTY-y

Thanks Pete, I'd forgotten
that charming incident.
NOT THE POINT. Sirius Black's
Very Sexy and Exciting Party
for his Eighteenth Birthday
is coming up and I need
ideas, otherwise you lot
are SO not invited.

No one is jumping out of a
cake naked for you, by the
by.

You are not fun.

That would be expensive.
Cake-jumping.

absolutely You could hire
someone cheap!
LIKE POTTER.


NO CAKE AT ALL, MATE.

one see? But you would be ever so
all white all covered in
icing. Maybe it would
make Evans love you again!
NO FUN POTTER

Myself in icing is not for the
consumption of the general
public.

The general public
wishes to thank you.

💔 I am heartbroken.

every new
cattle of
jerry met
 Alright. If you
are going to be BAD
FRIENDS, I will make
it simple. I've made
a list of supplies,
you can go pick
them up.

How very thoughtful of
you.

YOU ARSE as if we don't
have plans already.
(Carse!!)

YOU DO?! YOU DO
HAVE PLANS??!
OH JAMES I AM SO HAPPY
COME HERE AND LET ME
GIVE YOU A KISS

In the middle of Potions?
I THINK NOT. Our
private clinches are better
left to privacy.

You are disturbed.

WHAT PRIVATE
CLINCHES?..??

Don't get jealous darling,
it's unbecoming.

Yes look how pink he
is.

Pete's head →



He's always pink.

WHO'S ~~NOT~~ PINK???!
I AM NOT PINK.

He has always looked...
well it's more like
"healthy" to me.

Yes, I would have said
FUSCHIA.

It's definitely
more infrequent

ITS DEFINITELY
I HATE Y'ALL.

Has anyone noticed that
we are not talking about
ME anyone??

PROBLEM.

So what are these plans???

They are SURPRISES.

I don't like surprises
unless it involves Jamie
and a cake.

We'll see.



Remus has learned long ago that Marauder birthdays are not like other birthdays. This important lesson was brought home to him when Sirius shoved him, face first, into his first Marauder birthday cake -- which was, coincidentally, not a real cake, but rather a pan full of melted chocolate with icing on top of it. This is the way a Marauder has to learn how to say Happy Birthday. It always makes Remus feel squeamish, even after seven years of practice. He simply doesn't like shoving people's faces into anything, so James often charges him with procuring the refreshments and putting up the decorations.

Well, Remus is *bad* at putting up the decorations. He has no eye for it, and often gets tangled in streamers, which results in a lot of torn crepe paper and an incredibly bad mood. "Remus," James said to him finally, earlier that afternoon, "we are Seventh Year Gryffindor males. We have no need of crepe."

"Thank God," Remus replied, and went off to get the Firewhiskey.

It is, he supposes, some sort of reaffirming action -- showing that he isn't *all* Prefect, *all* the way down. To begin with, he can drink any one of his friends and probably any one of his teachers under the table, even though he doesn't much like the taste of Firewhiskey. He supposes it's his metabolism, which does odd things he isn't sure of. The first time he realized this was with Sirius, who stopped speaking to him for weeks afterwards, with a parting "Honestly, Moony, keeping this from us for *all this time*?" and an agreeable "Not on!" from James.

"Do we have music?" James yells from the common room. "What's the music?"

"I don't know," Remus yells back, tearing through his trunk. "All my music's too pretty. Shall we just take his?"

"Righto," comes James's voice a moment later, in a strangled grunt, "just -- ah -- pick that up, while you're up there, eh?"

Remus straightens. His arms are full of clanking bottles of Firewhiskey; it'll take another two trips to bring all of it down, not to mention the two enormous tankards of rum and the frightening pepper-infused vodka that he

brought back from Lithuania and which everyone is too afraid to try. If he tries loading up his arms with Sirius' enormous, dog-eared collection of punk records, both Wizarding and Muggle, he will probably fall down the stairs and spill all the alcohol, which -- though an excellent way to christen a ship -- is not the way of a Marauder birthday party.

Well, he thinks sympathetically, James must be extremely busy. Because he'd certainly come upstairs and help if he weren't extremely busy.

When he steps down the last stair into the common room, James is, in fact, on the floor, ankles and one wrist tangled in crepe paper and a look of bewildered disgust on his face.

"Crepe paper," he mutters, not looking Remus in the eye. "I couldn't let well enough alone. Tricky."

"I know," Remus replies. "It gets you where you're weakest and then there's no hope." Kindly, he helps James untangle himself, though he eyes the crepe paper warily all the while. He doesn't know of what, exactly, it's capable. "Don't know what sadist invented it. Someone with fingers I don't trust. Shall we just magic it up?"

"I love wands," James says, tugging his from his back pocket. "D'you know, it's a wonder Muggles aren't stumbling about with underwear on their heads *all the time*, not knowing right from left?"

"Oh, impressive," Remus says dryly, "those Muggles. And that they've managed it for so long."

Wands flicking in unison, they get the trailing curls, somewhat knotted but still passable, of crepe paper up into the air and thrown here and there over the rafters. They're boys, Remus supposes, so it doesn't have to be *symmetrical* -- though the utter carelessness of some of the criss-crosses still makes him cringe. "It'll do," he says finally, stepping back and brushing hair out of his eyes. "Well, it'll have to, as I've no idea how to get it down and start all over."

"Come on," James says, though dubiously. "It's not all that bad."

"Hello," Peter says, coming in with Remus' victrola. "Did all the crepe paper in the world come here to die?"

"It will be this way for all time," James mutters defensively. "As a reminder of our great triumph over the paper that is crepe."

"I wouldn't really call it a triumph," Peter says hesitantly.

"He's right, you know," Remus admits. "It's really more of a Pyrrhic victory."

"I think everyone who sees this room loses," Peter adds.

"How about we get them too drunk to notice?" James suggests. "Good God, Moony, that's a lot of Firewhiskey. What are we doing for people who like their drinks less painful?"

"I've got some Muggle stuff from my sister upstairs!" Peter volunteers. "Pads was a bartender, right? He can make

it taste good."

"We don't want him stuck behind a bar all night," James objects with, Remus thinks appreciatively, uncharacteristic consideration. "He'll have to test all his creations and we'll find him with his head in a toilet a week later. We'll just...make some kind of...punch. It can't be that hard, right? We'll get...juice. Peter, did you make that banner?"

"I started it," Peter says doubtfully. "I can't really draw portraits though. I don't know how it's going to turn out."

"And I have the camera," Remus says. "You know. For pictures. To document the chaos." He attempts a shifty look.

"Remus, have you got something in your eye?" Peter asks. "Like lint? Do you need help with it?"

"No," Remus mutters. "I was trying to imply I will blackmail you all and move to a sunny Caribbean isle with the hush money, whereupon I will be fed chocolate all day by the buxom natives."

James stares at him. "You make even that sound stodgy," he says. "Good job mate, really. It's impressive."



A glorious documentation of the eighteenth birthday of one Sirius Black, Gryffindor and Marauder, with captions added for posterity by Mr. Moony, Esquire.



Peter, Sirius and James.



Poor Lily.



And we never saw these girls again...



Nor did we see her, either. fancy that!



Shall we pretend the angle is "artistic" ?



Indeed, the birthday boy.



I call this "passed out with no trousers."

"Moo-ooh-ooh-ny," Sirius howls. "Where is Moo-ooh-ooh-ny, I want to *commend* him for this *excellent* Latvian purchase of his. Such foresight! Such intuition! Such Moo-ooh-ooh-ny!"

Remus, however, is in hiding. This is, after all, a party, and a rather good one at that, with Peter's banner hung high above the goings on where -- James whispered -- no one would be able to see it. It was supposed to be them, all four of them, but looks, Remus thinks, like a very large pen vomited on a very large piece of parchment and was then tortured into spasms of despair and agony for a very long time. With faces. There are, definitely, faces. The one with three splashes of ink across and a gigantic blob in the center is Remus, Remus guesses, and the one with uneven circles somewhere amidst a mess of black is James. Peter hasn't given himself any hair. Sirius is the one that's left, looking wild and squinty and definitely lopsided. There is a certain something compelling about it, sad, mournful little characters, that, somewhere, hit home.

"We are none of us artists," James had told Peter earlier. "You are a brave, good man."

"Pepper!" Sirius is yelling now. "It's pepper *and* alcohol *together*! Genius! Northern Europe! Hey, hello, where'd you come from? What's your name? Ashley? Hahaha *whoa* okay then *mff*--"

"Hey," comes a call, and all of a sudden the door of the closet jerks open. Remus looks up guiltily to see James staring fuzzily down at him, swaying slightly. "What are you doing in here? Come on. What the hell. Reading in a closet. It's a party! It's Sirius' party! Come up -- you've missed him doing the Sexy Dance on a table!"

"Argh," Remus protests. "Look, James, I know it's a party, and I'm really glad you're all having a good time, but I've got loads of reading to do and you know me, this isn't really my -- parties, you know--"

"Up," James insists mercilessly, and jerks him upright, dragging him out of the closet.

There aren't, actually, as many people as there had been when Remus had first crept into the closet to hide. There is, apparently, a Ravenclaw girl named Ashley, and Frank, and Kingsley with his arms folded across his chest downing Firewhiskey after Firewhiskey without batting an eye, and someone asleep face down on the floor who looks from behind like a fifth year Remus only recognizes by hairstyle. Peter is eyeing his own Firewhiskey nervously and Sirius is the life of the small, dwindling party.

"Evans left," James confides in Remus's ear, much louder than he probably intends. "I feel horrible. I was soooo drunk. So drunk. All I could say to her was 'I'm sorry I'm so drunk.' 'Sorry!' I said but she was so nice. She's the best girl. I forgot the entire conversation we were having while we were still having it."

"I'm sure it will be fine," Remus says, eyeing Frank nervously.

"An encore!" James demands, apparently having lost interest in the everpresent Evans Problem. "An encore of Sirius Black's specialty, the Sexy Dance! Up with you, mate! Onto the table! Where's your lampshade hat?"

Remus Lupin hates parties. He hates the drunk -- happy drunks and sad drunks alike, but for different reasons --

and he hates knowing at some point some Gryffindor is going to take a piss on something important (maybe, in fact, it has already happened) and only he will be sober enough to clean it up. He can't wait for the smaller half, the faint, dim hours just before sunup, when it's only the four of them left in the aftermath exchanging cards and presents like decent, respectable Englishmen, not bloody wild Gryffindor hooligans.

Hooligans, Remus' mind repeats.

"Good God," he says, out loud. "I am a forty year old in a boy suit."

"Thanks for the Daily Obvious, Moony." James rolls his eyes, stepping neatly over the prostrate body of someone Remus has never seen before. Some Muggles are destroying a guitar through the scratchy trumpet of the Victrola. Remus feels tired and irritated and very old.

"Moony!" Sirius says happily, surfacing. Ashley giggles and wipes her mouth. Remus really, really hates the drunk. Sirius is wearing a pink hat with sparkly tassels; he has chocolate and crepe paper in his hair and his face is covered in lipstick. Around eight o'clock he started demanding kisses for the birthday boy, and very few people had the sense or the fortitude to refuse. Even Kingsley condescended to duck his face into Sirius's hair, an act which only he could make stately and dignified. "Moooooony I wanted to thank you for the deliciously fantastic pepper vodka. I love the pepper vodka. I feel like I've found a soulmate. We're going to go have pepper vodka babies. Named *Alexei. Sturginoff*. Sturginoffski. Hey," this last to Ashley, with a troubled look, "how old are you, anyway? How did you get in here?"

"Sixteen," Ashley says, and giggles again, revoltingly. "I'm Meg's cousin."

"Sixteen! I think maybe that's illegal now, you know, you old pervert," James says knowledgeably, collapsing onto the nearest sofa.

"That's illegal," Sirius informs Ashley genially, patting her consolingly on the bottom. "This is possibly illegal. Or not. We don't know. Terribly sorry. You're a very," this in a low voice that is really closer to a growl, "very...sweet...girl *mmf*."

"I don't know what to say," Remus murmurs.

"Youuuu should get back to your House," Sirius informs her woozily, pulling back and pointing at her meaningfully. "Can't be out too late. Had a wonderful evening."

"I could stay here," Ashley purrs.

Remus *hates* girls who purr.

"No," Sirius says cheerfully, "not really, it's a Gryffindor kind of, yes, after this so, no. But Happy Birthday to me, I'm glad to meet you, yes, good-night," and hustles her out the door with a rather unnecessary amount of groping.

"You are cruel to them," Remus says, though fondly.

"I am not cruel," Sirius says, shocked. "Moony, the nerve! The insinuations! And on my birthday! How am I cruel!" He dusts off his hands with some relish.

"Well, they love you," Remus says. "You have that sort of -- personality. And then you pat their odd firm female bottoms and send them on their way. No doubt they pine."

"Of course they pine." Sirius beams. "That's part of the fun. You ought to try it sometime -- making people pine."

"I wouldn't now how," Remus says airily. "All right. Out! Out." He toes the two prone forms on the floor, rolling them kindly to the door.

"Here," Kingsley says, suddenly behind him. "I'll help." He leans down, taking the two by their collars, and tugging them out. "I will leave you alone," he adds, raising one brow in salute.

"You are a good man," Remus says. "You are a good man, Kingsley Shacklebolt."

"See that Sirius has a good birthday and that he does not have any more pepper vodka," Kingsley says. Commands, really. "See also that he does not vomit on himself."

"I will be a human shield if necessary," Remus says.

The rest of the guests filter out. Remus shuts the door behind them with a neat *snick*, locks it, and heads to sit by Peter, who is, blissfully, not drunk. Remus is suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude that he is here. "Thank you, Peter," he says, and Peter looks at him as if he's lost his mind.

"Encore," James mumbles. "Encore, Sirius, old boy, old gal, encore!"

"No more dance," Sirius says blissfully, draping himself across James's lap and kissing him wetly on the ear. "No more dancing for you." He exhales hugely and flops backward, wiggling comfortably into James's open arms. "I am too tired to dance. This has been a fantastically wonderful and amazing birthday. Happy birthday to me," in a light, dizzy, off-key tenor, "happy birthday to me, happy birthday dear Sirius, happy birthday tooo....me."

"Your neck smells like tequila," James informs him

"Good," Sirius says. "So does my mouth, see?" and he huffs in James's face to prove it.

"Yagh!" James protests, nose wrinkling in disgusted horror. "It's like the inside of an overcoat."

"Happy birthday to me," Sirius hums.

Peter turns his Firewhiskey bottle upside-down and regards it with interest. Remus settles onto his elbows. The record has come, finally, to an end, and the air is filled with the empty crackling of the Victrola in the silence.

How is it possible, Remus wonders, to feel so solitary amongst his three best friends? He is struck with the oddity of it -- how different they are from one another, and how miraculous it is they ever got along in the first place, and

how odd they manage to get along. Whatever glue binds them together so well cannot be classified or named or analyzed; it works without the properties of logic and common sense. Well, Remus supposes, that *is* friendship. That which comes from necessity or impulse or luck, but never from anything understandable. He licks his lips unconsciously.

"So-oooo," Sirius says brightly from his limp position on James's knee, waving a hand regally in the air and staring at the ceiling, "who's got presents for me?"

"I burned mine in protest," Remus murmurs, too quietly for anyone to hear him.

"I made you the birthday banner!" Peter says, pointing upwards. "That one, on the left, that one's you. I worked for hours on it. While James and Remus got tangled in crepe paper."

"I see it now," Sirius says blissfully. "I'm the one with all the hair. Pete, my lad, that is the best rendition of Moony's nose I have ever seen in my life." He turns his gaze to Remus's nose, focuses, and grins. "It's an exact likeness!" he exclaims. "That is the best birthday present ever. Pete. Peter. Petey. That is *fantastic*. Who is next? Your king awaits your offerings."

"I have gotten you," James says, not to be outdone, "a box full of many goodies. It is over there in the corner and I cannot reach it because something is on my lap. Oh, hello. It's you. Hello!"

"Hello," Sirius says. "Here, Moony, be a sport, would you, and fetch us James' box of many goodies?"

"I am afraid to touch it," Remus says, but obliges.

Sirius tears into the present with the same gusto he always has and always will have for only two things in his life actually worth the energy: presents and puddings. "James," Sirius says, moments later, his face falling. "James, it's a book. It's only one goodie and it's a book."

"It is not just any book," James chides. "Have some faith, man! *Open it.*"

Sirius opens the book.

"Merlin's spotted socks," Sirius breathes. "James, this is brilliant."

"What," Peter asks, "what is it?"

Sirius's eyes are wider than Remus has ever seen them. They look like they've been propped open by invisible toothpicks. He flips a page and shoves the book sideways at James, grinning so widely and with such sheer joy it looks like his face will split in two. "Look -- oh my God hahaha *look* at it!"

"Gotten great use from that one myself," James agrees solemnly.

"My legs don't do that," Sirius whispers, clearly awed. "I don't think my legs do that. Wow, they're really into it, aren't they?"

"That's right," James says, apparently to the book. "Keep it up. Lie back and think of England."

"James," Remus says uncertainly.

"What *is* it?"

Sirius flips through a few more pages, face glowing with delight. "James, it is so incredible. It is so marvelous."

"Let me *see* it!" Peter demands.

"Fine, whinge whinge whinge, don't let the birthday boy have his present for more than a second before you snatch it away," Sirius says irritably, dropping it into his outstretched hands. "But for God's sake do be careful and don't bend anything. Oh, James, I have never been so happy. You're the best friend a boy could ask for."

Remus, with an awful feeling that he already knows what he is going to see, leans over Peter's shoulder.

"Whoa," Peter breathes, long and low and reverent.

"A Wizard's Kama Sutra," Remus reads. "Well, James. How mature of you."

"They are moving, Moony," Sirius says. "It is *brilliant*."

"They are moving," Remus agrees. "It is *pornographic*."

"He's not right," Sirius murmurs sadly. "He's just not right. He was broken when he was little, but he's just not right." He gives Remus a disapproving look. "Just -- turn to the first page. Tell me that doesn't make you all warm inside."

Peter quickly turns the page to accommodate. Remus peers over his shoulder at the strange and foreign tangle of limbs that looks animal and desperate and somewhat comedic. Remus takes the book from Peter, ignoring Peter's pained sound, and turns the book upside down. "Well," he says. "I've found a head." There is a woman, he *thinks*, from the hips, and a man's entire rear end, and their legs are flapping about wildly. Remus ponders this. And then, he begins to laugh.

"He's not right," Sirius repeats. "He is all wrong."

"It's *funny*," Remus protests. "They look like insects flipped onto their backs!"

"Ugh," James says. "I'm glad I'll forget that one in the morning. Try page seventy-six. That one's my favorite."

Remus does so, amused and feeling somewhat superior, if not somewhat disappointed. How unromantic, he thinks, stopping on the appropriate page. "She's upside down," Remus says. "She looks as if she's about to choke. I feel sorry for her."

"That is *bliss*," James mutters. "Must you ruin all that is sacred?"

"I want my present back," Sirius mumbles, holding out his arms. "I will never part with it. I will be an apt pupil, James Potter. Hang on a tick, don't I get another present?"

Remus sighs. He's never been any good with presents. He knows Sirius, impossibly well, all the things that make him angry and all the things that, inexplicably, make him laugh, and what sends him round the bend with gratitude. But James is good with presents, and Peter is always blithely trying, and Remus never manages to hit the mark. "Er," Remus says.

"I dooooo," Sirius says softly. "I know I do. Come on. Give it up."

"I don't have it," Remus objects, flailing mentally for excuses. "I've, er, I've lost it."

"Bollocks," Sirius says rudely. "You are withholding my present. I can see it in your eyes."

"Pads," James reminds him, "you're looking at the ceiling."

"I don't have to see them to know!" Sirius retorts.

"You don't want it," Remus says desperately.

"I would like to concretely know I don't want it, if you please," Sirius commands, sticking out a hand. "Out with it."

Remus sighs and reaches behind the Victrola for the small square package, which Sirius seizes upon eagerly and rips apart with great gusto.

"It's...another old book," he says at length. "How...surprising!"

"I know," Remus says. "I failed. I tried, and then I gave up. I am a failure. Feel free to steal my chocolate."

"I steal your chocolate anyway." Sirius gives the book a peremptory once-over and then drops it unceremoniously onto the sofa. James picks it up, flips through it momentarily, and then drops it as well. It's almost a ritual: Remus spends weeks, sometimes even months, in advance, desperately trying to think of something new, and yet always falls back on *old, smelly book* in the end, panicking at all the possibilities, much to the expectations of his friends who no longer display even any pretense of humoring his lack of imagination. Of course, it isn't his lack of imagination that does it -- he imagines all sorts of presents, perfect presents, presents that would put anyone else's presents to shame. Unfortunately, most of them don't exist, and the rest of them are too expensive.

"I'll get extra," Remus mumbles. "You can have all of it. I did try."

"You always do," Sirius sighs. He pats him on the back, gives his shoulder a squeeze. "It's never your fault, really. One day, who knows. You'll get there. I like the stuff with caramel in the center."

"Your chocolate is impure," Remus says. "But noted."

"And that's it then, is it?" Sirius flings himself backwards, sprawled with his legs and his arms wide apart, on the thick carpet. "Another birthday, come and gone. Have we caroused, men? Have we drunk our fill? Are we absolutely full of good drink and good company? I'm tired," he concludes, and closes his eyes. James is already snoring, and Peter, with his head on his folded arms, fell asleep when Sirius opened Remus' book.

"It's not that I don't try," Remus says again, into the quiet, still air. "I do try. Giving presents is hard, you know. I always think, this year, I'm going to make it, and then I don't."

"Endearing," Sirius mumbles. "A bit pathetic but that's, you know, understandable. Keep your chin up, there's a lad."

"It's just books are -- well, *everyone* likes books," Remus presses. He toys at the frayed hem of one sweater sleeve. "It's just so few people really love them, I suppose. Except James managed to find the one incredible book the whole world had to offer."

"People going at it like they're made of clay," Sirius says agreeably. "Fan-tastic."

"Really," Remus says. "I don't understand how you can not think it's even a little funny."

"It *is* funny, you arse," Sirius says fondly, "it is intensely funny. But you don't think it's anything other than funny which is," an immense, face-devouring yawn, "...completely...ridiculous. You know what I think, I bet you bud."

"What?" Remus says, blinking. "I...is that a word? I mean, of course it is, but in this context."

"Yes," Sirius says solemnly. "One day you will get a growth at the end of one of your fingers, and it will grow and grow and then all of a sudden out will pop a little miniature Moony. Or maybe you will divide, like an amoeba."

"You are drunk," Remus says. "You are drunker than drunk. A moment ago you had a lampshade on your head."

"I am saying you are the most asexual person I have ever met," Sirius explains, opening James's book and dangling it upside-down. "I can't imagine you doing any of this! Not that I have ever tried, but, you know? I can't. No one could. It is like trying to hammer a square hole into a...peg. You know? So...you'll probably bud."

"I don't plan on reproducing," Remus huffs. He is *not* asexual. He could tell Sirius a thing or two about nagging, persistent dreams and trying very, very hard in the shower to *be* asexual. But he is not asexual. His organs would very much like to disagree with that misinformed assessment. "I just don't show it," he adds. "Just because I don't go around whipping out my respective, you know, doesn't mean it is not all there."

"I didn't say it wasn't *there*," Sirius reasons. "I just said it isn't the sort to stand up and take notice."

"Well that's not true either," Remus snaps.

"But what have you *done* about it, eh?" Sirius asks.

Silence.

This, Remus thinks, is rather uncomfortable. What can anyone say to that? Suddenly the conversation has taken a drastic, uncomfortable, and sexual turn. Remus wasn't expecting anything of the sort. He supposes Sirius will remember none of this in the head-clutching, moan-and-groaning morning, but for now Remus is very aware that one of Sirius' bleary eyes has focused on him and that any uncomfortable shifting or turning any strange colors to alleviate the bubble of embarrassment in his belly is completely out of the question.

"Do you want me to write you a list?" he replies irritably. "Or shall I have a pantomime?"

"Oh ho ho!" Sirius says delightedly. "He has a pantomime. An informative puppet show. Look, just because I -- you know -- you don't have to get all skittery all the time. It's in the past! It never happened! Stop *thinking* about it! *I'm* not thinking about it! Can you even say the word 'sex' without going all British? Can you? I've kissed James and he doesn't go all wonky-eyed every time we mention it. I've done *shots* off James's *nipples*. I could whisper dirty talk in James's ear all bloody night. *Kiss me, you fool*," he whispers throatily into James's unconscious ear. "*Caress me, you wild stallion, yes, right there!*"

James lets out a colossal snore. Sirius gives Remus a triumphant look.

Remus feels slightly dazed. This has just gone in a new, equally uncomfortable direction, and Sirius is staring frankly at him, and there does not seem to be any way of safely defusing the conversation. He doesn't want to think about it. He *hasn't* thought about it -- for *months* he hasn't. Sirius keeps making it harder and harder to avoid, seeming completely unperturbed once they've decided to be completely unperturbed about it, but there are always these moments, when they relax, when they let their guard down, that it comes back to haunt them, a ghost too frightened to disappear, or with unfinished business, lingering in the deep corners of their minds. Remus wants to cover his ears with his hands, squeeze his eyes shut, and wait until the flutter in his stomach passes.

"I--" he starts, and then there is a rhythmic tap on the window; the unmistakable sound of an owl on a mission.

"You can go," Sirius says loftily, "I don't have any lower legs."

"A convenient excuse, I say," Remus mumbles. Thank God for owls in the middle of the night. Morning. Whatever bloody hour it is. Remus' internal clock says somewhere in the wee hours of the morning, whatever those are -- around three or four, the latest, when everything seems gray and chill and quiet. He hurries to the window, undoing the latch and stepping back from a shock of cold air in the stifling room. "Not an owl," he says, as a black, sleek bird swoops into the room. "Raven."

When has a raven ever brought the post? Remus tries to remember. It does seem familiar, this bird, glossy black streak of confidence in the air.

"Did you say a raven?" Sirius mumbles. He rubs at one eye and sits up, swaying dizzily, before steadying himself, both hands pressed firmly against the floor. "Whossit?"

The raven caws, twice, and drops a crisp letter directly in his lap. It shoots up for the rafters a moment later,

precise movements very unlike the fluffy good cheer of a nice owl, and lurks above them, casting dark shadows over the room while it preens.

"For you, I think," Remus replies dryly.

Sirius frowns and lurches upright, flipping the envelope over.

"Oh," he says suddenly, with a sharp, bitter bark of laughter. "That's nice. The old seal of home." He sits up straight, with a swift brusqueness that Remus would have thought was completely impossible, and makes as if to hurl it into the fire.

"Now," Remus says sharply, grabbing his wrist. "Don't."

"Oh, *don't*?" Sirius demands, incredulously, his mouth curling into something that's half mirthless smile and half contemptuous sneer. His eyes are dark with alcohol and tiredness and anger. "You stupid -- you don't know what you're talking about. Anything that comes with this seal on it--" he jabs a finger scornfully at the silver wax seal-- "goes in the fire at minute one, and even that only rarely takes care of the problem. Get off my arm."

"It could be something important," Remus attempts helplessly. "You don't know what's in it. It's -- well, you can throw it away after you've opened it. Can't you?"

Sirius gives him an incredulous look, as if he understands absolutely nothing about the way the universe works. "Are you *joking*?" he snaps.

"No," Remus says. "Look, if you want, *I'll* open it--"

"Don't!" Sirius snaps, exerting sudden force and flinging Remus off him. "Just let go of me, Remus. *Don't*."

Remus worries at his lower lip, stumbling backwards and sitting down hard. He remembers this Sirius -- first year Sirius, wild and unpredictable and nearly vibrating with anger, livid at the smallest things, easily sparked to unexpected rages, dark in the eyes and tense in the mouth. Even when he was happy, this Sirius lurked beneath his laughter, ready to be unleashed at the slightest provocation. Remus has never met Sirius' family -- beyond Slytherin cousins, sisters and brothers in the halls of Hogwarts -- but he gets the feeling, deep and hard in his center, that he hates them. It's an animal reaction, going for the throat; sometimes, he dreams about it, faceless, porcelain pale parents before him, and instinct, before he can force it down, barreling against them, ripping belly from belly and spilling blood all over a white floor. Remus shakes his head, passing a hand over his eyes. "I," he begins.

"Shut up," Sirius says harshly. "You're so -- *God*, Merlin, *bugger*, you're so *ignorant*. Look, I'll show you why you don't open it."

He sinks his thumb into the crinkled parchment and rips it forward; the ball catches on the jagged edge of the letter within and rips, blossoming red over the yellow paper.

"Paper cuts?" Remus attempts.

Sirius's eyes flick up to his, black and furious and silent. Remus looks away first, but listens to the crackle of paper being unfolded, ripped open. "Well, this is *charming*," Sirius says derisively. "Cordial greetings, etc., eighteenth birthday, *would* have become the man of the Black family, if not for your disinheritance -- God, she's such a cunt, such a fucking -- *man of the Black family*! As if I wanted to -- those fucking -- oh, but it goes on, *fantastic*. Unfortunate death of your Uncle Alphard when you were fourteen, thanks, Mum, I'd forgotten. Whether or not I agree with Alphard's decisions it is my unpleasant duty to inform you, you may not have been aware -- oh, isn't that *nice*? Isn't that such a fucking favor she's done me, those fucking -- I *hate* them, Moony, I *wish* -- God!" He moves so fast it's a blur, arm flinging out in front of him, hurling the letter into the flames, which roar up to consume it; the raven shakes out its wings in the rafters. "I don't want their *fucking* money," he snaps at it, breathing heavily.

"How much?" Remus asks quietly. Sirius rounds on him, and he cringes.

"How *much*?" Sirius snarls. "How *bloody* much? That's all you can think about? How *much*? Do you want me to give it to you? It's yours. I don't want it. Give it to your *bloody* parents, you can go to Devon for the entire *stupid* summer."

"I said 'how much' because I don't know what else to say," Remus murmurs.

"Get out of here," Sirius yells, and it's a moment before Remus realizes Sirius isn't talking to him. The raven caws down at him, angry, reprimanding. Sirius shakes his arms up at it, futilely, then grabs for his wand. "Out. Out! *Go back and scratch their eyes out*." At last, the raven takes flight, circling once, twice, three times around the room, so that shivers creep down Remus' spine, and then streaks out the half-open window, disappearing against the bruised sky.

"Sirius," Remus says, stupidly trying to reason with him. "Perhaps you ought to--"

"You don't know anything." Sirius rounds on him again, the air around him brittle. "Perhaps *you* ought to *shut up*."

"You're acting like a child," Remus bites out, trying to shock him out of it, which usually works.

Instead, Sirius suddenly flings his arms down and snaps, "You know what, Moony? Every time anyone does anything to stir up your fucking *composure* you treat them like they're *two*! Have you ever noticed that? I don't want to hear your *stupid* lecture about Dealing With It! I don't want to hear your *stupid* Mature Voice! And I don't need you to tell me I'm the problem here because for once in my entire *stupid* life I'm *not*. And frankly if that *is* what you think, then you can sod off and leave me alone, because I don't need *another* person telling me what a shit I am, especially not you -- you're one to talk about acting like a kid! Jesus. You can talk all you want about how you're forty years old to cover it up and you can -- give lectures and books and wear patchy jumpers but I'm not sure you actually know a goddamn *thing* about being a grownup." He totters unsteadily upright, passing a shaking hand over his face. "I'm going to bed. I'll come down and get the presents in the morning."

"Sirius," Remus attempts. "I didn't mean--"

"Listen," Sirius says wearily, "whatever. I don't care. I had a great party until now, all right? Thanks for *not coming*. Goodnight."

Remus stares after him as he storms up the steps, and wonders at how James and Peter can sleep through anything. He presses his palms together and watches his hands for a while, and then goes to gather Sirius' presents into a pile. The fire is calming down again, spitting green ink up into sharp flashes of emerald fire earlier. Remus stares at the fire for a while, and then fishes out the charred, twisted remains of the letter with a poker.

"Oh God," Remus says. "It's a *lot* of money."

Remus can't sleep. Unlike his friends, who can sleep on any surface and despite any noise -- diadems drop, and dogs surrender, Remus thinks wryly -- he upsets easily and over-analyzes situations and worries far too much over this and that. Replaying the situation in his head, he realizes how garbled it is -- like most situations where anger is involved, the result is a definite inability to express oneself that will, at some point, be humorous. Not now. It's six o'clock and the sun is close to casting pale dawn light over everything when Remus finally gives up on sleep and heads off to the bathroom to fling cold water on his face and brush his teeth because his mouth smells and feels like something his mother sweeps out from under the bed, all fuzzy and gray.

The hall is quiet and still, torchlight flickering dimly to light his way, and all the paintings sleeping, one or two of them letting out great huffs of air. An old man with a frizzy white beard lets out a snore so loud Remus thinks a cannon has gone off and pirates are attacking. It takes a full minute for his heart to calm down.

He likes, surprisingly, the way Hogwarts is at night. Empty but full, quiet but peaceful. Everyone is sleeping except for him, which makes him feel secretive and delighted with the sound of his own footsteps echoing over stone. Besides, the bathroom will be all his, no half-naked boys flying around, all elbows and knees and someone else's soap up his nose.

Except the bathroom isn't empty.

"Er," Remus says. A man, with a pointy, kind face and enormous spectacles is washing his hands, back to Remus, face reflected over his shoulder in the mirror. He startles, jumping backwards and pulling his wand. "Eek," Remus chokes out, and is immediately glad no one is around to save him. This way, no one is around to share the knowledge that he just went *eek*. No one goes *eek* anymore. No one has *ever* gone *eek*.

"Eek!" says the man. "Who -- what in the *world*--"

"Er, so sorry," Remus says quickly. "I was just -- just going to wash my face and -- I'm sorry, are you a new professor?"

"No, no, not at all," the man says hurriedly, smoothing back the few remaining strands of his hair. "Not really, ahahah, not a professor *here*, naturally, something of an, ah, independent inquirer paying a visit. Do you know, when I attended this school students weren't allowed out of their dormitories after midnight, can you imagine,

how unenlightened times were, ahaha, I say." He has a brief, nervous laugh which sounds more like words than laughter, as if he has actually consciously said "Ha ha ha!" which is unnerving.

"Oh, seventh years are now," Remus says.

"Fenwick," the man says automatically, jabbing out a hand. "Benjy Fenwick at your service. Strange way to meet, in a washroom, ahaha. Least you know my hands are clean! Just -- you know -- paying a visit, as I say. Nothing to worry about. I say, you don't know how to get to the headmaster's office, do you? I was in Ravenclaw and I've never been much good with those moving staircases and do you know, I've misplaced myself."

Remus finds him shaking a cool, still slightly wet hand, his arm being flailed eagerly up and down. He waits until Mr. Fenwick has released him to respond, feeling strangely breathless and confused. "Er," he says. "I can take you? If you'd like. Your hands are wet, you might want to dry them first. I'm sorry, that wasn't very friendly -- I haven't slept yet. Er," he repeats. "I'd be glad to," he says finally. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Remus Lupin."

"A hero," Benjy says. "A hero, a hero. Lupin, eh? A hero. In your debt. Naturally. Oh right! Right, hand towels." He dries himself off, polishes one side of his enormous, round spectacles on his sleeve, and then blinks owlsh pale eyes in Remus' direction. "Ravenclaw, are you? Or no, no -- Gryffindor, I think, you've that air about you."

Remus, already forgetting why it was he came to the bathroom in the first place, steps out into the hallway, holding the door politely open. "Well, I -- Gryffindor, yes."

"You've that air about you," Benjy repeats distractedly. "Yes, yes, you do. Though I thought at first -- do you play chess?"

"Er," Remus says. "Sometimes."

"You're very good, I think," Benjy muses out loud. "You've *that* air about you, as well."

Remus tries very hard not to stare. "It's not that far," he murmurs, at a loss. "Dumbledore's office. You got very close."

"It's the stairs," Benjy mourns. "They keep -- moving -- like to have the plan of a place in my mind, you know, only sometimes the staircase leads up and sometimes down, and I never know which way I've gone this time. Ha ha! I'm sure you're much more competent than that, it's all about remembering they want to trick you."

Remus doesn't say he's never had trouble after the first day, when he found himself somewhere off limits and Sirius thought it was on purpose and told him jolly good job and perhaps you can take the bed next to mine, Lupin. Remus doesn't say anything at all.

"They do want to trick you, must make a note," Benjy adds, half to himself, and then says breathlessly, "well, jolly good to meet you, Lupin, we must have a game of chess sometime, eh, if I'm back in the country, shall we, and thanks ever so for the directions, goodnight now," and he ducks out the door and is swallowed by the darkness of the hallway.

"I didn't give you directions!" Remus calls after him, concerned.

"It's all right, haha, just needed the encouragement really, toodle pip..." The voice fades away into nothing, around a corner, gone.

"Madness," Remus says wonderingly, staring into the empty hallway. "Madness."

Sirius is still awake when Remus creeps back up into the dormitory, arms full of presents. There is a stale, frozen atmosphere around his bed that means he's still awake, staring at the canopy or carving rude words into the bedpost. Remus tries to be as quiet as possible, depositing the gifts in a pile beside the bed -- that book, left unattended, would definitely be stolen -- but it's no use. From behind the curtains comes a deliberate, signaling cough, as if challenging Remus to say anything. Remus gives the canopy a glare that softens almost instantly, sitting down on the edge of his own bed. He knows, in this second, that he will forgive Sirius anything, just as he will forgive any of his friends anything. He cannot imagine a circumstance in which he won't be able to, knowing them as he does, trusting them so. He can even forgive Sirius kissing him, the wealth of confusion that followed, the questions that nag him still and which he cannot answer -- and the way Sirius pretends to simply shrug it off, the way Sirius mentions kissing James as if it's the same, the way Sirius acts determinedly as if nothing's happened while Remus is struggling so hard to do the same.

Remus doesn't mind it. He's too tired to mind it, too fond, too grateful.



"I'm sorry," he says. "Happy birthday."

Sirius' bed creaks. Remus holds his breath.

"Good, because I'm still pretty sure that was totally your fault," Sirius mutters finally, poking his head out from behind the red-and-gold brocade. "Anyway I'm no good at apologizing."


Remus smiles faintly. "I know. That's why I did it." He licks his lips, and puts everything behind him. It's what he's best at. "The strangest thing just happened to me, d'you know?"

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.

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