

Hurt/Comfort
Temporary Amnesia
Temporary Character Death
Artist Sirius Black
Quidditch Player James Potter
Past James Potter/Lily Evans Potter
Period-Typical Homophobia
Internalized Homophobia
Good Parent James Potter
Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence
First Wizarding War with Voldemort (Harry Potter)
Marauders Era (Harry Potter)
prongsfoot - Freeform
Morally Grey Regulus Black
Past Child Abuse
Good Friend Remus Lupin
Angst and Fluff and Smut
James Potter Loves Sirius Black
Sirius Black Loves James Potter
Love Confessions
Idiots in Love
Sharing a Bed
First Kiss
Minor Regulus Black/Remus Lupin
First Time
Romantic Fluff
Found Family
Hurt James Potter
Slow Burn
Emotional Hurt/Comfort
Regulus Black and Sirius Black Angst
Sirius Black Gets a Hug
Jealous James Potter
Blood and Violence
James Potter and Lily Evans Potter Raise Harry Potter
References to Depression
Child Harry Potter
No Prophecy | Sybill Trelawney Does Not Make A Prophecy About Harry Potter and Voldemort
Past Sirius Black/Benjy Fenwick
English

Shooting stars, falling objects

Nyx_21

Chapter 4 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/61656694/chapters/157937233>): A lasting impression

Summary:

“You know,” Lily said softly, “I’d almost forgotten.”

“Forgotten what?” James asked, frowning.

She looked at him for a long moment. “The way you look at him.”

Heat rushed to James’ face, and he felt unmoored. But curiosity outweighed his embarrassment.

“How do I look at him?”

The smile faded from her lips. “Like there’s no one else in the world.”

Notes:

Did anyone ask for Protective James Potter?

TW: References to past torture

Soundtrack: “Another Love” (<https://open.spotify.com/track/3JvKfv6T31zO0ini8iNIItO?si=d232286257cd4457>)
by Tom Odell

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_4_endnotes\)](#).)

“Memory is a funny thing. When I was in the scene, I hardly paid it any mind. I never stopped to think of it as something that would make a lasting impression, certainly never imagined that eighteen years later I would recall it in such detail. I didn't give a damn about the scenery that day. I was thinking about myself. I was thinking about the beautiful girl walking next to me. I was thinking about the two of us together, and then about myself again.”

- Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*

Potter Manor, Scotland – February, 1979

James stood at the bedroom door, his forehead resting against the cool wood.

Drunken laughter rose in a sudden crescendo from downstairs. He should have been down there, celebrating his upcoming wedding, not alone upstairs, wrestling with himself to enter the room that had once belonged to Sirius.

The evening had been impossible to endure. Monty, Remus, and Pete had done their best to lift his spirits. Puddlemere United’s decision to take him on as Chaser had opened doors even the Potter name had not – a private Quidditch match at the World Cup stadium, followed by an indulgent dinner at the finest restaurant in Diagon Alley. Hours of drinking later, the party had spilled back into Potter Manor, where the revelry showed no signs of waning.

Yet nothing could distract James from the Sirius-shaped void in the universe. No one had noticed when he slipped away. The groom, it seemed, was not a vital component of his own bachelor party.

The door creaked as it swung open, and James reached blindly for the light switch. The moment the lights flickered on, his chest constricted. Coming here had been a mistake. The room was steeped in Sirius – his clothes still draped over the back of the chair, his records stacked by the bed, his posters curling slightly at the edges, and the paintings scattered haphazardly against the walls.

James stepped inside as though pulled by an invisible tether. The grief surged up to meet him, so forceful it made his knees buckle. He dropped onto the edge of the bed, unable to stand against it. The room seemed to blur at the edges, but no tears came. The hollow ache was too vast, too deep, to spill

over. It felt as though it had carved him out, leaving him brittle and hollow.

A fine layer of dust coated everything, a testament to how long the room had stood untouched. Not even Effie, who had a habit of tidying things for the House Elves, could bring herself to step inside.

James twisted the duvet in his fists, letting out a shaky breath. For a moment, rage threatened to engulf him – an impulse to shatter the lamp, punch through the wall, obliterate the silence with chaos. To make the room feel as shattered as he did inside. But the feeling burned out just as quickly, leaving behind a dull ache that throbbed deep in his chest.

He reached for the pillow still resting at the head of the bed, his fingers brushing the soft fabric. How many nights had he slept here beside Sirius, soothing nightmares or plotting grand escapades?

James brought the pillow to his face and inhaled deeply.

Cedar and smoke lingered faintly, fragile and almost lost after all these months. It was too much. He dropped the pillow onto his lap and cradled his head in his hands, elbows digging into the downy softness.

“I thought I might find you in here.”

James flinched, startled by the quiet voice. His father stood in the doorway, a tumbler of Firewhisky in his hand. Monty’s speech at the restaurant earlier had left James unbalanced; he had spoken of stepping in for Sirius as the understudy for a role that should have been played by his best friend, his voice steady as he raised a glass in tribute. James had not known what to do with his hands. His throat was too tight to swallow.

“Really?” James rasped, his voice thick. “Because I never planned on coming in here again.”

Monty crossed the room and sat beside him on the bed. James kept his head bowed, unable to meet his father’s gaze. There were things he could never bring himself to say – truths about that final night with Sirius, buried too deep to surface. Even with Monty.

“I know it feels impossible, Jamie,” Monty said gently, wrapping his arm around him. “But you’re allowed to be happy. It’s not a betrayal.”

James’ breath hitched, and he leaned into his father’s side like he had when he was a boy. “Then why does it feel like this?”

“Grief is the price we pay for love.”^[1]

James pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes, dislodging his glasses, trying to hold himself together. “I’m not sure love is worth it.”

Monty’s arm tightened around his shoulders. “Love is what makes life worth living. And I shouldn’t have to tell that to someone who’s about to get married.”

James stiffened. He knew his parents thought he was rushing things. The news of Lily’s pregnancy had tempered their opinions, but he could still sense their quiet worry. They had been worrying about him at all sorts of volumes ever since that night.

“I love Lily,” James said, finally lifting his gaze to meet Monty’s.

“I know you do.” Monty’s expression was calm, kind.

“It hasn’t been easy for her,” James admitted. “I haven’t been easy to be around.”

Monty exhaled, his concern evident. “You shouldn’t marry someone because you feel like you owe them.”

“That’s not what I meant,” James replied quickly, gripping the pillow tighter.

“I’m not trying to give you a hard time,” Monty said, his voice placating. “I just want to make sure this – the wedding – is really what you want.”

James’ eyes darted around the room, searching for some tangible proof to convince his father that he was making the right choice. His gaze fell on Sirius’ sketchbook resting on the bedside table. All he wanted was to lie down on the bed and drown in the memories preserved within its pages. But he knew, with a bone-deep certainty, that if he gave in to that urge, he might never get up again.

He turned back to Monty. “I want to move forward,” James said, his voice unexpectedly steady. “I need to.”

For a moment, it seemed Monty would say more, but instead, he stood. "Should we head back down?" he asked, his tone gentle. "Peter was threatening strip poker when I left."

James managed a small, strained smile. "I'll be there in a second."

Monty nodded, pausing briefly to glance around the room before slipping out, leaving James alone once more.

Carefully, James placed the pillow back at the top of the bed. He let his hand brush the cover of the sketchbook, his fingers lingering on the worn leather. The bee Sirius had drawn now lived on his skin, immortalised in ink. But it was not enough. It felt as though every inch of him should be covered in Sirius' work.

"I miss you," James whispered, his voice trembling.

The words felt pitifully inadequate, a pale shadow of the magnitude of his loss. James had not known it was possible to miss someone this much.

Instead of returning to the party, James slipped away into the night. Despite the alcohol swirling in his veins, he managed to Apparate to Marlene's flat, where the guests from Lily's hen's party were staying the night.

He knocked on the apartment door, not entirely sure why he had come. He was relieved when Lily opened the door.

"James," Lily said, startled to see him. "What are you doing here?"

James ran a finger along the edge of the doorframe, small flakes of white paint peeling away under his touch. It gave him something to focus on, something to keep his hands steady. With effort, he lifted his gaze to meet hers. She was wearing a short dressing gown, *Bride to Be* embroidered across it in sparkling rhinestones. Marlene had clearly gotten the Bedazzler out again; James noticed she had used Holyhead Harpies colours. No longer teammates but rivals.

"I don't have a best man," James said, his throat tight.

Something flickered across Lily's face - too fleeting to name but unmistakably complicated. Before she could respond, Marlene appeared at the entrance to the living room, clutching a cocktail glass and swaying slightly.

"Get out of here Romeo!" Marlene declared, her words slightly slurred "No boys allowed."

The flat erupted into raucous laughter, but Lily did not smile. Her forehead creased as she studied his face. After a moment, she reached into a bowl by the door, fishing out the spare key.

"Just give us a minute, Marls," she called over her shoulder, stepping into the hallway and closing the door softly behind her.

In the flickering electric lights of the corridor, James felt a rush of regret. He had wanted to see Lily. But it had also not felt like a good idea to be alone.

"Sorry to interrupt the party," James said, his voice subdued, though he managed a faint smile.

"It's fine," Lily replied, shrugging. "I can't drink anyway."

James' gaze dropped reflexively to her stomach, the way it always did when she mentioned the pregnancy. Though he knew that, come July, he would be a father, the idea still felt distant, abstract. He had imagined he would have life sorted out by the time he had children. Monty kept assuring him no one ever truly felt ready for fatherhood, but the thought offered little comfort.

Lily had been adamant that no one beyond their parents know about the pregnancy - not yet. She worried people would assume it was the only reason they were getting married. But James had proposed before they had known. He had clung to her ever since they started dating, to the one person who could make the crushing weight of grief almost bearable. He was still unsure whether it was entirely fair to saddle bright, talented Lily Evans with him when he was such a mess.

Marrying the woman of his dreams, becoming a father - these were good things. Surely, they would help fill the terrible space that had opened within him ever since that night. He should not have gone into Sirius' bedroom, not when the feelings were so raw. So much of his relationship with Lily had been shaped by that night. She had pulled him through the aftermath, propping him up when he could barely stand on his own. It was not her fault that something inside him was still broken.

“You could ask Remus,” Lily said, breaking the silence.

“What?” James blinked, confused.

“To be your best man. Or maybe Monty?” She hesitated, as though weighing her words. “I’m sure Sirius would understand.”

James was suddenly acutely aware of his drunkenness. If he had not been leaning on the wall, he would have slipped to the ground at the mere mention of his name.

I’m not talking about Lily. I’m talking about us.

James let out a humourless laugh. “No, I don’t think he would.”

Lily bit her lip, clearly uncertain how to navigate the minefield of Sirius Black. “Is this really about who’s going to be your best man?”

James was not sure what it was about anymore. He dropped his gaze to the threadbare carpet.

“I just... He should be here,” he said, each word dragged out like it hurt to speak. “I’m just not sure how to do anything without him.”

The admission felt like too much to say aloud. They never talked about this sort of thing. He had no idea how to talk to anyone but Sirius. But that was no longer an option.

He heard the faint rustle of her robe as Lily stepped closer, and then her arms wrapped around him in a warm, steady embrace. He clung to her, burying his face against her shoulder as his eyes squeezed shut.

“Lily,” James murmured, his voice breaking. “That night.”

Her hold on him tightened. “Yeah?”

“We were fighting. Me and Sirius.”

“I remember.”

James nodded against her shoulder. In the dark, he was even more aware of the crushing weight on his chest. “I went to talk to him next to the lake.”

“I remember,” she said again, after a brief hesitation.

Of course, she remembered; it was a terrible first date. James had not been able to meet Lily’s eyes when he returned from the lake, shaken to the core by that earth-shaking kiss with Sirius. He made his excuses. For most of the night he had run through the Forbidden Forest as Prongs.

Until –

No. He shoved the thought away. Sirius was gone.

“He was angry with me,” James managed at last. “For asking you. He and I were planning on going together. As friends.”

The clarification spilled out before he realised how revealing it was. Lily stiffened slightly. When he finally lifted his head to glance at her, he realised that he could not tell her. Not with a baby on the way. Perhaps it would have been easier if the kiss had been meaningless. But it meant everything to James.

Already, the weight of what he had almost said hung heavily in the air. James had come here seeking something - comfort, perhaps, or a way to make sense of the ache inside him. Instead, he felt selfish for dragging Lily into his pain.

He pulled away, fixing his gaze on a patch of wall over her shoulder. “We never fixed it,” he said, his voice flattening. “I just wish we’d cleared the air, you know?”

For a moment, silence hung between them, fraught and delicate. Then Lily reached out, resting her hand lightly on his arm.

“He knew how much you cared about him, James,” she said. “One fight doesn’t change that.”

James nodded, but the words did not reach him. She was wrong. That fight had changed everything.

Sirius must have fallen asleep because the next thing he knew, he was waking in that same comfortable bed.

His body ached, every muscle stiff and uncooperative, as if his limbs had forgotten how to move. He

clenched his hand into a fist, feeling the slow, sluggish response of his body, each motion slightly delayed as though his entire system were running underwater. Somewhere in the distance, voices were raised, sharp and urgent, but straining to hear only aggravated the dull throbbing in his head.

That, at least, was an improvement. Tentatively, he opened his eyes – only to be met by a pair of wide green ones, vivid and curious, framed by a shock of unruly dark hair.

A little boy was perched on his knees at the edge of the bed, his expression caught somewhere between fascination and mischief.

Sirius blinked, trying to make sense of the sight. Even without the gaping holes in his memory, he was fairly certain his experience with children of this age was non-existent. Nonetheless, Sirius could tell the boy still had the rounded cheeks of early childhood, though his bright, alert eyes hinted at a mind far sharper than his years.

For reasons Sirius could not begin to grasp, the boy was wearing a lion mane – a spectacular headpiece of golden felt and fur.

“Uh, hi,” Sirius said, his voice hoarse and uncertain.

The boy’s face lit up, splitting into a grin so wide it seemed to take over his entire face. Sirius could not help it – his own mouth curved into a smile, despite the confusion clouding his thoughts.

“You’re Padfoot!” the boy declared, bouncing on the bed with excitement.

The movement made the mattress shift, and Sirius fought the rising queasiness in his stomach as he pushed himself up, leaning back against the headboard. The boy watched his every move with rapt attention, as though Sirius were the most interesting thing in the world.

Even in his groggy state, Sirius could see it – the boy was unmistakably James’ son. The resemblance was undeniable. Sirius shoved aside the uncomfortable twist of feeling that came with that realisation. There was no reason for his chest to feel so hollow at the thought of James, with a child. Married, too, most likely.

“Am I now?” Sirius asked, feeling more awake as he focused on the boy. “And who’s Padfoot?”

“My dad’s best friend!” the boy replied without hesitation, his tone brimming with certainty. “So, we can be best friends, too.”

Best friend. Sirius tried to reconcile the words with the loose grasp he had of himself. He cast his mind back, grasping at fragments – an unhappy childhood in a dark, oppressive house, the pale, serious face of his brother, the cruelty of his parents. Nowhere in those dim memories was there room for a best friend.

Strange how the bleak memories were easier to locate. He could remember his mother, but he could not recall the first time he had laid eyes on his supposed best friend. It should be impossible to forget a face like James'; Sirius could sooner imagine forgetting the sun.

“Well then,” Sirius said, forcing his voice into a lighter tone, “I suppose I should ask your name.”

Sirius winced at his carelessness almost immediately. Surely the boy would be upset that Sirius did not know who he was, given their apparent closeness. But he only grinned wider, seemingly delighted by the question.

Reaching behind him, the child produced a wooden sword with a flourish.

“Pirate Harry Potter!” he announced with dramatic flair.

Harry Potter. Potter. James Potter. It was solid, dependable, strong – exactly how Sirius thought James’ name should feel, though he could not quite explain how he knew that. He realised, with a swoop of embarrassment, that he had nodded off shortly after James had made that stunning pronouncement of his.

You may not remember me, Sirius. But you should know that I’ll never hurt you.

“A pirate?” Sirius asked, clutching his chest in mock terror. “Does that mean I’m a prisoner?”

Harry swung his sword in the air, the imaginary blade cutting an arc through the room. “You’ll have to walk the plank!”

“But if you throw me overboard, you’ll never find the treasure!” Sirius exclaimed, warming to the game despite the groaning protest of his bones.

Harry froze mid-swish, his curiosity piqued. "What treasure?"

Sirius lowered his voice conspiratorially, leaning forward just enough to make it seem like he was sharing a great secret. "Gold, Harry. Gold beyond your wildest imagining."

Harry tilted his head, considering this. His lion mane bobbed with the motion. "And Chocolate Frogs?"

Sirius nodded solemnly. "Obviously."

Before Harry could press further, the voices Sirius had heard earlier grew louder, spilling into the room.

"You're not taking him anywhere!" James' voice rang out, sharp and angry.

Harry glanced toward the door, unconcerned. "Mummy and Daddy are in a fight," he said matter-of-factly. "About you."

Sirius winced. "Sorry," he said, surprising himself. It seemed members of the Potter family had an uncanny way of coaxing apologies out of him. It must be a genetic trait.

"S fine," Harry replied with a shrug. "They always fight about you."

"That doesn't sound very fine," Sirius said, frowning.

Harry leaned closer, as though sharing a secret. "All the grown-ups thought you were dead. But Daddy didn't!"

The words hit Sirius like a bolt of lightning, bright and sharp, impossible to ignore. He swallowed hard, pushing the sudden, unexpected wave of emotion aside.

"Harry," he said, his voice soft but serious. "Have we ever met before?"

Harry's brilliant smile dimmed for the first time, his brow furrowing. "No," he said quietly.

Sirius nodded, the tightness in his throat making it hard to speak. "And how old are you?"

The boy's seriousness melted away as he puffed up with pride. "Nearly four!"

Sirius forced a smile back onto his face, not wanting to let his expression betray the tangled mess of thoughts in his head. "Four? You're practically a grown-up yourself!"

The grin returned in full force as Harry began speaking at high speed about his plans for his birthday next month.

Before Sirius had a chance to respond, the door swung open. James walked in, and it was like he brought with him a warm summer breeze. Everything in the room seemed to brighten, his soft smile casting a gentle light. Sirius found himself staring at the freckle next to James' lip, the way it moved when he smiled.

"So, you've met the man of the house," James said, his voice carrying something almost shy.

Sirius chuckled. "I've already promised him hidden treasure and Chocolate Frogs."

"That figures," James replied, a spark of amusement in his eyes. "He's a ruthless negotiator."

Harry spun around to face his father. "Can Padfoot come to my birthday party?"

James' fond smile softened further. "Of course," he said, before glancing uncertainly at Sirius. "If he wants to."

It was not fair - the way they both looked at him with such hopeful expressions. Restoring his memories suddenly seemed less important than promising he would show up for the party.

Sirius tilted his head, as if weighing the proposition carefully. "Will there be cake?"

James pressed a hand to his lips, his tone mock-serious. "We were actually thinking of having broccoli instead of cake."

"No!" Harry cried, collapsing dramatically onto the bed.

James gaped at him. "But you love broccoli."

"I hate broccoli! Tell him, Padfoot."

Though they had met only minutes ago, Harry looked at him expectantly. Sirius opened his mouth to continue the joke, but his attention snagged on a figure standing frozen in the doorway.

A woman, pretty and red-haired, stared at them with wide, shocked eyes. "Holy shit," she breathed.

Harry sat up, visibly delighted. "Mummy said a bad word!"

Her green eyes - a perfect match for Harry's - were the giveaway. Each detail seemed to jump out at

Sirius. The family resemblance. Because they were a family. He supposed that the fact someone like James would end up with a beautiful woman like her was unsurprising. Predictable, even. It was foolish to feel so bereft; after all he hardly knew the man.

James' posture shifted as he turned to face her, his arms crossing tightly over his chest. Even Sirius could feel the sudden tension in the room. The woman's focus remained fixed on Sirius, her forehead creased in a frown.

"Granny's downstairs, Harry," she said finally. "She's going to play with you while I talk to Sirius."

Harry hesitated, his disappointment plain. "But –"

"Go on," she said firmly. "And be careful on the stairs."

With a dramatic sigh, Harry handed his pirate sword to Sirius and slid off the bed. He lingered for a moment before dashing out of the room.

A tense silence settled in his absence. Sirius shifted awkwardly, clutching the wooden sword like a talisman. At least they did not seem like a particularly demonstrative couple – though perhaps that was because of their argument downstairs.

"I'm Sirius Black," he offered, his voice a shade too formal.

Something flickered across the woman's face. She straightened, quickly schooling her expression as she stepped further into the room. James tracked her movements closely, his gaze sharp.

"Lily Evans," she said, holding out her hand.

Sirius hesitated, then took it. Her hand was cool and smooth, a contrast to his own. He noticed suddenly there were three nails missing on his right hand. He pulled his hand back, curling his fingers instinctively to hide the imperfection. The injuries were old, the nails already beginning to grow back, but self-consciousness prickled beneath his skin.

"I'm a Healer at St Mungo's," Lily continued, her voice steady but distant. "I was hoping to examine you, if that's alright."

Sirius glanced at James, who lingered near the bed like a shadow. Their eyes met, and the coldness in James' expression melted. Sirius' tension ebbed, though not entirely.

"You were... gone for a long time," James said, his voice low and careful. "We just want to make sure you're okay."

Sirius raised his eyebrows. "You mean apart from the memory loss?"

Lily's eyes sparked with interest. "Do you know today's date?"

"Not a clue," Sirius replied, attempting to maintain a breezy tone.

"15 June, 1983," James said quickly.

Lily shot James a look before turning back to Sirius. "What do you recall from yesterday?"

Sirius considered the question. "Trees. Someone levitating me."

"Anything before that?" Lily probed. "Let's say the last few weeks or months."

Sirius opened his mouth. There were no more than flashes – nothing substantial. The stone under his back, the feeling of constriction, his levitation to freedom.

"Nothing really," he said, cutting his eyes away.

"What about the last few years?"

Sirius considered. "Just images. But nothing that makes sense."

"Anything you can give us is helpful," Lily said.

"This isn't an interrogation," James interrupted. "It's supposed to be a medical examination."

Lily shot him another indiscernible look. "What about your earlier memories? Do you remember anything about Hogwarts?"

Hogwarts. Sirius could picture the castle, the grounds. He could remember his classes, although the details were oddly clinical. It was as if the connection between the memory and the emotion behind it had been severed. There was no colour, only the hard cold facts.

He answered Lily's questions as best he could. He could not recall the name of his house - Gryffindor, apparently - although he could remember the awful summers he spent back at Grimmauld Place.

“And,” Lily glanced at James, hesitating for a moment. “You don’t remember... your friends?”

Sirius smoothed his hand across the surface of the duvet. The room was far tidier than it had been when he woke up the first time. James must have cleaned up while he slept. He was not sure how he felt about that, being observed while unconscious.

“No,” Sirius said softly, not looking up.

“Have you noticed a headache, vision changes, or confusion?” Lily asked.

“Headache,” Sirius said tersely. “And this entire day has been pretty confusing.”

“You have a headache?” James interjected worriedly.

Sirius stole a glance at him. He was standing as close as possible to the bed without getting onto it. His forehead was lined with concern, his arms still crossed. He was staring intently at Sirius, as if afraid he would miss something if he let his attention wander even for a moment.

“It’s nothing,” Sirius replied.

Lily sighed, sitting down on the edge of the bed, right next to his knees. “Don’t downplay your pain, Sirius. It helps us figure out what’s going on inside. Other than your head, does anything else hurt?”

“Um,” Sirius said. “I’m just sore.”

“Where?” Lily asked, her voice thawing.

Sirius bit his lip, not wanting to answer. They both seemed to understand that this meant everything hurt.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” James demanded, his posture tightening.

Sirius frowned, irritated by the note of accusation in his voice. “I had a couple of other things on my mind, James. It’s not a big - ”

“Don’t say it’s not a big deal,” James interrupted stubbornly. “If you’re in pain it’s a big deal.”

Sirius rubbed his forehead in frustration. Lily’s eyes zeroed in on his fingers; he had forgotten about his missing nails. He let his hand drop, but it was too late.

“Do you remember what happened to your hand?” she asked.

Sirius glanced down at his fingers, forcing himself to be dispassionate as he scanned his memories. He remembered the sudden sharp pain, the dull throbbing. A cooing voice telling him that it would all be over if he would just stop being so stubborn.

“Someone pulled them out,” Sirius said flatly. “Whoever was... you know.”

James turned away abruptly, taking several long strides away from the bed. He took a deep breath, as if trying to calm himself.

“I see,” Lily said impassively, not sparing a glance at James. “Did they hurt you in any other ways?”

It was as if Sirius’ mind had been waiting for just that question. Suddenly a torrent of memories broke over him. A lavish room where he was strung up in chains while his captors ate dinner. A bleak basement where he shivered, starving. A cave that tasted like seawater. A cruel voice intoning that dreaded word over and over: *Cruciatu*s. Then that strange dim forest, filled with nightmares.

"No one's looking for you," said a cruel voice without a face. *"They all think you're dead. Even that blood traitor boyfriend of yours."*

Sirius' breathing grew shallow, the panic rearing up inside him, contracting his ribs, stealing his breath. There were stones on his chest, in his throat. He was suffocating, going under, swept away in the current of an ocean filled with monsters.

James was by his side in an instant, the mattress shifting under his weight. Sirius looked up desperately to meet his eyes. They pulled him back to shore, filled with unerring light. James picked up his injured hand and pressed it to his chest.

Sirius could feel the rise and fall of his breaths, his heartbeat gaining speed under his hand. The panic receded. Lily receded. Everything except James disappeared.

“Breathe,” James murmured. “Just copy me, Pads. That’s it.”

Sirius took a breath and James exhaled. As if they only needed one breath between the two of them.

James pressed his palms to the surface of the kitchen table, barely restraining himself from splintering it into pieces.

They had hurt Sirius. Tortured him. Badly enough that just touching the memory of it had sent him spiralling into a panic attack.

The anger in James' chest was uncontainable. It surged through his veins, crackling at his fingertips. He could feel the pressure of it swelling outward, like a storm building in the still air before the first strike of lightning. A shudder ran through the table beneath his hands, and the faint sound of shattering echoed from the cupboard.

A warm hand pressed between his shoulder blades. "You need to calm down," Lily said quietly. James shook his head, his voice tight and bitter. "Am I being too emotional again?"

The silence that followed was heavy. Lily's hand lifted from his back.

A moment later, he heard her murmur a spell; the delicate clink of mending glass replaced the earlier destruction. She was always calm and practical. It never failed to make him feel undisciplined and emotional in comparison. At least Effie had taken Harry to the main house, sparing their son from witnessing yet another confrontation between his parents.

Lily turned back to him, her green eyes sharp but unreadable, and sat at the table. James exhaled hard and dropped into the chair opposite her. The scene felt uncomfortably familiar - like those long, depressing negotiations when they had untangled their marriage.

They had divided their belonging with methodical efficiency, discussing schedules for Harry, and arranging the sale of their house near Potter Manor. They had both known ending things was the right choice. He should never have proposed to her in the first place; his head and heart had been far too fractured. But he would always owe her a debt of gratitude for standing by him in those early years, when the world felt like it had tilted off its axis.

And there was Harry. Harry made everything worthwhile.

But this situation – this was different. This was messy and raw, with no clear path forward. James could not even pretend at practicality when it came to Sirius. Every fibre of his being demanded action: find whoever had hurt him, make them pay, fortify the coach house, stand guard at his bedroom door. Never let anyone hurt him again - himself included.

He would still be in the armchair by Sirius' side, watching him sleep, if Lily had not led him out of the room.

Lily rested her hands on the table, fingers steepled. Her voice, when she finally spoke, was calm and measured, as if addressing the family of a patient. "I can't imagine how you're feeling right now, James. To have Sirius suddenly on your doorstep. For him not to remember you. It's a lot to process. And I know that me suggesting you talk to the Ministry or take him to St Mungo's sounds like I am trying to take him away again."

His eyes stung, and he dropped his gaze to his hands. Lily had always been better at putting emotions into words. He could not even begin to articulate the storm inside him.

"He needs to go to the hospital for a proper examination," Lily continued. "And I don't think I should be the one to do it."

James' head snapped up, his neck protesting the sudden movement. "Why not?" he asked, his tone sharper than he intended.

Lily's lips pressed into a thin line. "Sirius never liked me. We both know he wouldn't choose me to take care of him if he remembered who I was." She hesitated, her gaze flickering away for the first time. "And he deserves a Healer who hasn't spent the last five years resenting his ghost."

The words landed like a heavy weight between them. Lily had never admitted as much before, and James' stomach twisted. He wanted to reach for her hand but stopped himself, unsure if the gesture would be welcome.

"Everything that happened between us is my fault, not his," he said softly.

Her gaze returned to him, steady and dry. "It's no one's fault, James. Not really. But I'm too close to

this situation to give him the care he needs.”

The reminder of Sirius’ injuries made James’ shoulders tighten. The thought of taking him to St Mungo’s left a bitter taste in his mouth. “The minute I take him to the hospital, everyone will know he’s back. The Ministry will know. The Order. The Death Eaters. It’s too dangerous.”

He could see the conflict in Lily’s expression. Her instincts as a rule-abider warred with her Healer’s compassion. She had always believed that everyone deserved medical treatment, no matter the circumstances. Despite James’ estrangement from the Order of Phoenix, she was still their unofficial Healer, patching them up after top-secret missions.

“We’ll keep it off the books,” she said at last. “Use a glamour so no one recognises him.”

This time James did reach across the table to squeeze her arm. “Thank you,” he said, the words weighted with sincerity.

Lily shook her head, her eyes sharpening with determination. “I’ll only do it if you make sure that man is definitely him.”

James withdrew his hand as if burned. Hurt and anger churned in his chest.

“You still don’t believe me,” he said incredulously. “It’s Sirius, Lily. I know it is.”

Her eyes rolled, a gesture that had always grated on him. “Forgive me if I need something more concrete than your deep, mystical connection to Sirius Black.”

James clenched his teeth to keep from snapping back. Picking a fight would only complicate things further. “He has the sigil,” he said, his tone carefully even. “Regulus Black brought him here.”

She raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. “Then confirming it shouldn’t be an issue.”

James dragged a hand through his hair in frustration. The last thing he wanted was to make Sirius feel mistrusted, especially when he could hardly stand to be touched.

“I assume he’ll be staying here with you,” Lily said, her voice neutral.

The thought of Sirius being anywhere else made his chest ache. “Of course.”

Lily nodded, her expression still a bit too impassive. “If he’s going to be around Harry, then you need to make sure this isn’t a trap.”

It was a low blow, bringing Harry into it, but James knew she was right. He nodded stiffly, unwilling to say the words out loud.

Satisfied, Lily rose and headed for the door. James followed, leaning against the frame as he handed her Harry’s backpack. Some of the tension drained from him as she slung it over her shoulder.

“Thanks,” James said quietly. “For coming. I know it is not exactly...”

He trailed off, unable to find the words. He and Lily had spent so long avoiding the topic of Sirius that referring to him directly was counterintuitive.

Lily paused on the threshold, studying him with that sharp, penetrating gaze. “You realise Harry will want to come back to see him as soon as humanly possible.”

James could not help the smile that spread across his face. Seeing Sirius and Harry together – even briefly – had been one of the best moments of his life.

Something in his expression caught Lily’s attention. She hesitated, then offered a half-smile that was equal parts wry and bitter. “You know,” Lily said, “I’d almost forgotten.”

“Forgotten what?” James asked, frowning.

She looked at him for a long moment. “The way you look at him.”

Heat rushed to James’ face, and he felt unmoored. But curiosity outweighed his embarrassment. “How do I look at him?”

The smile faded from her lips. “Like there’s no one else in the world.”

James had no answer for that.

Notes:

I adore writing James, Sirius and Harry interacting. It warms my cold heart. Thank you so much

for reading, leaving kudos and commenting - it means the world ❤️

Notes:

[1] A quote from Dr Colin Murray Parks, *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*: “The pain of grief is just as much part of life as the joy of love: it is perhaps the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment.”

Close (#)