

**Part Six**  
*Christmas, 1975*

"Whatever are you doing, Sirius?"

It is Christmas, and the school is full to the brim of it: full of the rich green smell of pine in the hallways and the dining room, of the sparkle of golden lights in the garden and flitting about the classrooms, of the echo of notes in the vast towers as those students too merry to hold in their mood burst spontaneously into carols. Sirius is no less affected, and this, in addition to end-of-term giddiness, has sent him skipping through the halls, brandishing a sprig of mistletoe and a set of jingle bells, and leaving a trail of dizzy, giggling, flushed underclassmen girls in his wake. Remus stumbles on him in the midst of a particularly passionate interlude with a fourth-year Ravenclaw named Tansy. When Sirius sees him over his partner's golden head, he gives the bells a final little shake and pulls away, dumping Tansy rather unceremoniously to the side. She gives a dazed, euphoric little hiccup and runs a shaking hand through her hair. Remus lifts an eyebrow.

"Oh, another victim," Sirius says happily, striding towards him and lifting up the mistletoe with a charming smile and an inviting shake of his bells. "Please? Just one little kiss? Jesus would want you to." *Jingle jingle jingle.*

"Blergh," says Remus with a shudder, and ducks out of range. "I won't let you tempt me into depravity and debauchery. Go away."

"Yes, all right," Sirius say, his cheer unflagging, and Remus could swear he actually skips away. Remus has never seen Sirius skip. He's never seen anyone in combat boots skip, come to think of it, and is vaguely impressed at the leg strength it probably requires.

Not one to feel like a grouchy Christmas stealer, Remus heads down soon after to the Great Hall, wary of the traps set in waylay. For anyone else, Christmastime means good cheer at every turn. For the students of Hogwarts, letting one's guard down means instant ambush by one of the many sprigs of mistletoe planted throughout the castle. Looking nervously above him, scanning the ceilings for any sign of the spiny green plant, Remus nearly falls over his feet three times on the stairs and twice more in the hallway before he reaches the Great Hall.

The room is full of light and laughter, smelling of pine and cakes and sugar dusted cookies. James and Peter are settled into their corner, and Remus heads in their direction, instead of allowing himself to watch Sirius' capers -- three girls pressed into the fireplace, looking like deer in the headlights more than willing participants in Sirius' yearly ploy.

"At least he's enjoying himself," James says at the expression on Remus' face.

"Oh, yes. He has the Christmas spirit in him," Peter agrees.

"It can only end in tragedy," Remus points out, settling down. "Please tell me you're up to something that doesn't involve frolicsome revelries."

"Oh no," Peter says virtuously. "We've been doing schoolwork."

Remus steals a glance at James, who is gazing off into the middle distance with a glazed expression. He's seen that look before, a thousand times. It can only mean one thing. "By which, no doubt, you meant 'spying on Lily Evans?'"

Peter sighs. "Actually, I meant 'Watching people snog and laughing at them,' but only because she's been upstairs. Oops. Shouldn't have let that slip."

James starts up with a bang, a purposeful expression on his face, and Remus and Peter automatically put their hands on his arms and force him back down again.

"Let go!" James protests, struggling. "Where's your Christmas spirit?"

"You can't force the magic of Christmas on everyone, you know," Remus says grimly, not giving an inch. "There might not even be any mistletoe over there."

James pauses at this, brain working out a quick solution, then exclaims, "I'll borrow Padfoot's!" and redoubles his escape efforts.

"Stop!" Peter gasps, hanging on doggedly. "He won't lend it you, he's awfully busy -- Remus, help, he's out of control!"

"She'll clobber you," Remus says logically. His steely grip around James' wrist helps. "She'll clobber you like she always clobbers you, and in front of people."

"But it's *Christmas*," James whines. He sits back down, sullen, and sets himself to cleaning his glasses. "Some friends you lot are."

"It's for your own health, James," Peter explains. "Really. The last time she knocked you on the side of your head and it turned all purple for *weeks*!"

"I remember." James' expression is dour, dark. "She's inexplicable, really. Everything she does -- completely inexplicable."

If Remus knew his friend any less he would launch into an explanation of just how sensible Ms. Lily Evans is, given the evidence. But being sensible himself, he gives James an awkward pat on the back, instead. "Who knows," he says. "It's Christmas. She might be feeling charitable. No, no, that didn't come out right. What I mean is, there's mistletoe everywhere. And if you're caught underneath it -- and there's a very good chance you might be -- then, well, there's luck for you. Luck provides." Though James' expression

brightens considerably, Remus feels as if he's just sentence Lily Evans to public humiliation.

"And what luck won't provide," James adds.

"You can't follow her around anymore," Remus warns. "Remember? She's on to you. I don't know how she's figured it -- it could be a spell or something. But she'll know, if you trail her."

"I'm not going to *trail* her," James scoffs. Peter rolls his eyes behind James' back. "I'm just going to help luck along a little bit."

"Oh dear," Remus says.

James gets up, shrugging their hands off him. "I'm for the toilets -- don't want to be all musty when Lady Luck gives me my due."

"Oh, dear," Remus says again, and sighs, getting to his feet. "I'm going with you. You simply cannot be trusted."

"I can too!" James says, properly affronted, and then, very loudly, "Oh no, *please*, Remus, go on in front of me! The stair can't possibly be wide enough for three people, and I would hate to barge inconsiderately ahead."

Remus glances up. This can't be James Potter in his right mind talking. There has to be a reason -- ah. Lily Evans is coming down the stairs the other way, bathrobe-clad and looking resigned. She gives Remus a Look and rolls her eyes very expressively, which Remus feels deeply even from all the way across the room. Remus's head hurts with the effort of not nodding his emphatic agreement.

James makes an obsequious motion with his head and steps on Remus's foot. "Go," he hisses.

Remus sighs and starts up the stairs. Lily flattens herself against the wall to let him go by, offering him a Prefect's All-In-This-Together kind of smile, or at least informing him she doesn't blame him for the inanities of his inane friends. Remus indulges in a grateful smile until the loud, horrible, spiny-green voice above their heads squalls "WELL, SURPRISE, SURPRISE! SOMEONE'S ABOUT TO GET A HECK OF A CHRISTMAS PRESENT!"

"What?" Remus says, bewildered.

"What?" Evans gasps, shooting a panic-stricken look at Remus.

"WHAT?!" James yelps from behind them, sounding more horrified than the two of them put together.

Remus has never had to wonder what mistletoe is like outside of the wizarding world -- a cheerful sprig or two of green flora, dangling harmlessly from above the doorway, a humorous, quaint tradition that no one ever *has* to follow. Not so with mistletoe in Hogwarts. Remus, part Muggle and more used to the Muggle world even now, wonders if the school mistletoe -- complete with snapping sharp teeth and a voice grating as sandpaper -- is one of Dumbledore's inventions, or simply a warped wizarding take on a Muggle convention.

"Oh, dear," Remus says for the third time.

"PUCKER UP," the mistletoe howls, with sadistic glee. "GIVE THE REDHEAD A GOOD SMOOCH FOR ME OR I'LL BITE OFF YOUR NOSE."

James' face is the color of nice, summer-ripe tomatoes. Lily has flushed in an attractive, nearly devious way. A small crowd has gathered and Remus can just make out Peter's head amongst the curious onlookers, a pained little knot furrowing his low brow.

"Well, now, Remus," Lily says. "Isn't this lucky?"

Remus has stopped looking at James, the expression worse than the color, which is gradually shifting towards fuschia. "Er," Remus says. It sounds like 'erk.'

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?" the mistletoe demands. "TEN SECONDS. NINE. EIGHT. SIX. TWO."

Remus will be lucky if dungbombs are the only retaliatory tactic James employs. Heaving a great sigh, feeling more than a little nervous in the center of his stomach, he squeezes his eyes shut and leans forward. "Sorry," he murmurs through his puckered lips, "I've never--"

"Don't worry," Lily whispers against him, "I have. Make it a good one just for James, eh, Remus?"

"LESS TALK!" the plant shrieks. "MORE SALIVA! OR ELSE!"

Remus shrugs helplessly, at James, at Lily, at the enormous stormcloud rapidly gathering over James's beet-red brow.

"Shh," Lily says gently. "I like your nose; I'd hate for you to lose it." And she leans up, small terrycloth-wrapped body purposeful and languid, and presses her mouth gently to his.

Remus is paying too much attention to his own blood pressure to really analyze what kind of kiss it is in any fashion, but all in all, he thinks, it's probably kind of okay, as Lily makes a pleased little noise and moves against him, all curves and quiescence, and Remus is pretty sure he's about ten seconds away from being stabbed to death. It must *look* fantastic, at the very least. And Lily's attractive; Remus has often thought so, though clinically. One

of her soft girl hands comes up to smooth over his cheekbone, tangling itself in his hair. There is a muffled screech from behind them and a laugh that is definitely Sirius's, and then Lily finally pulls off, gazing intently at him with wide, innocent green eyes.

"That was *lovely*," she says, with great depth of feeling. "Thank you."

"Erk," Remus says, chokes, and tries again. "Er. No. Thank you."

"Anytime," she whispers, throatily, pecks him on the cheek, and sashays off down the stairs.

Remus risks a glance at James, who is a violent shade of purple at this point: Sirius has him pinned with a hand over his mouth, and favors Remus with a huge wink and a mouthed Well done you.

"THERE NOW," the mistletoe blares. "THAT WASN'T SO BAD, WAS IT??"

"Right," Remus says. He swallows, hard, and nearly fills his throat with his own tongue. "These stairs are *definitely* hereby closed."

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"You've got to give it a rest, mate." Sirius lounges with his feet propped up on the tea table, mistletoe dangling over one eye. "You've scared Remus off somewhere, he's nowhere to be found for all the mistletoe fun--"

"I should think he's had enough 'mistletoe fun'," James glowers.

"Yes, yes, but jealousy is so unbecoming." Sirius waves an idle hand. "Stop looking so sour. Your face is going to freeze that way."

"Or worse," Peter adds. "Slytherins could see you."

"*Snivellus* could see you." Sirius shudders. "Think of the little thrill, straight to his loins, if he saw you looking like the plague. No. No! I'll not have it." Sirius snaps his mistletoe in half, cringing at its howl of displeasure, and offers the smaller bit to James. "Have a go at it, what d'you say? Just for an hour or two. Excellent exercise in the chasing, excellent practice for the future, and excellent fun all around. And I'll tell you what, Peter," he continues, offering the bigger half, as well, "you can go carousing and having it on with the womenfolk whilst I appropriate for myself some sustenance for my next round this evening, and when I return James here won't look like he's from last night's takeaway."

"You've got lipstick on your nose," James says morosely.

Sirius frowns and goes cross-eyed searching out the culprit. "Have I? Spoils of war, I

suppose. Go on, both of you! Go have yourselves a Merry Little, and so on. You make me want to retch!" With one last lecherous wink he skips out of the room, singing "God Rest Ye Merry Gryffindors" in disgustingly cheerful tones.

"I hate him," James says moodily, watching Sirius plant an unsolicited smack atop the head of Frank Longbottom as he departs. "I wish he would lose an arm, or something. He ruins Christmas for everyone. We should lock him up forever."

"Cheer up," Peter says, feeling rather helpless. "Look, do you want to get out of here? We could go under the cloak and throw things at Rabastan Lestrangle, that always makes you feel better."

"It's no use, Wormtail," James says. He heaves an enormous sigh communicating all the world-weariness that has tumbled onto his sixteen-year-old shoulders. "I am crippled by Love!" He slumps backward into his chair with a dazed expression that presumably, in his head, passes for Romantically Tragic. Peter wonders if love is always supposed to look like it's been smashed over the head with a History of Magic textbook. Probably not. "And betrayed, as well," James adds. "Crippled *and* betrayed."

"I think we should go -- James, we should go do something. Anything. You can't sit around here and sulk forever."

"I want to die, Petey. Why can't you just let me die?"

"Bother," Peter says. The situation is becoming desperate. "It isn't that awful. Hup, come on!" Instead of taking every no for an answer, he grabs James's limp hand and tries to tug him out of his chair. James resists with a tragic little moan. Peter pulls -- James yanks back -- when all of a sudden, as a result of the fray, their fists knock together, each one clutching half a sprig of mistletoe.

"OH HO HO HO HO!"

Peter freezes. James looks panicked.

"WHAT HAVE WE HERE?" the twin mistletoe voices cackle in unison.

"DECK THE HALLS WITH BOUGHS OF HOLLY," James' shrieks. "FA LA LA LA LA, KISS 'IM NOW."

"TIS THE SEASON TO BE JOLLY," Peter's continues. "TAKE YOUR TIME AND WE'LL TELL YOUR SUPERIORS."

"I don't have any luck," James says. "I don't have any luck at all."

"Let's get this over with," Peter whispers. "Before anyone sees."

James looks Peter up and down. He's a short boy, small, with funny blondish hair and average features, on the overweight side but that could be the remnants of childhood not yet fallen off him. James rarely ever gets any good looks at him at all, just knows him by his presence and takes him, as he sometimes takes all his friends, for granted -- knowing he'll turn around and find one of them nearby, knowing they'll be there to eat every meal with him, knowing he can look down from the whip of wind during a Quidditch match and see their tiny faces rooting for him, but not ever needing to look at them for all he *knows* them. It's comforting, to feel them more than see them. It's disorienting to face Peter now, and wonder how the devil you go about kissing one of your mates. One of your male mates.

"One, two, three," James says. The kiss is quick and clumsy and a little wet.

"Blech," Peter says, making a big show of it. "Grgh. Gross."

James wipes his lips with the back of his hand. "Ugh," he agrees.

"FA LA LA LA LA LA," the mistletoes chorus. "LA LA HA HA."

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Sirius careens down the hall in a jingling half-jog, filled to bursting with that peculiar overwhelming Christmas joy: some combination of cinnamon and pine-smells, and lights, and music with bells in, and the strains of choirs. He loves it. Sometimes he wakes up in October full of music thinking about it. The shrieks of the mistletoe echoing down the hallways -- well, thinks Sirius, there's not enough love in this world; people should really just suck it up and do the deed. Kissing! How bad can it be? He winks at a passing third-year Hufflepuff, who cowers against the wall. Sweet girl, wosname.

The door to the kitchen is slightly open when he skids up to it, a pink house-elf just climbing out. She eyes him warily. "Mr. Black is hungry now?"

"Mr. Black," Sirius assures her, "is always hungry, Dinky. What've you got to spare?" Before she can answer he squeezes by her and into the rumbling kitchen, rubbing his hands together joyfully as the wash of smells hits. Christmas! Is its charm limitless?

The kitchens -- and their host of tiny guardians -- stand no chance against him. Thoroughly supplied with pastries, sweets, fruit and something under his cloak that, Sirius acknowledges to himself, may have been slightly overkill, he heads back out into the hallway, humming little carol-snatches to himself and watching the snow drift down by the huge windows.

He skips round a corner and, head fully immersed in the Holiday Spirit, directly into someone, says "oof!" and tumbles over. The clandestine turkey bounces down the hallway, and Sirius spares a moment to mourn its loss before leaping upright again, seizing his

victim's hands, and yanking him to his feet. "Terribly sorry," he says, still jovial, "wasn't looking, you all right?" until he shakes out of his hair, realizes whose hands he is holding, and drops them with an indignant yowl, as if he's been burnt.

Severus Snape, who now has jam the length of his bent nose, has eyes like death and an equally disgusted expression on his face. "Well," he snaps, "it would seem Christmas has a *most* interesting effect on you, Black -- I wasn't aware you could be any more *ludicrous*." Sirius recognizes in Snape's voice the pureblood bite, the wealthy sneer, the self-important erudition. It makes his heart hammer in his ears and his fists clench without thinking.

"Perhaps you couldn't see where you were going, *Snivellus*, what with your great big nose obscuring your vision, but *some* people have friends to meet up with and don't appreciate being knocked into."

"What a clever retort." Snape runs a long, thin thumb over the bridge of his nose, wiping sticky blackberry away. "You must spend hours dedicated to my nose, to have so many revelations at hand."

"I'll show you what I have at hand," Sirius says, rolling up one sleeve, forearm tightly muscled, his ample snacks forgotten.

"Ah, yes, of course. Just *like* a Gryffindor." Snape's lips curl back, twisting his face into something old and brittle. Sirius watches for any flicker of fear in his expression, and is met with nothing. It infuriates him.

"Just you and me, Snivellus," Sirius grinds out. "Afraid?"

"Of you?" Snape snorts.

"Maybe," Sirius breathes with a tight little grin, rolling his head on his shoulders so that his spine cracks menacingly.

"Please," Snape sneers, heavy-lidded eyes flicking insolently over him. "Afraid of a boy who ran away from his own mother? What do you think I am?"

Too fast even to think, Sirius yanks Snape by the shoulder of his robes, whipping him round, and smacks him into a wall. "Don't you dare -- you have no idea -- "

"What," Snape says, lazy and mocking, "as if everyone who's anyone doesn't know what happened in your poor, dear family." He even smells Pureblood, all old, evil things and varnish and the assumption of a power he doesn't actually have, and there's nothing Sirius wants more than to just make him Purebleed all over the floor.

A bar of chocolate bounces ridiculously out of his robes and onto the flagstones.

Moony would let it go.



"You're pathetic," Sirius snaps scornfully. He pushes Snape against the wall again, for good measure, before contemptuously releasing him. "Go snog Lucius Malfoy somewhere, you seem to like that. The arse bit, anyway." He turns his back on Snape, determined to find another way through the castle.

"Right," comes the languorous, nasal drawl from behind him, "and since we're on the subject of snogging, I'll just let you go back to that pathetic little half-breed disgusting animal that you call a friend--" He cuts off as Sirius whirls and launches himself at him, fist raised, slamming them both around the corner with the force of his tackle.

As Sirius lifts one fist high a scratching, demanding voice from just above them screams, "JUST CAN'T CONTAIN YOURSELVES FOR A MINUTE, CAN YOU?! HONESTLY! YOUTHFUL HORMONES!"

"Oh god," Sirius whispers, feeling all the blood drain from his body.

"Oh god," Snape says, in a voice like the knell of doom. "This cannot be happening."

"It's not happening," Sirius says, very quietly. "This is not happening. Back away. Just back away from it, don't let it know you can hear it talking--"

"YOU MUST THINK I'M STUPID! HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE THEM, OR I'LL HAVE YOUR EYES OUT!"

"I would rather be sterilized," Snape says. "With a spoon."

"I'd rather sterilize *you*," Sirius says. "Without the spoon."

They lift their heads, in comic unison, craning their necks to see the mistletoe, glinting, hidden in the curve of the archway above them. It grins down at them, baring its teeth. "WHAT'S THE MATTER, BOYS?" it demands. "LOST YOUR APPETITE?"

"I'm going to be ill," Snape says. "This is unthinkable."

"It's *unsanitary*, is what it is." Sirius wavers, still wanting to punch Snape's lights out, still wanting to smash his head into the floor, but the anger is slowly eclipsed by the great, overwhelming disgust, welling up in little waves from the center of his belly. "I don't know where the Hell your lips have been, Snivellus, but I'm sure it's got something to do with eye of toad and tail of newt."

"Very funny, Black." Snape tries to struggle free but Sirius shoves him back onto the stone floor, hard, and pins him there with the flat of his palm. "I thought the plan was to flee?"

"NO ESCAPE, NO ESCAPE!" the mistletoe howls. "NONE, NONE! HEADMASTER! HEADMASTER!"

"I'm not kissing you," Sirius says. "I'm not. I refuse."

"Am I supposed to be disappointed?" Snape asks.

"*Shut up*," Sirius snaps. A few house elves from the kitchen, startled by all the noise, are peering at them from around the corner. He can hear steps coming down the stairs, too fast to be Dumbledore's, which means *people he has to sit in class with* are going to be privy to this. Sirius doesn't hate Christmas. Not even this dreadful turn can make Sirius hate Christmas. But he does hate mistletoe. His hate is boundless as the dawn.

"Maybe we could trick it," he says, feeling the desperation clawing at his throat. "Maybe I could punch you, right, and you could make a smacking noise -- it hasn't got eyes, has it?"

"I KNOW EVERYTHING! FA LA LA LA LA! DO AS I SAY OR I'LL HAVE YOUR LEGS OFF!"

"I'm not doing this," Sirius says, closing his eyes and praying for a Christmas Miracle. "I would rather be killed."

"That could be arranged," Snape hisses, "if you don't do something!"

"Yeah," says a voice from the rapidly gathering crowd. It sounds suspiciously like Ted Tonks, a man Sirius once considered a friend and a brother, and now will, sadly, have to murder, along with everyone else in Hogwarts. "Do something. You know what I mean, eh?" The crowd -- where did these people come from? Don't they have classes? Don't they have lives? -- titters wildly, in one collective bout of tittering. Sirius' hate is still boundless.

"Right," Sirius says, hating a world that makes it appropriate for him to speak to Severus Snape in a conspiratorial whisper. "On three, right, we'll run for it. It can't get both of us, and you're slower, but you might keep one leg. Ready?"

"Well, well!" says a jolly voice, as sparkling and full of holiday cheer as St. Nick himself. "Are we organizing some inter-house reconciliation for the holidays? Marvelous instincts, boys, very mature."

Sirius considers, not for the first time, the option of death. He turns to look over his shoulder, to make sure it isn't just the fumes off Severus' body giving him hallucinations. No such luck. Albus Dumbledore, arms folded behind his back, eyes forever twinkling, stands over them, casting a pointy shadow across the threshold in which Sirius and Snape have sprawled.

"But what are you boys doing lying down? It's only a kiss," Dumbledore continues. Infuriating, insane old man, Sirius thinks, with his twinkling eyes and his sparkling voice, watching them, trapping them, and waiting for them to Do The Right Thing. Sirius wants

to be ill. He wants to be ill all over Severus Snape's face. "I do so love mistletoe," Dumbledore is saying to the gathered students, all of whom are paying rapt, delighted attention to the humiliating display. "A quaint little custom, the origin of which is really quite interesting -- but I do think it keeps us on our toes, doesn't it?" The crowd choruses yes unevenly. "Well?" Dumbledore turns back to them and gestures widely with a benevolent hand. "An exercise in tolerance, for the school to see. Ten points to each house." He pauses, tapping the side of his nose, rearranging his glasses. "Well, boys?"

"OH THE HOLLY AND THE IVY," the mistletoe howls.

Sirius drags himself to his feet, weighted from the center of him downward. He gulps. He watches Snape straighten, sunless face sharply angled away from Sirius' line of vision, dusting himself off. Sirius rubs the back of his head. *This is it, Black, he thinks. Time to make a break for it. Time to grab your trunk and your bike and head for the hills. You could be an outlaw or a pirate or tend a pub or something, and you'll never have to kiss Snivellus except in the nightmares you will still have of this day.*

"Go on!" someone shouts, from way back in the crowd.

"James?" Sirius blinks, incredulous.

"Damn. It. All," Severus snarls.

He doesn't even give Sirius the triumph of bravery. He doesn't even give Sirius the barest fragment of dignity left in initiating the kiss, the ultimate mortification. He grabs Sirius' face with his spindly, spidery fingers and jerks him close, lips tasting like lunch, kiss perfunctory and clinical in its intimacy, like a doctor's appointment.

Their enormous audience bursts into applause.

"Nnngh," Sirius says miserably, pawing at his mouth.

"I will never be clean again," Snape says. There's little triumph in his hollow, dead voice.

They accidentally lock eyes, accusatory, hateful, repulsed. Both twitch, shudder and stare determinedly in opposite directions.

"Very good, boys, very good," Dumbledore says blissfully, and Sirius entertains a brief fantasy in which he is strangled by his own beard. "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night! Ho ho ho!" His belly under his robes quivers like a bowl full of evil.

Sirius shuts his eyes and enters a brief, nightmarish trance; when he opens them again, Snape and Dumbledore are gone, though they will remain burned on his memory forever and ever and ever and ever until death claims him at last.

"Prongs," he croaks, "Memory charm. Please. I'll pay you good money. Please, please,

make this have never happened."

"How was it, eh, Padfoot?" says James. "Did he push your buttons? Was it greasy?"

Sirius eyes him blearily.

"And we thought ours was bad," Peter says. James elbows him, hard, in the stomach.

"Your what?" Remus asks, peering out from behind them.

"Our nothing," James says.

"Nothing," Peter echoes, nodding emphatically. "Our nothing at all."

"Oh God." Sirius sinks to the floor. "Am I dying? Am I dead? The inside of my mouth feels like I'm dying. Moony -- Moony, quick -- take my temperature. Did he poison me? Do I have a fever? What's happening -- where am I -- I can't see!"

"Sirius," Remus says, "you're hysterical." He kneels down beside him anyway, obligingly, and touches the back of his hand to Sirius' forehead. "Well," he diagnoses, "I think you'll live."

"But who calls that living," Sirius groans. "Hold me."

"Get up, Sirius," Remus says. "Come on. Up, up. We'll get through this. There's Christmas Pudding with dinner, you know."

"You're trying to distract me." Sirius' eyes narrow. "You're trying to tempt me away from my dungeon of pain and Snivellus germs with talk of food I can never again enjoy because his lips are forever burned into mine."

"There's Christmas Pudding," Remus repeats.

"I do like Christmas Pudding," Sirius admits.

"That's right," James says, feeling very generous with his consolation now that Sirius has worse luck than he can ever claim. "There, there."

"How many people were there?" Sirius stares from one to the other to the next of his friends, head lolling weakly. "God dammit, men, just hit me with the truth."

"You can't handle the truth," James says with painful honesty.

"That bad?" Sirius whimpers.

"That bad," Remus says, and then, kindly, "chocolate?"

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"He isn't still mad at me," Remus ventures, from behind his book, "is he?" James hasn't been around all evening, since dinner, and was terse all during their meal. Of course, the food had been spectacular and no one had been talking as much as they could, given the option of eating as much as they could, but the paranoia creeps in and out of Remus' awareness like a cold. He rubs idly beneath his nose, searching Sirius' distraction for some sign of recognition. "Sirius? Hello? *Sirius?*"

"What?" Sirius blinks, jumping nervously, and then relaxes with a long, pained sigh. "It was on the *lips*, Moony," he mutters. "D'you have any idea how *disgusting* -- oh. You asked a question. Er. What was it again?"

"Never mind," Remus says. "It doesn't matter."

"No, no, don't do that." Sirius pulls a frown. "Tell me?"

It's Remus' turn to sigh. "I just wanted to know if James is *very* mad," he says quietly. "That's all."

"What? James? About -- oh. About that. No. Well, he'll get over it, anyhow. He and Peter took my mistletoe, d'you know. They're off causing chaos amongst the masses, no doubt. Told them they could keep it. I *hate* mistletoe."

"Mm," Remus murmurs.

"It was horrible," Sirius insists. "It was like -- no, it was *worse* -- it was *worse* than kissing a dead rat, worse than kissing a dead *fîsh*. Touched me all over, the smelly, unclean git. I can still feel his hands on me, you know. I suppose that's what they mean, being touched by death."

"It sounds terrible," Remus says. They walk in silence for a minute, and then Sirius jumps again, more violently this time, and whips his head round. Remus jumps, as well, but out of startlement. For a long, trembling second Sirius stands in total stillness, forcing Remus to keep still as well. Finally, he relaxes. "Oh God, Moony, I thought I heard him."

"Snape?"

"Dumbledore," Sirius says. He shudders, all twitchy in the corner of his eye. "You don't understand, Moony, I'll never be able to look the man in the eye again."

"Right," Remus says.

"Oh, here." Sirius, rough as always but affectionate and sincere. "Look, don't worry about it. James, he's not really mad. Jealous, yeah, I'll grant you the man's jealous. But he's not

really angry. It wasn't your fault -- God, it wasn't any of our fault." He goes slightly bug-eyed, remembering again.

"I know," Remus says, and sighs. "It's just that I worry. He really does like her, you know. And I didn't exactly say no."

"You always worry," Sirius replies, and slopes his long arms around Remus's shoulders, knocking their foreheads together gently. "He still likes you. He's just going to ask you a lot of awkward questions about were her lips soft or chapped, that kind of thing, and you're going to have to figure out a way to put it out of your mind."

"Urgh," Remus says. "I shudder to think what he'll do with that knowledge."

"I suggest you don't think about it at all," Sirius offers. "You and I can do that together. We can both spend our time not thinking about things." His left eye twitches again. It's beginning to grow worrisome.

"Don't," Remus interrupts quickly, "la la la, think of elephants, sing a song of sixpence, how much wood could a woodchuck chuck et cetera--"

"You're a good friend, Moony, but it's too late," Sirius says. His voice echoes hollowly within his throat. "Still, it's a kind thought. But sixpence and woodchucks just aren't enough. Not all the -- what was it -- perfumes of Arabia can get his filth off me."

"Something like that, yes."

They turn to swing round a corner when suddenly Sirius slams a hand into Remus' chest and Remus stumbles backward, tripping over his own robes.

"Wh--" he starts. Sirius, holding him up by the sleeves, slowly, silently, points upward. Above them it dangles, teeth glinting in the candlelit hall. Remus has had enough unexpected kissing forced upon him for one day, for one month even, and for a boy so private as he strives to be it's all very invasive. He doesn't know how Sirius does it. "Oh," he says. "Right. Can't have that happen again."

"It's staring at me," Sirius whispers. "Do you see it? I bet you Dumbledore keeps track of each and every one and just *waits* to descend, like a spider or worse."

"Calm down, Sirius," Remus soothes. "We'll just go at it one after the other. It can't *get us* that way."

"Are you sure?" Sirius looks around nervously, up and down the walls, scanning the high ceilings. "There could be others. Waiting."

"Then we'll walk one behind another the rest of the way," Remus offers. "How does that sound? Perfectly safe. Perfectly mistletoe free."

"I'm never going to live it down, you know." Sirius' face twists with degradation. "I'm ruined. I'm *ruined*."

Remus pats him on the arm. "You first," he says.

"No, that's all right, you."

"But I--"

"Hm." Remus laughs, sheepish, and starts forward -- just as Sirius does the same.

They stop short just in time and tumble over one another's feet. Sirius glances at Remus and laughs, a short, nervous bark. Remus pulls back immediately, sensing too well his own discomfort, understanding too well Sirius' sudden, stiff posture. They look away from one another pointedly.

"Hah -- sorry, Moony." Sirius shakes his hair out over his eyes and glances up again, eyes glinting light through the dark strands. The mistletoe is still up there, evil and waiting.

"It's no bother," Remus says, intensely uncomfortable within himself. "I'll just -- I'll just go first, shall I?"

"Righto, haha," Sirius says, sounding a little strangled. "I'll be, er, I'll be right behind you. Not too close behind you. At a safe distance."

"Right," Remus agrees. He coughs into his hand and walks out bravely under the mistletoe, head up. After a reasonable period of time he hears Sirius's shuffling footsteps start up again behind him. He wants to turn, to look back at him and glean some reassurance, but doesn't.

"This is weird," Remus calls over his shoulder, and then feels stupid.

From behind him Sirius's sharp, barking laugh suffers. It's uncomfortable, too. "But don't you feel safer?"

"I suppose," Remus says. But he doesn't.

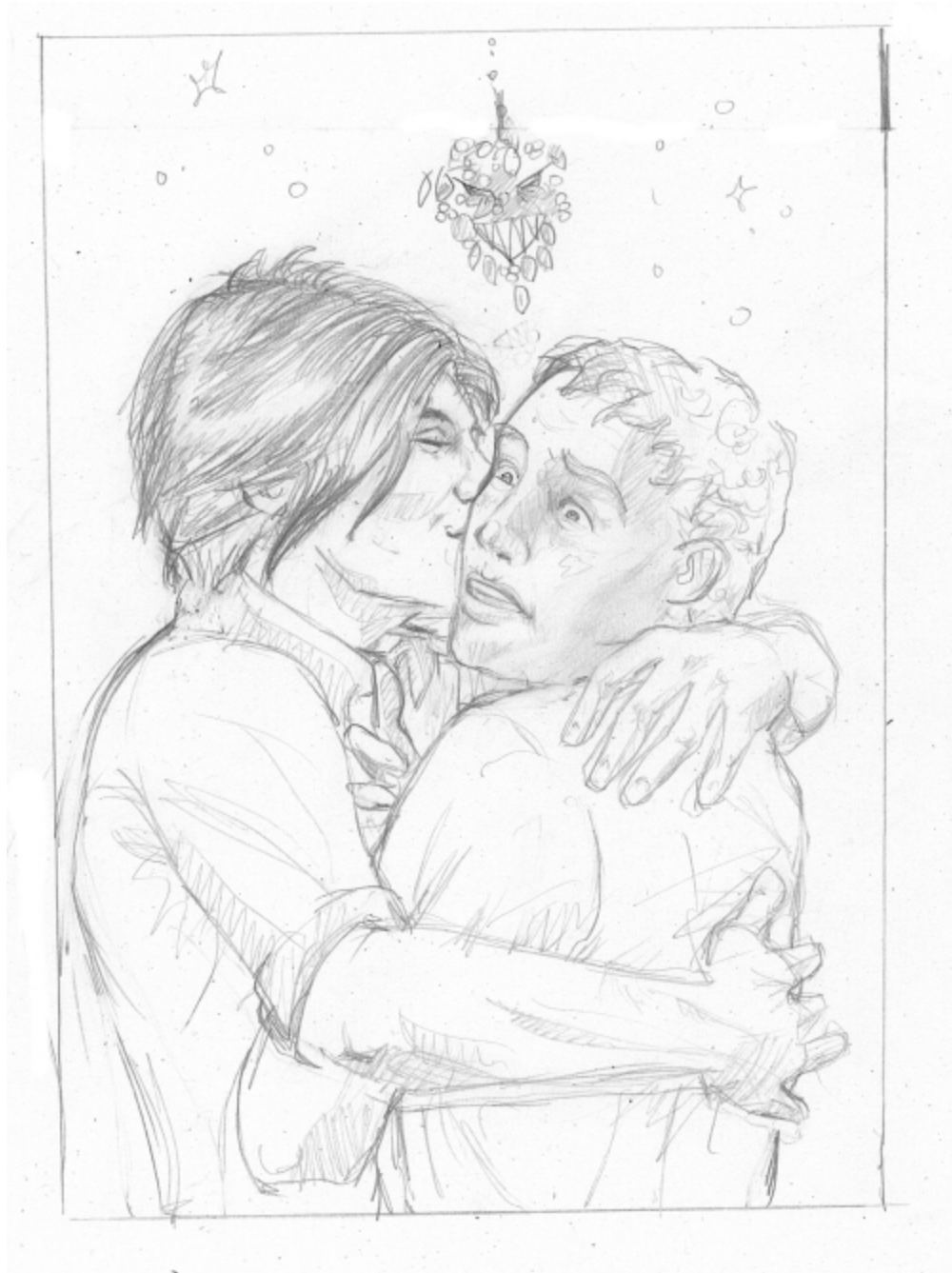
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*Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, Christmas Hols*

Hellooo Moony McMoonykins,

Happy Christmas to you! Well not quite Christmas but getting there, anyway. You can imagine, the tower is a grim dank prison without all the Marauders in it but there are advantages. For example I am currently devouring a turkey breast with my bare hands, that's what all the smudges are round the corners. BARBARIC AND DELICIOUS, food never tastes so good as when you hunt it down yourself. Down with cutlery!!!

As you can tell I am having a perfectly BRILLIANT time here, thank you, I don't need ANY of you to be happy. I've mapped out all the passages we know on that big mock-up of James's and I spend most of my days going round tapping the walls to see if I can find any new ones. (No luck so far but there's loads of wall left, this is a great sodding CASTLE after all!)

This is a short letter because I am near out of parchment. Send me good presents or I will curse you and all your descendants.

--Paddlebrains

*Remus Lupin to Sirius Black, Christmas Hols, Prompt Response*

Padfoot, c/o the House Elves

It would seem you are holding up indefatigably, which is good to know. Hopefully you are not eating too much Christmas Pudding, and by too much I mean save some for Dumbledore or who knows, the mistletoe might eat you in your sleep. (He no doubt has an army of mistletoe at his very fingertips. Look out behind you.) Your letter was very smelly of grease & rosemary when it arrived but I have attempted a cleaning spell on it and it will serve for the records.

In any case, I have written up a list of suggestions for places to check & enclosed them in this letter. There are a few wrong turns in the dungeons, by the way, and a certain tunnel which forks into three separate and equally dank passageways. When your research brings you there, make sure you do not take the right one or the one in the middle one as, with the first, you will find yourself in an enormous storeroom full of eyeballs, whereas, with the second, you will find yourself falling into a pit of what I can only assume are eyeballs, as they are very round, have quite a good deal of slime, and certainly go squish when applied with pressure.

(You wonder how I am so well-acquainted with the dungeons, and I remind you, Remedial Potions. Most unpleasant, being a second year Moony and attempting to navigate the dungeons all by oneself.)

Christmas here is busy as it always is. A few of mum's aunts are coming over and they are all very disapproving of, well, everything, picking at the furniture and making comments behind their hands about the small upstairs and dad wanders around looking angry *all the*

time so I really do wish Christmas were over already and we might get back to research.

Again: stop eating so much Christmas Pudding. It will ruin your figure.

Remus Lupin, c/o the Holiday Rush



*Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, Christmas Hols, Prompter response*

Mooooooooony, surrounded by great-aunts:

No wonder you are such a disaster, you were scarred as a child by pits full of Slytherin eyeballs!! If only you had warned me about The Pit day earlier but alas we are now linked by trauma. I thought they were skinned plums. If I hadn't had all that pudding in me I might have eaten one or several. SO YOU SEE AGAIN I AM SAVED BY PUDDING. I can't help it if it does ruin my figure, it has rescued me from eyeballs.

By the time you get back I will be pleasingly rotund, you can use me as a balloon or kick me around the common room for your twisted amusement. I can hardly stand to look at myself in the mirror. It's tragic to see such beauty fade really, all in all it's probably a good thing that I never want to kiss anyone ever again as no one will ever kiss me now that I am hideously fat.

Other than that the list has been very helpful. I've been asking the portraits too, they are really terribly solicitous if you butter them up and they'll talk to the statues for you. Apparently there's a trick to one behind Gregory the Smarmy but I don't like how he eyes me so I've not really explored it. I've found some weird weird rooms though, they're brilliant, I'd never have known they were here! One of them I went into and I swear it was the Moony Room, there were all these books in there and records and jumpers and things. I've not been able to find it since though. And there's a horrible scary one up the Hufflepuff wing, it's all black and the walls are POINTY and as soon as you go in they start to CLOSE. That one is the Room of Doom and I've put it up with an X, I nearly lost my life. I can't think what good a smashy room does anyone, on the other hand if I'd known about it

that time that Snape Well You Know, then I might have put it to good use.

That's the news from Hogwarts. I'm sorry you're having a busy Christmas, I know you like the quiet but you can put your head in a blanket. I remember your mum's aunts from third year! Is that one there who yelled at me, Prudence or something? You should give her a great big kiss from me.

Prongs's mum has sent me three tins of biscuits and a towel with my name on. What am I to do with all this opulence?

--Padfoot, surrounded by house-elves

*Remus Lupin to Sirius Black, Christmas Hols, Same day*

Padfoot, surrounded by opulence --

Such riches. What with those biscuits and the Christmas Puddings I will return to school to find you, bloated and beached as a whale, sprawled out in a hidden passageway, lost forever. It will be a great tragedy and I will write a novel about it, which will sell millions, and you will live on always in literature. It will be a most moving story. I can just see it now.

*And there we found him, eyes still open, lips still smelling of brandy. His beloved Christmas Pudding lay half finished beside him, strewn across the dusty corridor. Behind him was all blackness, and his friends, laying down their pride, their masculinity, their self-respect, wept great tears for their fallen comrade, slain by Holiday Baking and Too Much Good Cheer. They bowed their heads over him in silence. He had not even unwrapped his presents before his arteries exploded within his chest.*

What say you, Sirius? Up for being immortalized in hardback forever and ever? You shall be a sung hero. Rare that heroes get singing about.

Especially the sort who die of Christmas Pudding.

D'you know, your 'Moony Room' as you called it does intrigue. Do you remember where you found it? Did you go back and was it gone? I've had the same experience, in a manner of speaking, as once I found myself in a tight spot -- up all night studying for Potions and Filch on the prowl while I tried to get back to Gryffindor house -- and suddenly, there was this door, in a place I knew there was no door at all before. I ducked inside and there was just this small empty room with no windows, almost like a forgotten closet, and a slit in the door only I could see through. Perfect for hiding. I researched it later and there was nothing on it, even in the meager Hogwarts Floor Plan I found in the restricted section. Stop looking scandalized, I got permission.

If you had eaten the eyeballs I would never have spoken with you again.

The Aunts are here and I cannot bring myself to kiss them, even for your sake. Ask anything else of me and I will provide.

This time I've enclosed some sweets, not as though you need it with all the feasting you must be doing, and a picture of our tree, and if there's anything else that will keep you out of the kitchens I can provide.

Remus, surrounded by assassins.

*Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, Christmas Hols, Scratchy writing*

Moony, drowning in relations--

HOW CAN YOU GIVE ME MORE SWEETS, CARE YOU NOTHING FOR MY FRAGILE ARTERIES?! Honestly I think you care less about me than you do about your precious three-volume novel which by the way will be far more gruesome than you suggest, the scene will really be an explosion rather than a beaching. Anyway if you really loved me you would not write a novel about my death; no, it would be an epic poem and you would have to pass it down by the spoken word only. So perished Sirius of the shaggy hair, breaker of motorbikes. I would be the Achilles of gluttons and all would mourn me down through the generations of man.

You know I honestly can't remember where that room was? I was sort of wandering aimlessly about two days after you lot left, thinking dark thoughts, and then there was this door at the end of the hallway. I was in a bleak mood anyway as Peeves had just hit me with a currant and I wasn't paying attention I suppose. How do you suppose we map vanishing rooms? They won't map themselves. And what good is a room full of jumpers? It was all right for me since all I wanted was to sort of curl up and not be...I dunno, anyway it was all right for me but I can't think what most people would do with a room like that.

MOONY MOONY MOONY I AM SHOCKED AT YOU, SHOCKED. A prefect wandering into the Restricted Section. YOU'LL BE STRIPPED OF YOUR BADGE YOUNG MAN, paraded through the streets as a warning to all rebellious prefects. You didn't happen to steal their copy of *The Garden of Golden Delights*, did you, because SOMEONE did, I snuck in for my annual perusal only to find it missing. No one's allowed to check it out so either we have thieves and perverts in our midst or Madam Pince must truly have hidden depths. Oh God I cannot believe I just said that let alone had those thoughts GET OUT OF MY HEAD ARGH.

Well I must go eat more to forget. I'm sorry about your aunts. There's not much shopping to do around here, most of the shops are closed since everyone's home with their families, but I've got you something anyway. It's not much but I didn't know if you'd read him and it seemed like your sort of thing. Do you like Kipling? (Don't say I DON'T KNOW, I'VE NEVER KIPPLED because that would not be funny AT ALL. Har har har har.) I like him,

he's all wild beasts and mad Englishmen. Anyway even if you don't like it DON'T DROP IT IN A LAKE, I SHALL BE DISPLEASED. Also there's chocolate of course, you glutton.

Sirius, smothered in lard



*Remus Lupin to Sirius Black, Christmas Hols, Written while hidden in the bathroom*

Padfoot, ruined by calories --

I only thought you might like them. It was all we had about. That's gratitude for you. Try to bring a friend into the Christmas festivities -- well, Christmas nightmares hereabouts is more aptly phrased -- and what does he do? He tells you it's your fault he's going to die young from some sort of heart explosion after all the stress he's put on the poor thing, not thinking about the future, only thinking about drowning his sorrows in soggy desserts. Never again will there be sweets for you. They rot the teeth anyway, so my mum says, and constantly, just because I found where she keeps the chocolate and keep eating it so as not to have to listen to Aunt Prudence quote poetry incorrectly and having to stay quiet while mum glares at me not to correct her. It is torment. I am very polite though. They at least think I am the perfect picture of a little gentleman. I want to bite them, which is rude and very improper.

*So was lost our great hero.  
Not with a bang, but with a whimper --  
but also with a bang, yes, daring to eat  
too many puddings, and all alone was he*



*on the day the butter claimed him.*

Or perhaps I'll do them in rhyming couplets. Iambic pentameter gives such excellent epic structure.

*He paused to touch the pudding to his lips  
(With all that pudding spread across his hips)*

*And smelled of brandy, through and through,  
whilst all his innards felt like glue.*

*When we returned when Christmas Hols were over  
We found him large and wide as Dover,*

*Yet stirred he not upon the floor  
His Christmas Pudding days were o'er.*

In any case, as I am bound to become poet laureate any day now, let me move on to other things, such as that room. I think I've developed a theory, so bear with me a moment: what if, just *what if*, the room is there only when you *need* it? Sort of a room of requirement, in a sense. That sort of magic is nearly impossible, I can't fathom how it's done, but certainly if you had a room when you were no doubt moping around looking for things to punch holes in, and I had a room when I was being chased down the hall by that ratty Mrs. Norris (you know how I hate cats), and neither of us could find it again, then it *must* be possible. I would ask Dumbledore, you see, but the circumstances are shady and I'm not quite sure how it would look on my record.

Oh, stop snickering, go back to your puddings.

Remus Lupin, THE POET.

*Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, Christmas Hols, Christmas*

M, embarrassingly brilliant composer of epics--

I have no words for the literature you have composed in honor of my incipient death, all of it is so masterful I can barely move for awe. Well either awe or pudding I cannot tell which.

Your theory is interesting but ridiculous. If YOU had found a room full of jumpers then I would say, well, surely it is the Room of Stuff You Need. But what am I supposed to do with such a room, you know as well as I do that when I wear a jumper I look more or less like a sock. Well, I don't know, I didn't mean for it to be such a big deal I just thought it was funny or something. If it is the Room of Needing Things then why hasn't it ever showed up full of green vegetables or fruit when I am on my prowlings? I swear I am this

close to getting scurvy.

Christmas Eve Feast is just over, it was painful. Dumbledore leered at me constantly and McGonagall refused to return my ardent gazes, also Hagrid ate all the roasted apples and the only other sixth-year there was Lionel Lovegood who spent the whole time gazing at me in that cockeyed way and telling me bizarre statistics in a sheep's voice. The man is a holy terror and God only knows what he will do with his life.

I cannot thank you enough for the poetry, honestly, it has made me feel much better about the way I am fat and dying and alone.

Happy really Christmas!

Thus spake Sirius of the long tail, whose untimely death was writ down as legend, before he passed away into the halls of Hades.



*Remus Lupin to Sirius Black, Christmas Hols, Christmas*

Sirius --

I am writing not in reply but in the hopes that this will reach you Christmas morning. Happy Christmas Day Morning! (And soon Happy Christmas Day Afternoon and then Christmas Day Evening.)

I'm coming back early. My dad said I could because only one of us male influences need sacrifice himself to the Jowly Aunt Creatures -- I want to be kinder, I do, but I'd like them

more if my *mum* liked them, if they were *nice* to my mum, even, but they aren't and it makes me too mad when they ignore how hard she's trying -- and so he gave me permission to pack up my things for tomorrow. He only told mum about it last night after dinner. There wasn't even any yelling. She seemed all right with it, just sad at the mouth.

In any case, if you manage to kill yourself on pudding before then, then there's nothing I could have done anyway to help you, and that's that. Rest In Peace, Padfoot.

I will see you probably late tomorrow.

R

PS I don't suppose you would like any socks? I have countless pairs of new socks, which are warm and nice but don't all fit in my trunk.

*Sirius Black to Remus Lupin, Christmas Hols, Immediately thereafter*

R--

I DON'T WANT SOCKS. DO I REALLY HAVE A MOONY COMING?! AGHH YOU CANNOT LOOK AT ME I AM ASHAMED. HURRY UP IT IS ELEVEN O'CLOCK WHERE ARE YOU?!

--S

