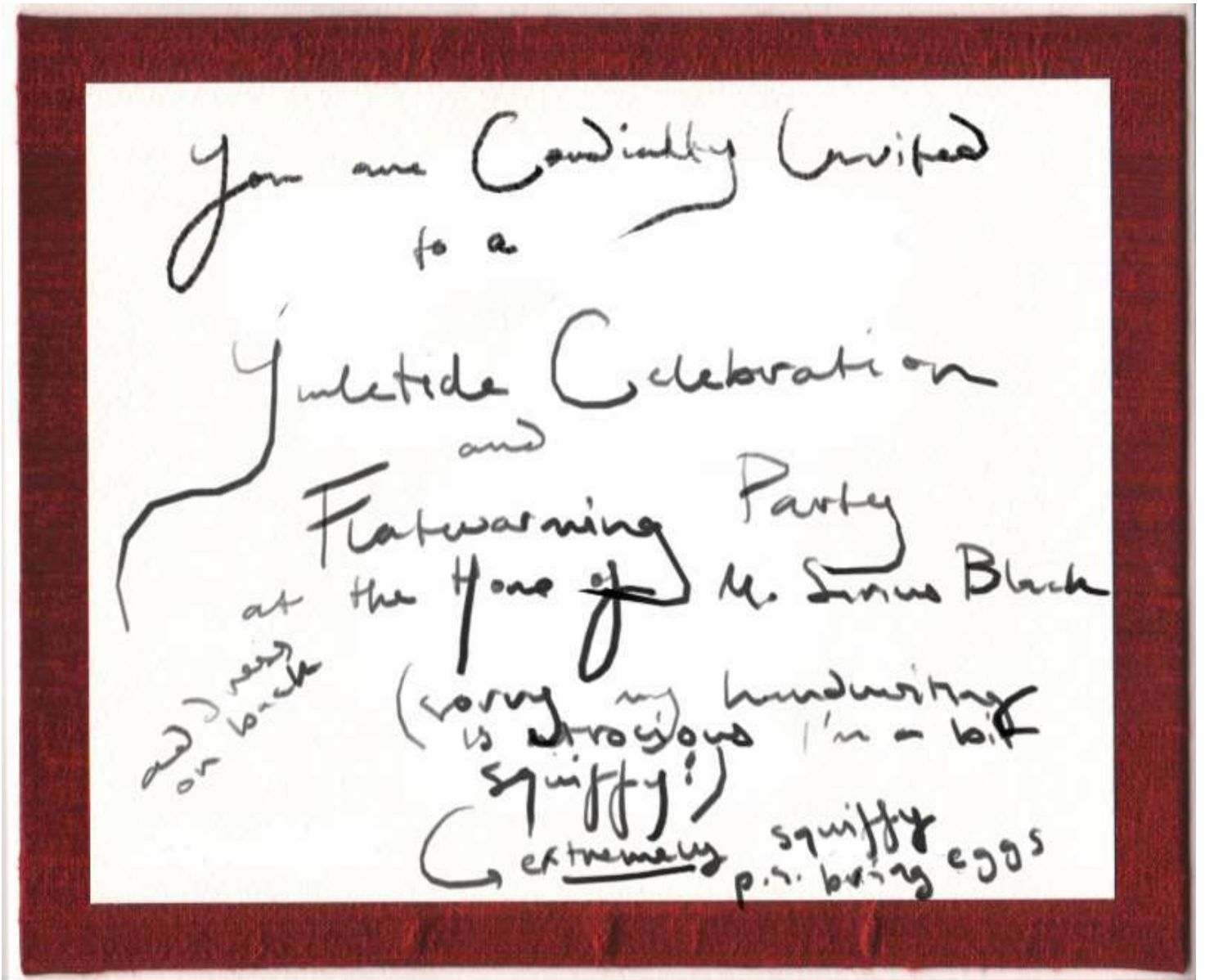


Part Eighteen
December, 1976



"Sirius," Remus says, "the mistletoe in your bathroom is trying to kill me." He pauses for a moment, to reflect on the oddity of the sentence, and then shrugs it off as part and parcel of displaying Christmas Spirit. It doesn't dismiss the fact that the mistletoe -- growing wild between the few forlorn tiles in Sirius' bathroom -- went for the ankles and, after formulating a better battle tactic, attempted instead to gnaw off his toes.

Sirius, who has donned a rakishly angled red hat with an enormous, shedding white pom-pom, waves his hand dismissively. "You know mistletoe," he says. Remus gives him a look. "Well, there was an accident," he admits. "I wanted them fresh, more feisty that way, but then a pot spilled, didn't get to it right away -- anyway, it doesn't matter. It's Christmas! Have some pudding."

"How you can think of pudding," Remus mumbles, "when I was nearly killed--"

"Oh, it won't kill you," Sirius says cheerfully. "It just holds you there for hours waiting for someone else to come along so it can have its perverted way with the both of you. I was on the toilet for half a day before the landlord heard my screaming."

"That must have been perfectly earth-shattering experience for both of you," Remus says, rather shaken. He recalls Sirius' landlord: a man with the general shape, coloration and demeanor of an angry lemon. The idea of his force-kissing Sirius in a toilet is simultaneously horrifying and intriguing and one which he will spend many hours mentally scrubbing from his subconscious for years to come, while the sight of mistletoe only revives it in the very back of his mind, resulting in a perpetual holiday agitation.

"We do not speak of the outcome," Sirius says. "It is That of Which We Do Not Speak. Oh come on, have a pudding, you've been looking even more like a weed than usual lately. Peter's already had three!"

"Ungh," Peter agrees from the couch. The couch is the only piece of furniture in the living room, unless one considers the enormous Yule log humming away merrily in the fireplace. As Peter shifts and makes sounds reminiscent of large, blubbery, dying creatures, the cushions let out an equal groan: of pain, of turmoil, of desperation to escape. Remus touches his fingers to his forehead in a silent salute. The poor couch never had a chance. Springs collapsed, frame shattered, cushions carved forever into the shape of Peter's backside, insult will later be added to injury when at least three pints of eggnog will be spilled on it in what Sirius labels "general festivities" and the police more appropriately title "indecent exposure."

"What are you doing, Moony, man?" Sirius asks. "You look mad. Here: take this. Pudding!"

"If I'm mad, it's because your mistletoe is diseased," Remus mutters, but takes the offered pudding as a sign of peace on earth and good will to men.

"And don't go after me about how there's no furniture," Sirius adds. "There is a couch for sitting. There are blankets. On the ground. If you roll them up they're actually quite comfortable. You know, to sit on, as well. And isn't the floor God's given flat surface? Stop giving me that look."

Remus hides a smile behind his pudding. "Your eye for décor is impeccable," he murmurs. "You should make a business for it."

"It's minimalist," Sirius says. "Don't be a twat."

"Well, I think it's ace," James proclaims from the floor, where he is sprawled comfortably atop a pile of rolled-up blankets. Remus supposes it makes sense James feels right at home in this mess, and that he's the odd one for wanting to fold everything. Blankets aren't as soft folded as they are wadded into little balls, hiding dust and spilt pudding and great mistletoe demons in their many folds. "It's your own place," James continues. "What else do you

want? Furniture will come and go, but independence is forever."

"Yes!" Sirius says triumphantly, hurling himself onto the sofa. It groans; so does Peter. "Symbolically, this is the most beautiful flat in all the world. Don't sit by that wall, Prongs, that's roach country." He folds himself up into a comfortable slouch, all long legs and arms draped over the couch, every inch the master of his peeling-walled, piss-smelling domain. Remus has to smile, seeing him like this. He must revel in it, the antithesis of familial duty and pureblood upbringing, even though family money and pureblood upbringing technically pay for it.

"Hah!" James scoffs. "Roaches. Mate, I've faced giant pumpkins and lived to tell the tale, do you think I'm afraid of a few insects?"

Sirius shrugs lopsidedly. "Don't say I didn't warn you. They've got mandibles on 'em."

"All roaches have mandibles," Remus says. "Don't they?"

"You'll see what I mean," Sirius replies mysteriously. "But it doesn't matter now. Compliment me on my haven of domesticity."

"This place is ace," James says, for the eighteen hundredth time. "Isn't it ace, Moony?"

"Yes," Remus agrees, also for the eighteen hundredth time. "Though really, something ought to be done about the mistletoe in the bathroom. There are people you can call -- there are *charms* you can use--"

"Now why would I want to do that? I've named them," Sirius sighs. "The patch by the toilet, those are Humbert and Ophelia. The one that hangs just above the window, he's a feisty lad. I named him Jack. And the girl by the mirror -- the one with the pointy teeth -- she owns the key to my heart. I call her McGoogles."

"Until you call an exterminator," Remus adds hopefully.

"I am wounded," Sirius says, patting his chest. "If you love me, you will love my pestilence."

"Everything we love about you is pestilent," James says, and then suddenly leaps upright and shrieks, "what in the name of God is that?!"

"It's Hector!" Sirius explains, sounding very pleased. "Wotcher, Hector?"

Remus looks down. Hector is not a cockroach; Hector is something like a small dog, or a large rodent, but clearly cockroachian in shape. Hector does have extremely sizeable mandibles. Hector might also have horns, and a small country of vile diseases living peaceably on his shiny, cockroachian back. Hector surveys them all very impassively from a dark corner, chewing on what could be a sock, or a small, dead rodent. James flees without dignity to the couch and huddles into the pillows, staring at it in undisguised horror.

"You're hurting his feelings," Sirius says. "They're not always like this, Hector. Don't worry about it. They'll get used to you."

"It's enormous," James whispers, trembling. Hector swivels its head to regard him coolly and click-trundles from

one far corner to the next, and then plods back under the couch. "Sirius, you have to get rid of it."

"No!" Sirius says, genuinely shocked. "He's like my own personal guard dog. I think he scares the fleas off."

"He makes the fleas flee," Peter says, mostly to himself, and cackles.

"Besides," Sirius adds, "Ophelia would pine."

"This flat should be condemned," Remus says. "Sirius, you are friendly with cockroaches."

"An attitude like that and you won't be," Sirius points out. He pats a bundle of blankets on the cushion next to him. "Have a seat, Moony. Do flat-ly things."

"He always does things flatly," Peter murmurs into his chest.

"Save me," James says, crawling up onto the arm of the couch, at Peter's back.

"Wotcher, Sirius," Hector says, in a crunchy voice, which echoes beneath the couch and sounds, Remus is sure of it, like death must when the end comes nigh.

"Never a dull moment," Remus sighs, and gets more pudding.

"And there we have it," Sirius says, hanging the last of the ornaments. "Our very own tree. Doesn't it smell fresh and -- pinelike?" The few candles he has arranged wink on and off, hovering around the tree, casting a dull glow over a few silver globes and the occasional warped, lopsided decorations that were lovingly handcrafted out of depressed clay during Sirius' formative -- and obviously impressionist -- years. Childhood memories, Remus thinks, are often very hideous, and have strange sequins and bobble-eyes glued on in unfortunate places.

Sirius sets the top piece -- it looks, Remus thinks, like a confused hippogriff mating with a swan -- in its place and gives the tree a gentle, loving sort of kick at the base. It shudders, wobbles, threatens to pitch backwards, and instead leans just slightly to the left. There is something more than a bit pathetic about the droop of its tip, the spindly crookedness of its branches, the patchy insecurity of its brown-green color, but Sirius appears to be enchanted.

"Fa la la la la," he sighs, pushing its star back square atop it, "la la la *la*. So how shall we celebrate?"

"No more eating," Peter moans, twitching. "Please, Sirius. No more eating."

"There is always more eating!" Sirius rounds on him, eyes alight with fanatic devotion. "This is what Marauders do. We eat and eat and eat."

"And are sick all over the decorations," Remus murmurs. No one hears him.

"Nnghhf," Peter says. Remus watches him disappear into the sofa. No doubt Hector is waiting just beneath a tear in

the base, mandibles spread wide.

"We could do presents," James suggests. "Or not," he adds, as Remus cringes inwardly.

"Or," Sirius interjects, a wicked little gleam appearing in his eye, "we could talk about presents. Like, say, the presents for a certain redheaded someone that a certain shortsighted someone tried to put discreetly in the post the other day."

"You didn't," James says. This, Remus thinks, is the perfect picture of holiday cheer. James' eyes bugging out of his head, and abject horror in the round O of his mouth. All he needs are pointier ears, green hose and shoes with curled toes and he's the spitting image of a chipper elf, ready to bring socks, hand-knit sweaters and lumps of coal to all the bad little boys and girls at Christmastime. "You didn't," James says again, which is of course ridiculous, as it's painfully clear Sirius *did*.

"James, lad," Sirius says, clapping him on the shoulder, "it was the sort of present even *Moony* wouldn't dream of giving."

"I know what *not* to give *girls*," Remus agrees, then adds, "sorry."

"But it was cute?" James murmurs helplessly.

"Atrocious," Sirius informs him.

"Terrible," Remus echoes.

"Bleurgh," Peter finishes.

"But it *was*," James groans. "Oh God. And now it's gone off to her and she's going to open it and send me owl post right away. 'James Potter,' it will say, 'I want nothing to do with your teddy bear sentiments!'"

"James," Sirius says, with fond exasperation, "what kind of friend do you think I am? It hasn't gone in the post. It's in the tank of the toilet. I swear, sometimes trying to save you from yourself is an exhausting exercise in futility. My question is, why were you sending her a present anyway? If you want to be humiliated, we could just string you up naked outside the window with a Christmas wreath on your bits."

"Yeah," Peter agrees. "I mean, doesn't she just hate you?"

"She," James starts, and his eyes go sideways a little and then slide back. He looks, for once in his entire Boys Club life, a little uncertain. "It's a bit...well. I thought...teddy bear?"

"Yeats was better," Remus says. He shakes his head -- *it's too late now*. "Yeats was much to be preferred."

"He's right, you know," Sirius sighs. "For once."

"It's different," James attempts, staring at the ceiling with, apparently, great interest. "Now, I mean. It's different. She knows me a little. I know her a little. I'd feel an arse, trying to pretend I'm a -- I don't know -- *Yeats* bloke.

You're a Yeats bloke, Moony. Kingsley was an abdominal bloke. I'm not a Yeats bloke *or* an abdominal bloke."

"And yet you think you are a pink teddy bear bloke?" Sirius protests. "It said 'I Think You're Beary Wonderful' on its little satin pillow. There was lace. It had button eyes. I don't understand you anymore."

"It didn't," Remus says, looking horrified.

"It *did*," Sirius assures him.

"It didn't!" James protests, turning a shade of red that can only signify how very much it did indeed.

"Oh, James," Remus sighs.

"It isn't like you're any better," James mutters. "*Books*. Pah! Besides -- it was private! It didn't say 'To Sirius Black' on the package, now did it?"

Sirius shrugs. "You put it in the post. You left it unattended. It might as well've said *To Old Dumbles* for all you let it fall into dangerous hands."

"*Your* dangerous hands!" James explodes, quivering like a fervent pudding. Sirius wiggles his fingers. "That was private," James insists. "From -- from -- well, d'you see, I think we're -- Lily and me -- well it's not like we *aren't*--"

Sirius darkens suddenly, a brief flash of something hard and angry in his eyes, then tosses his head back with a deep laugh. "Oh, James," he says, "oh, *James* -- she's left Kingsley for you, has she? He'll squash you like a rodent -- whoops, sorry about that, Pete, mate -- like a bug, then. Like a teeny, tiny, very-squashy bug. Not like one of *my* bugs. Like a bug that goes squish and has no mandibles at all." He elaborates with one shoe and an unappealing squelching noise out of the corner of his mouth.

"She hasn't left him for me," James says, shoving his hands into his pockets. "She's done a runner a while ago. She's not with me. Or him. I just -- sometimes, it's almost -- almost *better* than last time, I mean--"

"James!" Sirius wheels on him, derisive and sharp, all edges. "It's *never going to happen*. It's humiliating, watching you! I'm tired of it! They're tired of it!--aren't you?"

"Oh," Peter says nervously, "I don't know--"

"Of course you don't," Sirius says, dismissing him. "Look, Prongs, I don't see why you can't just stop it. There's other birds! There's birds who might actually not punch you in the face! Every time you get around her or you get in one of your mopes about her you stop being any fun at all. It's embarrassing, mate."

"Hey," James says, a little bit too sharply, "all right, okay? I didn't ask you."

"Of course you didn't," Sirius says bitterly. "I should have just let you send the bloody bear."

"Here, now," Remus says quietly, abandoning the instinct to *stay out of it* for the instinct to *have one Christmas without suffering any major casualties*.

"Keep out of it, Moony," Sirius bites out.

"Don't bother," James snaps.

Peter gives Remus a look that says, *Come, join me on the couch of impartiality*. Or perhaps it says *I have had too much pudding*. There's a fine line between the two sentiments. Remus shrugs. "All right," he says.

"It's got nothing to do with you," Sirius mutters.

"It's got nothing to do with *you*," James flings at him.

"It's got *everything* to do with me!" Sirius says. "Don't look at me like that -- I'm your best bloody mate, *that's* why it does!"

"This is ridiculous," James says.

Inwardly, Remus agrees, but inspects the cuticle of his right forefinger and gnaws just slightly at a loose piece of skin. The cockroaches -- Remus imagines the great, tusky beasts deep within the walls -- are clearly growing agitated, as the windows are rattling. *Do something*, Remus thinks to himself. *Fix things*. And then: *it isn't your place, you keep your big nose out of it*. He chews on his nail. He shifts uncomfortably. He looks at Peter, who has closed his eyes and is whistling a happy tune. He ponders Christmas at home -- his perfumed aunts, their quiet disapproval, having to hide in the bathroom to escape the madness of family. This is almost like the madness of family, he supposes. They've all been living together long enough. In the boys' dormitory it was different. Now, Sirius has a flat. Now, they feel drunk on age and their own pudding. Now, they have their own tree.

Now, they are *bickering*.

Only Remus can't very well go hide in the bathroom, because he'll be eaten alive by untrained mistletoe with a jovial, wicked glint in their ruby-red eyes.

"D'you know what I think?" Remus says, interrupting one of Sirius' tirades on how he never wants to hear another word on the virtues of the redheaded female contingent of the planet.

Sirius quiets immediately. James simply boggles.

Peter salutes him, but pityingly, as if to say his last goodbye.

"I think," Remus says, taking a deep breath, "that a teddy bear is an absolutely *awful* present, especially one that attempts a pun, but it's *James'* absolutely awful present, isn't it? In any case, let's have at me for a while, shall we, because I bought everyone books again. And I wrapped them neatly. And they've Cards with Kind Sentiments."

There is a very long, very silent moment.

"I think he's trying to distract us," Sirius says, nudging James's elbow. "Go on. Don't let him. Where were we?"

"You were up to 'I don't care'," Peter says helpfully. "That's what you were saying. Again."

"Do any of them have moving pictures?" James inquires of Remus, ignoring him.

"No," Remus says. "No, there are no pictures and they smell of wet bread and have words like 'zeitgeist' in them. They ask you to consider the social constructs of a pre-Merlin society versus the post-Merlin times we live in today. They compare Muggle history with Wizarding history. They have dates and footnotes."

"You never learn." James shakes his head sadly and makes a face. "I tried to teach you, but you'll never learn."

"Look," Sirius suggests tangling his hand into his hair, "why don't I just haul off and punch you one, like the good old days? This is silly. Then we can have my eggnog."

"You made eggnog?" Remus asks.

"Welllll," Sirius says carefully, "eggs, anyway. With brandy in them. I couldn't find a recipe and I don't have any nutmeg or rum. Or cinnamon? Or what-have-you. Besides, you know how I am with *recipes*. James, stop hopping, I never get you in the face."

"You're the one who should be punched," James says. He pauses, then sighs, toeing the rolled-up carpet and the dusty, scuffed wood beneath. "All right. It was a bad present. I'm sorry I don't have anything else to talk about. I am toenail dirt. What-have-you. Can we just get drunk and put ice down Pete's trousers and wake up in the morning with headaches and presents and Pete here with wet trousers?"

Sorry, Remus' eyes try to convey, across the room, to where Peter is sprawled. Peter shrugs listlessly. They do it at least once a year, anyway. To let them quarrel would simply postpone the inevitable.

"All right," Sirius says, after only a moment's deliberation. "Eggnog, then. Noggy eggs. Eggs that are somewhat nogged."

"We will have food poisoning," Remus murmurs.

"We will have egg noggining," Sirius corrects.

"Pardon," Remus says. "We will be nogged by your eggs."

"I've no idea what either of you are talking about," James pipes in gamely. "Let's all be sick on Sirius' terrifying homemaking skills, shall we?"

"*Jolly* good," Sirius says. "When you're throwing up, think fondly of me." And then, he clocks James a good one on his shoulder. It's affectionate, Remus thinks, but not without aggression. "All in the name of Christmas Spirit," Sirius adds, "eh?"

Well, Remus thinks, something like that, anyway.

Sirius has made four mugs of hot chocolate by five-thirty in the morning. On any other day it would be odd for Remus to walk into the kitchen before sunrise and see Sirius, already at the stove, burning things -- eggs, Remus *thinks* -- but this is Christmas morning. This is where all the magic happens. This is the only day of any vacation where Sirius wakes up before it's already the afternoon. "Ow, fuck," Sirius says, trying to kill his eggs with a spatula. "Bugger all this -- here, Moony, give me a hand, my eggs are dying twice."

"I've had enough of your eggs for one lifetime," Remus groans. After a night of being ill from Sirius' eggnog, the idea of eggs, the smell of eggs, even the possibility of murdering eggs, make him queasy all over again.

"Get over here," Sirius brushes him off, motioning him over. "I am *fantastic* with sandwiches," he adds, poking sadly at the black-and-yellow mess in front of him, a hissing, quivering ball in the very center of his frying pan. "I make the world's most fantastic sandwich and you know it. Yum. Let's have sandwiches for breakfast instead."

Remus shuffles over, peers into the pan, and makes a pained face. "That looks dreadful," he says. He helps Sirius scrape the egg glop into the trash. "Was there butter in the pan?"

"Oh," Sirius scoffs, "Moony! 'Was there butter?' says he. 'Ha!' says I. *Was there butter*. There was enough butter in there for all the merry Hippogriffs and the four of us." As if to illustrate his point, he goes at the butter with a knife. Remus leaps at his arm, holding him back.

"Wash the pan," Remus instructs. "Are you sure you want eggs?" Sirius makes his dog eyes, the ones that wobble, the ones that look impossibly ridiculous, the ones that Remus can't resist. "All right! All right. Eggs. Happy Christmas. Your stomach must be made of pewter."

"Like a cauldron," Sirius says proudly, patting his belly. "Ding, ding!"

With a shrug, Remus satisfies himself with the knowledge that, one day, when Sirius' intestines have shut down completely, and he has to eat lettuce and grains that taste like carpeting for all eternity, he'll realize the error of his ways. "Eggs, then," Remus murmurs. He doles out the butter, watching it sizzle across the surface of the frying pan while he pokes at it with Sirius' spatula.

"Well it's not a *slug*, Moony," Sirius says, watching. "Stop poking at it."

"It melts faster," Remus points out. "In any case, you're the one who asked for *my* help."

"I didn't exactly *ask*," Sirius says, but quiets.

Remus turns to the eggs, aware that Sirius is breathing down the back of his neck. *Don't over-think it*, Remus tries to tell himself. *You know how to crack an egg*.

"No pressure," Sirius says. "Remember that, Moony, old chap."

"Oh, be quiet," Remus mutters. He knocks the egg against the side of the pan and the egg slides neatly in. "There."

"You look so *smug* when you look so smug." Sirius grins. "Makes your lips go all lopsided."

"Do you want eggs or not?" Remus asks, trying to remain reasonable.

"I'm getting to you, aren't I? Aren't I, Moony?" Sirius grins. "You'll forgive me when you see what I've got you for Christmas. You'll lavish me with eggs and forgiveness." Remus sighs, but knows that this is probably very true. Sirius, despite his loud bouts of selfishness and many thoughtless accidents, is the sort of person who knows exactly what to get everyone. It's a gift, something you can't learn, something you have to be born with. Sirius can look at a person, male or female or undecided, and know within an instant the perfect gift, the right flowers, the exact brand of chocolate. It's uncanny. Remus has often harbored secret plans to divine the root of this power, but has in the long run settled for being awkward and jealous about it. "Oh, how you will beat your chest, weeping at the cruelty of your callous actions -- oh, how you will mourn these unkind words!"

"Hm," Remus says, dubiously.

"No, you've no idea," Sirius insists. "In fact I think you should open it now."

"I'm making eggs," Remus reminds him.

"Bugger the eggs," Sirius says. "Come see your present."

"James and Peter are still sleeping off the effects of your noggy eggs," Remus says. "We ought to wait."

"You're not right," Sirius exclaims in disbelief. "*Early Christmas presents*, man! What's wrong with you? For the sake of all that is wrapped in shiny paper, for your undying soul, forget about the eggs and come see what's under the tree?"

Remus sighs the deep sigh of a man who knew from the beginning he could not hope to win, and turns off the flame. Poor eggs, he thinks. Never had a chance.

"All right," he says. "But I'm telling you right now my presents are awful. I think Peter threw up on his last night, in any case."

"We gave up on you long ago," Sirius informs him. "We all had a meeting without you and decided that, even though you give the most awful presents in the history of the world, we'd keep you around because your face is funny. Hah! Look, there it goes now. Being funny. All right, this one is yours." Sirius roots around underneath the tree and comes up with pine needles in his hair and a huge box in his arms, which he thrusts outward at Remus' chest. Remus staggers back under the unexpected weight of it.

"Oooph," he says.

"Open it open it open it," Sirius insists, before flinging himself on the couch to watch. "Go on! Tear at it! You don't have to save the paper, Moony, it's *paper*, it was born to be ripped apart. Stop that, it's depressing how neat you're being!"

"I can't help it," Remus says, rather nervously. It's heavy, the paper, golden and glossed and looks like it could have

been used to cover the walls in someone's grand ballroom. He lifts it up neatly, untucks it from the box, and sets it carefully on the pillow beside him, whereupon Sirius promptly puts his feet on it. *Crunch*, goes the paper. *Crunch*, goes something beneath Remus' spleen. He tries to ignore it.

Underneath, the box is heavy, ornate, dark-threaded wood, carved in an intricate spiral pattern. Sirius is looking particularly gleeful; Remus eyes him. "Is this evil, Sirius?"

"Evil?" Sirius asks innocently.

"Did it come from your family's basement?" Remus turns it over, weighs it between his hands; there's a certain geometric gravitas about it that makes him suspect it would probably sell for more than his family's house would. It is the perfect size in which to store all the extra books that don't fit on the expandable shelf he has by his bed at school. Remus feels awkward and jealous and irritated.

Sirius rolls his eyes. "For the sake of the holiday, Moony, would you please try not to be so distrustful? It's hurtful. Christmas is about giving."

"Yes," Remus mutters, "giving me some kind of full-body rash," but sighs and flips the heavy lock anyway, inevitably, and creaks the lid open.

Side to side, back to front, the box is packed with every imaginable variety of chocolate. Dark, sweet, dangerously rich ones that leave your tongue feeling drenched and coated with velvet, and the light, creamy buttery milk-chocolate ones bursting with almonds or cashews, and the honeyed smell of caramel from a gold-swirled stack in the left corner; frothy, delicate mallow-filled bars on which the thin shell hasn't even been cracked, and fresh, dark minty chocolates striped cleanly with green, and dark, luscious things that Remus cannot begin to identify; and none of the horrifying space-fillers that mar even the most sublime assortments -- no tongue-coating strawberry horrors or the vile misnomer that is white chocolate. Remus wants to cry.

"Do you like it," Sirius presses, "do you do you do you huh?" Remus' face pinches inward to the center, a deep concentration that Sirius must recognize all too well as *The Way Moony Gets When Moony Finds Himself At A Loss*. Sirius lets out a low sound of triumph, pumping the air with his fist. "Where is it?" Sirius asks, grinning like a madman. "Where is it, eh? It's been ten seconds, Moony -- where's it gone to, the *thank you kindly* and the *it's so good of you, you shouldn't have* and the *please sir, may I have some more?*"

"Don't ruin it," Remus mumbles. "Just be quiet." He runs his fingers helplessly over the edge of the box, and breathes in deep the jumbled scents. There's something fruity, and something like layers upon layers of cocoa, something cold and crisp like mint but just the right balance, and something like cream, and something like coffee, and something that has the soft inner curl of caramel. There's pistachio, and almond, and a variety of nutty delight that comes one from every corner and then the simple delicacy of chocolate so pure his heart constricts and his stomach lurches in pleasure. Where does it come from, he pauses to wonder, this love of chocolate, this veritable obsession? Everyone has a favorite food, he supposes, something that tickles an untraceable fingerprint of personality somewhere deep inside their bellies. Chocolate is a comfort. Chocolate is the essence of luxury; silks and satins for the tongue. *But why chocolate?* he asks himself. *The way you are about it -- it's lunatic, you know.*

"It's lunatic, you know," Sirius says.

Remus startles.

When he was a little boy -- when he woke up after a week of denying himself pain and confusion -- when the wolf bit him and for the first time he saw his father's face with a thousand other instincts behind the sight, none of which he recognized as his own -- his mother handed him a bar of chocolate and gave him a sad look, her face also pinched inwards, as if words could never give voice to what it was she felt, and what it was she was trying so fervently to hide. Eating it for breakfast, he thought the entire world was about to end, and this was his mother's way of telling him. He got to eat *chocolate* for *breakfast*. And still, the oddity wasn't enough to drown out the flood of sensation: tasting with a new tongue, a world of sense unfolding, and the beginning traced back to that moment.

"Go on," Sirius says, with a new tone now. Remus looks over to find his head is bowed -- he isn't looking, not quite, but the curiosity in his posture is as real and as tangible as they are, as if it is another person, sitting between them on the couch. "You can have it. For breakfast. I know it goes against all you hold dear but it's bloody Christmas and you're practically *drooling*."

"What about the eggs," Remus attempts, but he can feel himself giving in.

"Bugger the eggs," Sirius says. "Not literally. Go on. Pick one."

It feels like a psychological test of some kind; like caramel will reveal to Sirius that Remus is a closet hairdresser, or the thick, lumpy, alluring drizzle that may contain raisins will be an indicator of a deep-seated Oedipal complex. It's too unnerving. There are too many.

"What do you think?" he appeals.

Sirius winks at him. "You know me. One of the dark ones."

Remus takes one, gingerly, like he's holding a precious artifact. It's cool and smooth and has the slight slick-powder sheen of really incredible chocolate under his thumbs. It's also *heavy*. He almost groans aloud. "Sirius, how much did this cost?"

Sirius shrugs a little uncomfortably, his hair swinging forward over his eyes. "Who cares? It's not my money."

"Sirius, if you spent half the money on rent that you spend on presents--"

Sirius sits up, very suddenly, and slams his palm over Remus's mouth, touching his forehead against Remus's in a kind of irritated benediction. "Moony. Just. Leave it, all right? Just eat the candy."

Remus' breath hitches.

It isn't particularly pleasant, to have one's breath hitch. It isn't like they make it out to be in writing. Later, Remus realizes it was a hiccup. He nods, slowly, tasting the egg on Sirius' palm, breathing in the hundred scents of his fingers. It's an assault on his senses.

"I'd eat the chocolate if you'd get your hand off my mouth," he says.

It comes out like: *Ah ee uh oh-eh ih oo eh oh ah oh ah owwh.*

"Right," Sirius says, wheeling back. "Go on."

"You're *watching* me," Remus protests.

"I know," Sirius replies. "It's lunatic, you know."

Remus sighs, straightens, pauses for a moment of meditation to clear his mind, licks his lips nervously, and bites in. Deep. Hard. Cool. This isn't the sort of chocolate you sit on for a train ride to soften and get all over your fingertips. It's the sort of chocolate you dedicate yourself to -- it's the sort of chocolate you dream about. It shaves off around his teeth and he gets half of it into his mouth, poised on his tongue, resting just against his upper gums. Just chocolate. One of the dark ones. It tastes like the renaissance. He sucks it, drawing it meltingly against his tongue and back into his throat.

"Aghk," Sirius says.

Remus doesn't notice.

This isn't the sort of chocolate that allows interruptions of any kind. This is the sort of chocolate that demands your full attention. It requires complete and absolute concentration. It melts all the way down the back of his throat and into a soft spot, thick and warm in the middle of his belly.

Remus presses his thumb against the corner of his mouth and sighs a chocolate breath outward. He can feel it in his pores, huffed out through his nose, a religious experience, an epiphany.

"*God*," he whispers.

"Lunatic," Sirius mumbles.

"Silky," Remus says, idiotically. "It's silky." He runs his tongue along the backs of his teeth, richness on richness.

"You've been nogged," Sirius says knowledgeably. "Chocolate-nogged. I can see it in your eyes. All right, Moony, stop...licking yourself. It's distracting. Did I do all right?"

"All right?" Remus stares at him incredulously, smearing his thumb across his cheek to get the last streak he can feel there. "It's...Sirius, you know. It's just...I mean...it's *always* -- you know."

"All right, I do," Sirius rumbles peacefully, flopping backward. "I know because I ate about fifty of them when I bought them. For your own safety, don't. I know it's tempting, but just -- don't."

"And I got you a book," Remus mumbles, lowering his head to breathe in that excruciatingly delicious miasma of smells. "A book. I don't understand how you can possibly be around me without wanting to punch me."

"You're not fun to punch," Sirius explains. "You don't make amusing noises. I think you'd just deflate. James, on the other hand -- oh, the screaming! Fantastic. So how about it, then? Happy Christmas? In spite of Hector and the

mistletoe and the no furniture and the nogging? All of which you should get used to, by the way, because that way lie the Christmases of the future."

"I like it," Remus says quietly. "Don't tell Sirius, I'll never live it down."

"This Sirius bloke," Sirius says, shaking his head. "What an arse."


"Excellent with presents, though," Remus points out.

"*Spectacular*," Sirius agrees.

"Uncanny," Remus finishes.

"You lunatic," Sirius says, and grins, and ruffles Remus' hair. From somewhere beneath the couch, Hector's mandibles creek something merry. It is, Remus thinks, and then amends -- well, it *was* a good night.

Cowritten by  [dorkorific](#) and  [ladyjaida](#).



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

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

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

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

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

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

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project